Books

July 1, 2000 By Angelo Ragaza

Fabulous Hell
By Craig Curtis
Alyson Publications ($12.95, 239 pp.)

Coif, a Gen-X Los Angeleno, learns he's HIV positive on page one of Fabulous Hell, and spends the remaining 238 trying to drink, crystal-meth and fuck himself into oblivion. A volatile cocktail of nihilism and narcissism, Coif would be unbearable if he weren't so funny: "A flaccid dick betrays my little secret. The cursed crystal weenie. Dash it all…Well, what should I do? Tell him it's a war wound? Or better: It's your hairpiece." Author Craig Curtis got the 1996 PEN Center West Grant for writers with HIV for a reason: He's an exceptionally stylish writer with a Dorothy Parker–like salt. One wishes that the book's personalities weren't so quickly dispatched with the you-are-what-you-wear method of characterization ("Throughout the interview I am dazzled by Georgie's brazen display of bad taste.") Elsewhere, the book's economy is relentless—three-page chapters, sitcom-speed dialogue and no room for the subtle signs that surface when a person's destiny changes. When Coif finally gets to his happy ending, it feels a bit like getting off a plane that never left the ground.

Ravelstein
By Saul Bellow
Viking ($24.95, 233 pp.)

Like Fabulous Hell, Ravelstein—octogenarian Saul Bellow's fictionalized tribute to his friendship with late author Allan Bloom—is about finding meaning in the face of death. But Ravelstein is to Fabulous Hell what Wagner is to music video: Ravelstein has just three long chapters, each laden with almost embarrassing riches of detail and insight. Chick, a writer (read: Bellow), persuades Abe Ravelstein (Bloom), a political philosopher and conservative firebrand, to make a book out of the notes he prepares for a popular university class. As Ravelstein opens, Abe is flush with cash from the sale of that bestseller (read: The Closing of the American Mind) and roundly despised for it. He's also dying of AIDS, and extracts a promise from Chick to write his biography. More than a memoir of a deep and complex friendship, Ravelstein is a love letter to an endangered species of intellectual. But Bellow is not above divulging the "culture wars" general's penchant for $4,500 Lanvin jackets, his devotion to a live-in Asian companion young enough to be his son, or his dim view of gay pride. But are these idiosyncrasies Bloom's or Ravelstein's? "He was doomed to die because of his irregular sexual ways," Bellow writes, as Chick. "About these he was entirely frank with me, with all his close friends…. There were times when I simply didn't know what to make of

his confidences.” There are times when the reader won’t know what to make of Bellow’s, either—but fact or fiction, the Nobel Prize– winner is in supreme command of his storytelling powers.

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