

LITERARY LIFE

What's on the bookshelves today?

Weekend, June 9 & 10, 2007

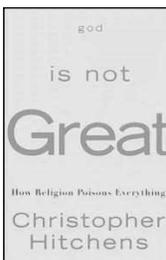
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NEXT WEEK'S BOOK RELEASES

- » "Double Take" by Catherine Coulter (Penguin Group) \$25.95
- » "Blaze" by Stephen King (Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group) \$25
- » "The Diana Chronicles" by Tina Brown (Doubleday Publishing) \$27.50
- » "Penny" by Joyce Meyer, Deborah Bedford (FaithWords) \$21.99



POLITICS AND PROSE

FICTION

1. Divisadero
2. A Thousand Splendid Suns
3. The Yiddish Policemen's Union
4. Falling Man
5. Entitled
6. The Gravedigger's Daughter
7. The Overlook
8. Suffer the Little Children
9. The Children of Hurin
10. The Reluctant Fundamentalist

NONFICTION

1. The Assault on Reason
2. The Canon
3. Einstein
4. FDR
- » 5. God Is Not Great
6. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle
7. No Excuses
8. Presidential Courage
9. How Doctors Think
10. The Zen of Fish

Ken Ackerman examines early days of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI

Part I

By Joanne Collings

Ken Ackerman is an Albany, N.Y., native, and a graduate of Brown and Georgetown Law School. Before going into private practice, Ackerman was administrator of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Risk Management Agency and manager of its Federal Crop Insurance Corporation and special counsel to the Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and counsel to the Committee on Government Affairs. He is now with the firm Olsson, Frank and Weeda, P.C. In addition to his many published articles, he authored four books: "Gold Ring" (W. Clement Stone, 1988), "Dark Horse: The Surprising Election and Political Murder of James A. Garfield" (Avalon, 2003), "Boss Tweed" (Avalon, 2005), and his new book, "Young J. Edgar" (Avalon, 2007). Mr. Ackerman lives with his wife in Falls Church.

Q You've written about several interesting men and events. Do they have anything in common?

A I try to write about people who have been ignored or misunderstood over the years. James Garfield is considered a very obscure president, but I felt that his assassination was one of the most underappreciated events of that whole era. What it said about the stability and nature of our politics I thought was ... profound. He's a ... different person from J. Edgar Hoover. Garfield was a very decent, honest man. I saw a contradiction in Boss Tweed that I thought had been missed by many people. On the one hand, he was the most crooked politician who ever served in America; on the other hand, he was a big-hearted person who did a lot of good and who's still thought of very warmly by people in New York; his name is on the courthouse in Lower Manhattan.

J. Edgar Hoover is probably, of everyone I've written about, the least pleasant person personally, the one you would least actually want to meet and have dinner with. I write about a period in his life before he became the very corrupted, very set-in-his-ways autocrat of his later years in office. More recent biographies have found it ... important to knock down the image of Hoover as

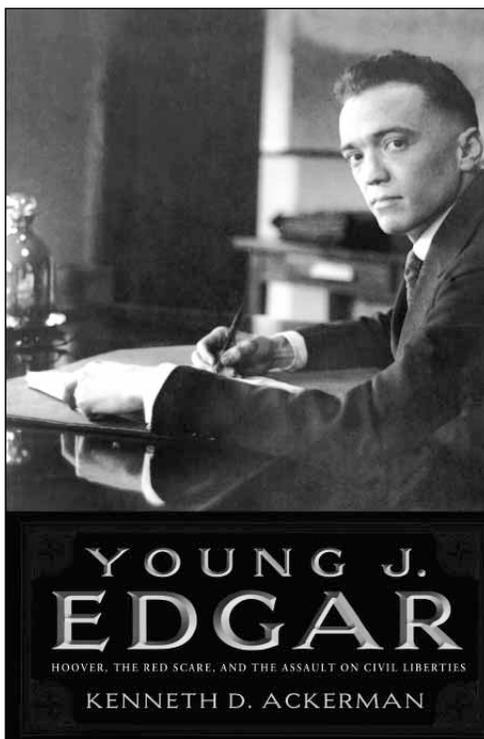
a national hero created during his decades in office, and to show that, in fact, he was a man with a very pronounced dark side. I started with the fact that we know that Hoover is that. We don't have to prove that anymore. That gave me the freedom to look at him freshly and try to get an idea of how he got to be that way and how he was shaped by the period when he started his career.

