

READING

By Harry Middleton

Walker Percy's Latest Is His Best

The Second Coming, by Walker Percy. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, \$12.95.

In Percy's novel "The Last Gentleman," Will Barrett was a young Princeton drop-out given to periods of amnesia whose searching for love and goodness takes him from Central Park to Santa Fe. Will Barrett is back and is falling down. Now, instead of amnesia he has a completely opposite and equally upsetting condition. He remembers everything. And his golf game is off. He has developed a slice in his swing and a slice in his brain. Things do not fit anymore. They never have. That is Barrett's discovery. One of them, anyway. No wonder he cannot keep his feet. Suddenly, life has no center, no substance.

Barrett has retired early from a successful northern law practice, returned to Linwood, North Carolina. His wife has died. She was a kindhearted, rich northern woman who wanted to spend her fortune helping out the poor, sad, tired South. She left behind a grab-bag of plans and projects and everyone is after a share of the Barrett money.

Barrett began running from his dark, violent, bloody southern past, his heritage of death, as soon as he was able. What he has remembered is what he really never forgot — that his father had been disappointed with life and in love with death and tried to kill Will and himself in a deep Georgia wood while bird hunting. His father would not take no for an answer and later went alone, blew his brains out in an attic in Mississippi. Barrett ran north, determined to escape. He would be his father's opposite, deny his doom, or so he thought.

Will Barrett likes sitting in his German car, holding a German gun thinking seriously of shooting himself, of taking his father's

escape route, saying good-bye, loving death totally. He cannot, not yet. There is an anger, a gnawing questioning burning in Barrett's spinning brain. The gyroscope in his head has both thrown him down and of a sudden made him present for his life, finally aware of it, all of it. What good is an end, a resolution without first knowing what happened to him and to the modern age? After all, maybe something has gone right instead of wrong. There is that small chance.

In the blood-and-death stained cells of Barrett's memory there is a pale but throbbing thought that he might yet be "a man among men rather than a self sucking everything into itself." His father went too soon, asked too little of life, and his suicide was "wasted. It availed nothing, posed no questions let alone answered questions, did nobody good. It was no more than an exit . . . a closing of a

door." Will Barrett wants to swing the door wide, make God and life give him a straight answer one way or another.

Signs, portents, cosmic announcements. These are what Barrett wants, seeks. He cannot make up his mind whether or not the Jews are leaving North Carolina to return to Israel and if they are whether their leaving is a sign — of what? The end? Barrett is not sure. He falls down. And what of the young girl in the woods by the golf course who presented him his lost golf ball and had just by her presence so calmed and soothed him? She was part of his memory too: a new stirring of life, new and crisp. She is Allison Hunnicutt Huger. Barrett had dated her mother. Allison has escaped from a mental hospital. She was sent there years ago after her mother had refused to let her fail. Allison insisted, hid in a closet determin-

ed to collapse into her essential and fundamental self. Instead, she has been through six electroconvulsive (ECT) treatments, what she calls buzzing.

Before the sixth treatment, Allison decides to leave. While her parents and doctor plan her future, which includes taking care of her inheritance, an island and a piece of land near the Linwood golf course left to her by an old woman, Allison makes plans too, for her freedom. Her discovery is that she "could act . . . was free to act." She takes \$400 from her father's wallet, writes instructions in a notebook on how to escape. The notes are important clues to life. After the buzzings Allison remembers nothing.

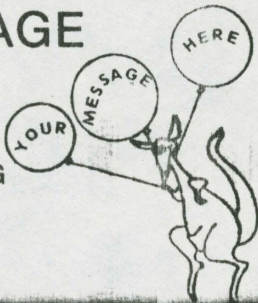
REMEMBERING

Barrett remembers everything; Allison remembers nothing. Both are falling out of themselves and

into life. Allison moves into an abandoned greenhouse performing small jobs with immense joy, learning how to live all over again. Barrett is looking for God; Allison is trying to hoist an old iron woodstove from an abandoned cellar to the greenhouse. Barrett is battling the universe. Allison is battling the task of everyday living. One task is no more or less important or significant than the other. They are searching for the same ease, are wayfarers on the same journey. Barrett decides he is "surrounded by two classes of maniacs. The first are the believers, who think they know the reason why we find ourselves in this ludicrous predicament yet act for all the world as if they don't. The second are the unbelievers, who don't know the reason and don't care if they don't." Neither is acceptable to Barrett.

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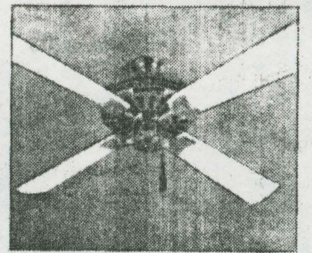
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