

License To Thrill

THE GUN SELLER

By Hugh Laurie
Soho. 339 pp. \$24

By Jay A. Fernandez

LOOK no further. That is, please continue reading this review, but you can stop the search for that perfect read for the final weeks of the waning summer. If you can allow yourself only one more "light" book, just one, before the encroaching darkness of fall guilts you into re-reading *Being and Nothingness*, this has to be it. *The Gun Seller* is fast, topical, wry, suspenseful, hilarious, witty, surprising, ridiculous and pretty wonderful. And you don't need a permit to buy it.

Our narrator, as well as reluctant crusader against money-grubbing governments and the myopic military-industrial complex, might be James Fincham, a decent man in the wrong place at the right time. Or he's Herr Balfour, high-rolling vacationer at a swank Swiss ski resort. Or is he Ricky, the young, intelligence-challenged Minnesotan terrorist? (Imagine Philip Marlowe as conceived by P.G. Wodehouse, or Fletch played by Denis Leary.)

The man behind these identities is Thomas Lang, former officer of the Scots Guard, unemployed, underfed and generally uninterested. Yet, by the end, Lang stands as a hero for the '90s: flippant, cynical, sensitive, resourceful, world-weary, strong and ethical. A man stranded in the middle of the chaotic sea of modern life with just a healthy sense of irony for a life jacket.

The plot chases down our hero on page one as his arm is being painfully broken by another man. As clear as I can make it, this is why: While in Amsterdam doing nothing in particular, Lang was approached by a man named McCluskey who offered him a lot of money to kill a man named Alexander Woolf, at which point Lang, being the upstanding guy he is, refused the job, but decided to re-



ILLUSTRATION BY ANTHONY RUSSO

turn to London and warn the target, whereby he was attacked by the actual killer, who tries to break Lang's arm and is knocked silly by him, whereupon an enchanting woman whom Lang immediately falls in love with, and who turns out to be Woolf's daughter, appears and calls the police, who inform Lang that the man he has beaten badly is in fact Woolf's bodyguard, causing Lang to appear to be the attempted murderer, until Lang finds out that McCluskey is actually Alexander Woolf, a man who apparently hired Lang to kill the same man who hired him.

Right.

Mind you, this only gets you to page 50 or so, where the plot gets *really* convoluted. And if you can put the book down at this point, you shouldn't be reading anything without pictures. Laurie has constructed a delightful novel with (almost) everything: There's a genuine plot twist on every other page, good guys/girls that you care about and bad guys/girls that you want to see mauled beyond recognition, good guys that turn out to be bad guys and vice versa, chases, exotic locales, a heavy moral center, flinty dialogue, loads of suspense and, keeping up with the times, a world full of guns. In this case, the weapons that fire the

plot are a new class of "small, fast, and violent" helicopters with enough firepower to take out people by the buildingful, and for which the manufacturer needs buyers. Desperately.

Double crosses and deaths pile up as Lang is sucked into the jaws of global intrigue and misplaced love. From first glance the love interest has *femme fatale* written all over her: Sarah is pleasant enough to call the police to arrest him on their first meeting, point a gun at him on their second, and then finally shoot him on their third. You can see why he's so smitten.

Thomas Lang is the perfect type of hero, a good but flawed man thrust into an unusual situation, and very human. He has doubts and second thoughts about his decisions, he misjudges people, he makes stupid mistakes. And occasionally gets himself hurt because of them.

Well, "occasionally" in the way that the British have tea "occasionally." Lang sustains injuries like no other character I've encountered since Ian Fleming's early Bond. One unfortunate incident occurs when bad guys force his motorcycle into a guard rail at 60 miles an hour. He comes to confused, strapped down and in quite a bit of pain: "I tried flexing bits of my body . . . The feet seemed okay, if a little far away. As long as they weren't further than six feet and three inches I wasn't going to complain. . . . Pelvic girdle seemed all right, but I wouldn't know for sure until I put some weight on it. Testicles. Ah, there was another matter entirely. I didn't have to put weight on those to know they were in a poor state. There were too many of them and they hurt too much." It takes a particularly heartless creator to have his hero's testicles mangled so carelessly, something Laurie's Lang and Fleming's Bond share in their first literary adventures.

Witty sarcasm and wise-guy antics aside, Lang is a hard man, a former soldier unafraid of combat. An exceptional fighter, he employs his skills only when absolutely necessary, relying instead on talking his way through potentially violent situations. His preferred form of self-defense is confusing the hell out of his opponents. He is a genius of prevarication, able to take on new identities and in less time than it takes most of us to remember our phone numbers.

The only thing sharper than his tongue is his power of perception. Here he meets his soon-to-be nemesis, Russell P. Barnes, an American intelligence official at the American Embassy in London: "He looked over some half-moon glasses at me as I came in, but carried on reading, running an expensive fountain pen down the margin as he went. Every fibre of his body said dead Viet Cong, well-armed Contras, and General —Continued on page 7

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Schwarzkopf call me Rusty.”

This book is not all one-liners and jaunty verbal sparring. There is a thematic gravity throughout that arises from the ominous, dispassionate way in which the agents of evil present their designs. As one says with spooky nonchalance, “Terrorists these days are businessmen . . . and businesswomen.” When the plot juggernaut of the second half of the book gets rolling—it includes the antics of a terrorist group called the Sword of Justice and the takeover of the American consulate in Casablanca—Lang finds himself forced to battle institutionalized illegalities that, in the long run, he can have little effect on.

My two problems with the novel are these: One, in the second half it does indeed become extremely difficult to follow the plot. (What is lacking in coherent narrative explanation, however, is more than made up for by the clever tidiness of the finale.) Two, and most important, there’s not nearly enough sex, and what there is is far too discreet. While I admire Lang’s personal code of ethics (I told you he was a hero for the ’90s), it wouldn’t have hurt to let him sleep with a few of the women who are obviously in thrall to his quirky

charms. After the testicle incident, it’s the least the author could have done.

The Gun Seller is described as a “spoof on the spy genre” on the jacket copy. This strikes me as not quite fair. Take away the unique tone of the narrator and you’ve got an international thriller as solid as anything that Len Deighton or Robert Ludlum has written. Add Lang and you’ve got an extremely entertaining, fresh and funny genre novel with an edge on the competition. My fervent hope is that Lang makes future appearances—it just may be that Laurie is on the verge of creating his own sub-genre, which I am proud to dub “Sarcastic Realism.”

Hugh Laurie is an actor (“Blackadder,” “Jeeves and Wooster”), and if you’ve ever seen “Blackadder,” you will recognize how easily his comic sensibility was transposed into this, his first novel. “As daft as tripe,” one of my British colleagues quipped about the author, and while I’m not sure what the heck that means, it was said in a complimentary way. This is right on the money in describing the book as well. The playful likability of the narrator had me laughing and the plot machinery had me rapt, so that when I say that this is perfect light summer reading, it is meant in the most complimentary way. ■