

an Irish beauty, Martha McGlathery, much to the dismay of his stiffly Anglican parent. He persisted, against his father's advice, in painting still lifes rather than entering the lucrative portrait market.

The elder Peale rebuked his son in clever paintings; he offered to give him painting lessons that he did not need. ("I have a colorick [sic] disposition, and, therefore, I am obliged to keep a bridle constantly tight reined to stay my tongue and hands from mauling anyone that approaches me," Charles once told his daughter.)

But Charles' "surpassing perversity" came in 1799, when he appointed his son chief taxidermist of the Peale Museum (the first such institution in the United States). No man was in a better position than Peale to know that his son would be "fatally affected" by the arsenic and mercury then used in taxidermy, Lloyd notes—Charles had given up taxidermy to avoid what he suspected were the ill effects.

Raphaëlle took the job to please his father. But he began drinking, small quantities at first, to ease the pain and other ills caused by the toxic chemicals. His painting faltered. His father chastized him for "high living and drink," and even went so far as to publish a pamphlet containing thinly-veiled criticisms of his son.

Raphaëlle died, in agony, in 1825. In memoirs and books stretching into the mid-20th century, Charles' descendants upheld the father's explanation (alcoholism) of his son's demise. Raphaëlle's body lies in an anonymous Philadelphia grave, the "bright serenity" of his paintings his only memorial.

## *A Decathalon*

"It is better to lose health like a spendthrift than to waste it like a miser," wrote Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94), "better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sick room."

And that is how the tireless author of



*In 1795, Charles Willson Peale painted this trompe l'oeil showing his sons, Raphaëlle (foreground) and Titian. Framed in a door jamb, it was so lifelike, according to Peale family lore, that George Washington was fooled into doffing his cap to the boys. Later, in a typically perverse gesture, the father painted a second version, substituting himself for Raphaëlle.*

"The Short Happy Life of Robert Louis Stevenson" by Joseph Epstein, in *The New Criterion* (Nov. 1988), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

*Treasure Island* lived his brief life. Enduring respiratory ailments and numerous other maladies, the novelist moved from his native Edinburgh, to California, back to Scotland, then to Switzerland, France, England, upstate New York, and finally to

Samoa. Along the way, he acquired (in 1880) a wife 10 years his senior and two stepchildren nearly old enough to be his siblings, an education in lighthouse engineering (the profession of his ancestors), a law degree, and a gigantic literary reputation. Tall and gaunt, an eccentric dresser and an endless talker, he seemed to Henry Adams "an insane stork."

Writing in bed, usually in poor health, Stevenson produced essays, novels, children's books, poetry, political journalism, plays, short stories, and mysteries. Not until *Treasure Island* (1883) did he earn enough to support himself and his family. Then came *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped*, both bestsellers in 1886, and lucrative contracts in journalism, including \$10,000 annually for a weekly column in the *New York World*.

Always unsure of his own literary worth, Stevenson once described himself as the

"author of a vast quantity of little books." After his death, from a stroke, in Samoa, the accolades were unanimous. No less a light than Henry James acclaimed Stevenson "an exquisite literary talent." By the early 20th century, however, many critics had soured on him, dismissing him as a mere children's writer.

What is to be made of Stevenson's career? "Given all that he had to overcome to achieve what he did," says Epstein, who teaches at Northwestern, "there is simply no setting aside his life." And yet, he concludes, Stevenson "was the literary equivalent of the decathlon athlete: competing in 10 difficult events yet holding world records in none." Writing in various genres, he developed so many different styles that he "finally left no fingerprints of his own." What Stevenson might have accomplished if he had lived another 30 years, writes Epstein, is a question "too sad to pursue."

## Making It

"American-Jewish Writers: On Edge Once More" by Ted Solotaroff, in *The New York Times Book Review* (Dec. 18, 1988), Times Square, New York, N.Y. 10036.

Twenty-five years ago, American-Jewish writers—novelist Saul Bellow, playwright Arthur Miller, poet Delmore Schwartz, essayist Alfred Kazin, and other luminaries—were often lumped together by critics as exemplifying "marginality."

That is, says Solotaroff, a New York book editor, they were outsiders in both the American and post-immigrant urban Jewish communities. Hence, they could see more keenly "what more accustomed eyes would miss at a faculty meeting in Oregon or on the screen of a Western or in Jewish dietary laws."

The result was some brilliant literature. But, according to Solotaroff, individual success and assimilation eroded the artists' Jewish distinctiveness: "The special angle of vision has blurred, and Jewish identity [in America] as a subject with a moral edge has tended generally to decline."

In America, being a Jew was soon "no longer a fate, as it had been so recently

and completely [in Hitler's Europe], but rather more like a fact, and not necessarily the central one, about oneself." The American-Jewish writer soon recognized that he was "less marginally American than marginally Jewish." What, then, did being Jewish mean?

In Solotaroff's view, a new focus for American-Jewish writers may be the relations between American Jews and the state of Israel. Since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, he says, the survival of Israel has probably been the "paramount source of Jewish identity" in America—and a promising source of personal tension and literary inspiration.

Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* (1987) points the way, with its examination of Israel, a land of "saintly" weakness and "heroic" force, as "the very image of the confused desires of American Jews." In this confusion, says Solotaroff, "the seeds of a new fiction are waiting to sprout."