

The Moebius Seed: A Visionary Novel of Planetary Transformation. Steven M. Rosen. Walpole, New Hampshire: Stillpoint Publishing, 1985, 288 pages, \$9.95.

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The Moebius Seed is an optimistic book: it presents a vision of "planetary transformation" accomplished by the hidden capacities of the human mind. The mind's untapped resources, briefly revealed now and again in parapsychological episodes such as out of body experiences, surface to preserve humanity—indeed, the earth itself—during a time of impending destruction. The forces of destruction are essentially a paranoid military establishment, East and West, that perceives conspiracies in every nook and cranny, and whose planet-threatening suspicions trigger a genuine planet-wide "conspiracy," a community of "selves," of "soul-mating," a "Moebius Seed" with the potential to fertilize the "Planetary Egg" and "transform the world." This transformation is positive; it has none of the ambiguity of other novels of mental saltation—such as Arthur Clarke's *Childhood's End*—and it suggests that, beyond the novel, if we were all to conspire in "the Moebius way" a species-wide mental metamorphosis might be possible.

Rosen purposely blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality in his novel, implying didactic motives. Clearly the novel's ideas are meant to be its most important facet, and as long as a sense of verisimilitude is maintained, this is not troubling in the least. Historically, the novel has been a medium for dealing in depth with important ideas. The technique Rosen uses to merge fiction and reality is what has been called The Quaker Oats technique (because of the picture on the label, containing a picture of itself which contains a picture of itself, *ad infinitum*) and is perhaps best exemplified in the plots of André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which place books within books. *The Moebius Seed* is, the reader eventually learns, the book being written not only by Steven Rosen but also by Noel Innerman, a character in Rosen's *The Moebius Seed*. Thus Rosen attempts to give his novel an appropriate form—a Moebius Form—since the Moebius Strip is his most constant metaphor and symbol for the transformation that must take place to save the planet. The technique has a few faults, the most apparent of which is that the novel Noel Innerman is writing, as demonstrated by excerpts, is not a good one. It is, in fact, made up of abstract maunderings. Indeed, Innerman's "novel in progress" demonstrates the weakness of *The Moebius Seed* as a novel; when Rosen's prose is concrete, when he works to show the reader rather than to tell the reader, when he eschews abstract philosophizing and attends to plot and characterization, *The Moebius Seed* is interesting reading and its ideas are palatable.

Unfortunately, when the abstract dominates the novel fails and its ideas collapse with it. Granted, Rosen's own novelistic declarations make it clear that he hoped to transcend the techniques of "mere fiction." Noel Innerman expresses the same desire—explicitly. Yet if an author hopes to capture a reader's attention, keep it, and influence the reader's thought, that author must make concessions to the conventions of fiction—especially if a

cross-section of readers is to be persuaded. If Rosen were writing only for parapsychologists, his approach might be successful, for their interest in their field of study might sustain them to the end. The average reader, however, will be distracted and even bored as the novel becomes a lecture. The serious reader of fiction will probably view this novel as a disaster, as an unfulfilled promise.

Rosen is at his best in the novel's first half, while he is yet committed to the traditional techniques of prose fiction. His descriptions of out of body experiences, particularly those of graduate student Sandra Peterson, are detailed and realistic enough to be convincing. Disbelief is suspended, the reader is drawn into the world of the novel, and a sense of reality is created. Rosen has the reader exactly where an author should want a reader: engrossed, interested, sharing experiences and, in fact, a reality with fictional characters. Unfortunately, Rosen's noble desire to do more, to transcend the forms of fiction, destroys the sense of verisimilitude he has so deftly created and—especially in the novel's second half—the reader feels less a participant in the story—a conspirator to use Innerman's terminology—and more and more like a member of an audience listening to a lecture he or she had no intention of attending. Rosen is a much better writer than he allows himself to be; the first half of *The Moebius Seed* testifies to his potential.

