

THE BOOK REPORT

Too Many Escalations Level Suspenseful Novel

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THE Q DOCUMENT
(Morrow: \$4.75) by James Hall Roberts starts out so well that it retains interest all the way to the end despite a continuous decline. It has all the ingredients, and more, for a superior suspense novel. Perhaps it has too much. The secret of a recipe is that two pinches may ruin where a pinch makes perfect.

The idea is a brilliant one: An American scholar named Cooper, in bitter self-imposed exile in Tokyo because he has lost his wife and child in a fire back home, scrapes along by authenticating and translating documents for a smooth conniver named Victor Hawkins, who traffics in manuscripts and maidens. Prof. Cooper has a continuing unlove affair with an unemployed woman reporter who once won a Pulitzer Prize but is now losing a battle with the bottle. Friday early, he meets and discusses his loss of faith with Father O'Connor, a Catholic teacher and missionary; Friday later, he illustrates his loss of the capacity to care by meeting the woman, Willa Cummings.

Hawkins, in his devious ways, has acquired a manuscript collection said to belong to the noted Martin Baum, a rabbi-scholar who was killed by the Nazis. But only after a brief and unlikely period in which Baum, a hero of the ghetto, was changed in name to Brenner and made into a Nazi.

In the Baum-Brenner collection is a scroll called the Q document which is said to prove beyond any doubt that the miracle of the Resurrection never occurred. So far, there are the obvious possibilities of a suspenseful tale. Where Mr. Hall goes wrong is in his effort to escalate everything to a shattering dimension. Cooper's wife and child were killed in a fire; that was bad enough, but his wrath comes from learning his wife's betrayal led directly to the death of his daughter. Father O'Connor is interested in Cooper's redemption; but this fine priest considers murder in order to prevent the Q document (which he himself cannot authenticate) from falling into the hands of the Red



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Chinese. The document, we are led to believe, will demolish Christianity, a position hard to sustain in the light of 1,900 years of attack and defense.

If the prospect of the Red Chinese competing with the Vatican in a secret auction for documents, the authenticity of which depend on the opinion of one scholar and a few technicians, is not

enough to move you, Roberts injects a good old Victorian subplot: an 11-year-old girl is sold into a life of sin. He rescues this girl, loses her, trades the Q document, saves her.

The irony is that all this escalation is not necessary. The essence of a powerful suspense story in an exotic setting on an unusual topic is really enough. The rest serves as irritant and distraction. And it is too bad. Roberts is a good writer, a fine stylist and an able storyteller. He could have written the best suspense novel of the year.

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If I seem to carp more than usual, it is because quite a number of suspense and mystery novels have disappointed me. One of my favorite writers, Margaret Millar, performed way below her track record in **THE FIEND** (Random House:

\$3.95). From the title on, this novel follows a barely disguised set of case studies in social psychology. There are echoes of the novel of suburbia, the novel of the psychopathic personality, the novel of children in peril.

Perhaps this comes, paradoxically, from the almost constant effort to avoid the tritenesses of that type of suspense novel which involves a community held in the grip of fear because of the fate of a child. A young man with a record of annoying children fixes his attention on a young girl. He gets the wrong address and sends warning notes to the wrong parent, a divorcee who thinks her estranged husband is behind the whole thing.

Meanwhile back at the tract, the father of the right girl is engaged in some hanky-panky with the childless wife next door. The librarian who wants (just why is hard to credit) to marry the young man, tries to save him from another brush with the law. His long-suffering brother is about ready to give up. The child disappears. The rest you can find out for yourself.

Again, it is a depressing

waste of Miss Millar's substantial talent. All the parts are brilliantly done: characterization, mood and setting of the small

California town, dialogue, individual scenes. It is the sum which disappoints. It just doesn't add up to a superior suspense novel.