

The Biggest Secret in Christendom

And the K.G.B., the neo-Nazis and the church are fighting over it in this speculative novel.

THE JUDAS TESTAMENT

By Daniel Easterman.

437 pp. New York:

HarperCollins Publishers. \$23.

By Clifford Irving

DURING World War II, in order to accumulate so-called evidence for their racial theories, the Germans throughout Eastern Europe seized and accumulated a huge library of esoteric Judaica. This was stored for the most part in Berlin; later, along with other distinguished manuscript collections and art treasures, it was liberated by the Red Army and convoyed to Moscow as booty.

In "The Judas Testament," his 10th book (including three under the pseudonym Jonathan Aycliffe), Daniel Easterman uses this wartime plunder as the genesis for an exploitative and horrendously overlong novel. It

Clifford Irving's most recent novels are "Final Argument" and "Trial."

falls into the category of *what-if* fiction, usually sold to publishers by clever literary agents between the first and second course at the traditional three-drink lunch. In this instance: *what if*, among the plundered papyri buried in the vaults of the Lenin Library, there emerged in 1992 one scroll that, if revealed, would shock the foundations of everyday Christian dogma? What if this scroll was a letter demonstrating beyond doubt that its author, Jesus Christ, was no less but no more than a Jewish fundamentalist and militant revolutionary?

Confronted with such a hoary premise, some readers might yawn. The ghost of George Bernard Shaw might rise up and say: "Dear boy, I dealt with this 80 years ago in my preface to 'Androcles and the Lion.' Only a few brilliant people paid attention." Mr. Easterman's scenario, however, posits that if such a scroll surfaced, an astonishingly large number of rich and organized neo-Nazis, ex-K.G.B. and secret service types, as well as major players in the Roman Catholic Church, would go to any lengths to exploit or destroy it.

To play against these evildoers, you need a hero. Enter Jack Gould, a half-Irish, half-Jewish, half-baked young widower and Aramaic scholar who is brought in by old friends in Moscow to authenticate the scroll and

then act as a broker for it. The scenes and characters in Moscow are by far the best in the book: Mr. Easterman has a sharp sense of what life is like in the post-Soviet wonderland and he conveys it well.

But we don't stay in Moscow long enough, and the narrative jets from Russia to Ireland to Paris to London to Germany to Israel: a zany, dizzying route. The journey cries aloud for ruthless compression; so does the text, studded with sentences like "She was, by the age of 6, already her own person."

Gould crosses verbal clichés with enough cardboard villains to populate three or four such *what-iffers*, and when the story seems ready to bog down in background information — information that is far more fascinating than the story itself — someone is found with his throat cut or blown up in a car. (I think it was Raymond Chandler whose advice to mystery writers was something like, "When you're in trouble, knock off a minor character.")

Meanwhile, Gould falls in love with an elusive, beautiful woman who resembles his beloved dead wife and is the daughter of the chief villain, and she turns out to be . . . well, I won't spoil it and reveal her identity. The reader will figure it out anyway by page 200, if he gets that far. □

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW 9

February 6, 1994