The manipulation of ideas makes the novel creak. At times dialogue resembles that of a "Doc" Smith novel, though with little of the charm of Smith's pioneering science fiction. Characterization is weakened and verisimilitude virtually destroyed when a first-rate college professor defines the simplest concepts:

"Then he began flirting with biofeedback."

"Which means attaching electrodes to you so you can see a record of your brain waves, heart rate, and the like. Am I right?"

That "Am I right?" is as out of character as a request by a professor to have "Chutzpah" defined for him or her by a colleague. What reader can believe that a college professor from New York would not know "Chutzpah"? And how can a graduate student in sociology, whose undergraduate major was psychology, ask a professor if indeed psychology and sociology are not closely related disciplines. If such explanations are intended for the readers, they are insulting; if the characters are indeed this ignorant, they are not believable as lights of academe. The fault is too frequent. Rosen repeatedly sacrifices a fictional sense of reality to an explanation or discussion—often gratuitous—of "concepts."

When Rosen's characters are round—to use E.M. Forster's term—the novel moves along engrossingly. When deflated by ideas, flattened to a maddening two-dimensionality, *The Moebius Seed* moves slowly and painfully. Interest is destroyed. For example, the reader is intrigued when an M.C. Escher print triggers an out of body experience (and it is, appropriately, a moebius-like picture), but the intelligence of the characters is soon in doubt. Surely solid members of academe, and especially a professor such as Phil Myserson, whose primary interest is research, would investigate Escher more thoroughly, given the power of this one print. Ten minutes in a university library would reveal works by Escher entitled "Moebius Strip I" and "Moebius Strip II." Had Rosen made his researcher behave like a researcher, the link he attempted to forge between word and idea, between print and visual media, would have been more solid. His goals could, with attention to characterization, been furthered fictionally: the relationship between reality and fiction solidified.

Too often ideas are left unexplored in their contact with reality; rather they are ballooned into abstract verbiage by the novelist-character, Noel Innerman (whose Bunyanesque name might translate as "Christmas Spirit," an allegorical suggestion of the new birth the novel portends: Mind as Savior?). Innerman's novel, for example, has a

sightless theoretician who is clearly meant to be a visionary (though Innerman makes him near-sighted rather than sightless a few pages later, and one can only wonder how well Innerman knows his own characters, or how important his characters are to him). But the sightless theoretician is never real; he is a two-dimensional purveyor of ideas with no life of his own.

The novel's theme is certainly interesting. It is in the best Romantic tradition, from Blake to the present, which holds that imagination is the first step in creation, that reality is altered by the imagination. First, imagine something (in this novel, the conspiracy of minds will transform the planet); then will what has been imagined into creation. This conscious willing into being of an untapped potential is a rich theme deserving of fictional exploration. But *The Moebius Seed* creates too many problems for itself, and most of them could have been avoided with more attention to the strategies of fiction which, for success, demand that a conspiracy be formed between author and reader. Noel Innerman intends to "bridge the gap between author and character, author and readers . . . to overcome literary fragmentation, achieve literary wholeness. He is not content merely to write *about* wholeness. He feels it must be built into the very medium in which he writes, if the idea of wholeness is to be conveyed." Unfortunately, Rosen employs Innerman's strategy, and he achieves not wholeness but fragmentation. *The Moebius Seed* is fragmented as a novel and it is fragmented as a treatise on consciousness. Innerman need only have asked a Professor in the English Department for a good bibliography, one that included say Henry James's "The Art of Fiction," E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*, Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Scholes and Kellogg's *The Nature of Narrative*, or Simon Lesser's "The Function of Form in Narrative Art," to have saved himself a great deal of puerile musings on his fictional difficulties. Had Innerman studied the manner in which such writers as Sterne, Joyce, Gide, and O'Brien approached narrative problems similar to his own, he might have concentrated upon a *sense* of reality and written an entire novel for Steven Rosen as good as *The Moebius Seed* is in occasional entertaining flashes.