Birthright: A Novel, by Andrew Coburn

reviewed by Martin Kich in the July 15, 1998 issue

By Andrew Coburn, Birthright: A Novel. *(Simon & Schuster, 316 pp.)*

The premise of Birthright might seem like an idea generated late in the day at a workshop for conspiracy theorists. Someone asks, “What if the Lindbergh baby wasn’t really killed?”

Andrew Coburn’s fictional premise is that Rudy Farber, an acquaintance of Richard Bruno Hauptmann, has orchestrated the kidnapping of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh’s son and involved Hauptmann and longtime friend Joseph Shellenbach in only parts of the plot, so that if either is ever questioned about the crime he will not be able to reveal all of the details. In fact, Hauptmann knows nothing about Shellenbach--only that there is someone else involved.

In Coburn’s version of the infamous 1932 events, Hauptmann’s role is restricted to making the ladder and collecting the ransom. Farber does the actual kidnapping, and he later deceives Hauptmann by telling him that the other man involved dropped the boy when the bottom rung of the ladder broke and that the boy died from head injuries. After Hauptmann foolishly spends some of the ransom money and is arrested, he cannot implicate Rudy Farber or anyone else without confirming his own guilt.

Shellenbach is interested in the boy, not the money. His wife, Helen, who is mentally unstable, has dropped their own son in the bathtub and fractured his skull. So it is the Shellenbach’s dead baby whom Farber dresses in the Lindbergh baby’s clothes and leaves in the underbrush along a roadside. The Shellenbachs leave New Jersey and settle in Connecticut. Shellenbach--called “Shell” throughout the novel--eventually becomes a reporter with the local newspaper. When their “son,” David, is still a boy, Helen has to be institutionalized--though she is never so far gone that she reveals their secret.

To Coburn’s credit, he does not milk this circumstance (or any other) of all of its melodramatic possibilities. In fact, it is never clear that Helen’s involvement in the “crime of the century” has accelerated her mental deterioration. Coburn’s novel is

so far removed from the Robert Ludlum school of intricate plotting that, for substantial sections of the novel, one can almost forget the crime, much as the characters themselves almost forget it. Yet everything moves inexorably toward the moment when Shell, slowly dying of cancer, feels compelled to reveal the improbable truth to his son.

The major strengths of the novel are Coburn's emphasis on character over event and the richness of his style. Even some of the minor characters continue to develop and to surprise. Shell's mother-in-law, Mrs. Dodd, initially seems a caricature of the tactless sort of mother who can be expected to have children as psychologically fragile as Helen and her gay brother prove to be. Yet, later in the novel, Mrs. Dodd emerges as a fascinating presence; her bitchiness can then be understood as an integral aspect of a strong, even attractive personality. Instead of simply proving the first impression wrong, Coburn makes us see her more fully for who she is. Indeed, his characterizations are so skillful that even the Lindberghs come across as something more than the two-dimensional figures of American iconology.

Coburn's prose is straightforward without being self-consciously spare, literary without being pretentious, somewhat off-centered without being distracting. It seems perfectly suited to a story about characters for whom irony is an instinctive understanding rather than an affectation. And the narrative language is flexible enough to adapt to each character.

Of special interest may be the characterization of Father Henry, an Episcopal priest who is Shell's friend and eventually Mrs. Dodd's second husband. He can be described as Shell's stand-by confessor. His great compassion has a sardonic edge; it has come at the cost of much of his faith. During his last visit with Shell, he reassures him by saying, "Soul is mind. Mind is essence. Without substance, there's no essence. You've nothing to fear." He is a Camus in a clerical collar--which, by the way, he wears on the flight north from Florida because he has observed that the stewardesses tend to be much more forgiving of old priests than of old men in general.

A former investigative reporter, Coburn is the author of ten previous books, including three novels adapted as *films noir* in France.