Q What in particular made you decide to write about J. Edgar Hoover and this part of his career?

A I wanted to write a book about the Red Scare because I thought that the tie-in, the theme of civil liberties in a time of national crisis, was very relevant to today. When I first started looking at the era, I originally conceived of this book being told from Clarence Darrow's point of view. The more I studied [Attorney General A. Mitchell] Palmer's personality and role and J. Edgar Hoover, this young prodigy in the office who seemed to take control of events, even though he was the junior person in the office — I thought this is the way Washington works, the way bureaucracy works.

Q This period in American history is very popular with writers at the moment. Why do you think that is?

A It's a very forgotten period. We tend to ignore ... that not that long ago our modern conception of the First Amendment really didn't exist: People in World War I, for instance, could be arrested and thrown in prison for ten years for giving a speech; that was commonplace. The Labor Movement had reached a stage where the notion of a Bolshevik-style uprising in America could be conceived as realistic. I was very struck by the level of very explicit, very pronounced racism, anti-Semitism, [and] xenophobia against Eastern Europeans as well as Japanese, Chinese, Asiatic people. All this was part of the American fabric and was considered acceptable. [I] read the files of the Military Intelligence Division at the time about Louis Brandeis, a sitting Supreme Court Justice, and the way he was tracked around the world for his Zionist activities and [about] the way they confused Zionism and Bolshevism; the way that they tracked the Irish Independence



Movements also as a Bolshevik offshoot. It's almost like going to a foreign country. This was the world my grandparents grew up in.

Q I don't remember learning about the Palmer Raids. Has that been your experience with readers? Why do you think that is?

A We have a very selective memory, both as individual people and as a country. If you go to a bookstore and look at the American history section, there are hundreds of books about the Civil War and World War II and the Founding Fathers and then a lot of blind spots in between. World War I is very little written about and is very much misunderstood, let alone the period af-

ter it. I think the Palmer Raids were swept under the rug as early as 1920 because they were very much an embarrassment on all sides. The period was forgotten and then overtaken by other events, the Depression and World War II. There's been a recent debate about whether Hoover's name should be taken off the FBI building. My personal feeling is that his name should be there as a warning of what can go wrong. But if we really knew our history, there ought to be some building in the immigration department named after Louis Post. He's someone who showed [how] a government official ought to do [his] job.

To be concluded next weekend.

Exploring mixed-race identity

'ACE OF SPADES'

By David Matthews
(Henry Holt and Company, 2007)

"Racism is not blindness." David Matthews writes in his memoir "Ace of Spades" (Henry Holt and Company, 2007); "it is sight that refuses to be clouded by the heart and mind."

Born in 1967, Matthews was raised by his black father, mostly ill white mother abandoned him. He spent his childhood passing for white, and sometimes as Jewish. Although Matthews knew nothing about Judaism (despite his mother being Jewish), he sensed a "simpatieco ... with who or what [he] imagined Jews to be." He decides, "How hard can it be? I'd gesture a bit more with my hands when speaking, whine a bit more (not a problem), and that would be that."

"Ace of Spades" should come with Dramamine for the emotions: Matthews can break your heart, turn your stomach, make you laugh out loud, nod in agreement or shake your head in amazement, and rethink an opinion, sometimes all in one chapter.

His black grandmother is light enough to be hired by the Baltimore Sun, but she quits once she learns their policy is not to hire blacks; they'd assumed she was white. After being rescued from his evil (white) stepmother, the young Matthews lives with her in her senior citizens' retirement home, where she quickly begins to "solidify [his] natural tendencies toward the foppish."

To save him from this fate, Matthews' father, a respected journalist, sends him to a public school, where he meets Stefan, who also has a black father and an absent (although he spends every summer with her in Europe) white mother. Stefan is "a tawny, diminutive James Bond," long an important presence in his life. Matthews never knows, though, if Stefan knows he is "actively passing." If so, he never gives it away.

Matthews' journey to adulthood and beyond takes him to Europe and New York City, "an eight-mile gumbo of ultracondensed multiculturalism," and to some understanding of who he is. To answer that question, he has to find the truth about the mother who has had no role in his life except through her absence and the mystery that surrounds her.

- Joanne Collings