

Using foreground makes photographs more effective

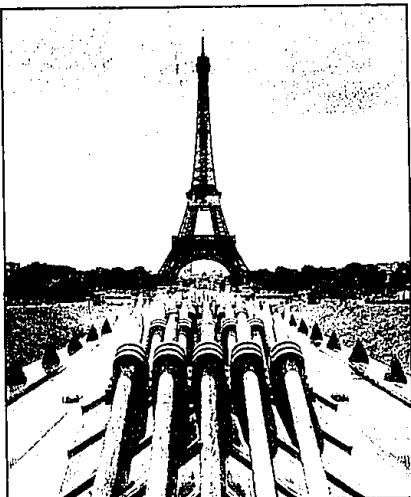
In many pictures, the subject itself is the nearest object to the camera. The image exists only on two planes... the subject and the background. The results are often just ordinary shots.

FOCUS ON PHOTOGRAPHY
Yet to make your photos more effective, use of the foreground can be a big benefit. In addition to helping create an impression of depth and distance, a strong foreground can make an important contribution to the composition and overall impact of a photograph.

In some cases, the foreground can be used to lead the eye toward the center of interest such as the fence toward the barn or a river toward a distant mountain. Imagine the furrows created by a freshly plowed field and how by careful composition, you can have them lead to that lone tree in the middle of the field.

Composition aid
Another way in which the foreground can be used to aid the composition is to use it as a "frame" around the subject. For example, tree branches framing the steeple of a church will dramatically add to the overall impact of the shot. Shooting a charming outdoor scene through a decorative window frame will add a special touch not otherwise obtainable.

When using the foreground in your photography, you must pay particular attention to the depth-of-field. Because you'll want the foreground as well as



Interesting view: How's this for using the foreground? Mickey Nagler used the "cannons" as a wonderfully effective foreground in this impact-filled view of the Eiffel Tower.

your subject sharp and in focus, you'll need to use a small lens aperture. Learn how to read your camera's depth-of-field scale, or, if you're using an automatic camera, learn how to program the camera to attain the necessary small aperture.

Compose carefully and use the foreground to complement the subject, not dominate it.

Use of the foreground will add strength to your shots and will produce pictures of which you'll be proud.

Monte Nagler is a fine art photographer based in Farmington Hills. You can leave him a message by dialing (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone. His fax number is (248) 644-1314.

'Blues Lessons' sad, joyful

Blues Lessons, by Robert Hellen (Scribner, \$25).

BY VICTORIA DIAZ
SPECIAL WRITER



VICTORIA DIAZ

BOOK REVIEW
This engaging novel tells the story of Martin Dijksterhuis, who grows up on a prosperous apple farm in Michigan. There, through migrant farm workers, he is introduced to country blues—a music in which "the notes of joy and sadness can sound the same."

Nearly on the same farm lives Corinna, with whom Martin eventually falls in love. A beautiful African-American, she is the high-spirited daughter of the orchard foreman.

When she finds that she is expecting Martin's child, his parents pay her and her family to "disappear," so that their son cannot marry her. If he marries her and takes on the responsibility of the child he has fathered, they believe he will forfeit a chance to better himself outside the confines of the provincial farm community. The fact that this is their dream for him and not Martin's dream for himself turns out to be a major theme in *Blues Lessons*.

Set in the years 1954-1974, the novel takes readers in several different directions. These pages provide commentary on every-

thing from race relations to Vietnam to the writings of Ayn Rand to extra-marital affairs to apple growing to bowling to mortuary science to economics to guitar picking to the finer points of country blues and its aging, legendary musicians—and then some.

Weak spots

In fact, should we quibble about weak spots in *Blues Lessons*, we might observe that Hellen has perhaps tried to include too much in just one story. Often and at some length, for instance, he has his lead characters (both Americans in this all-American story) show off their knowledge of French. As we read, and when this tale is ended, we're not sure why he does this, not sure how it moves things forward or what purpose it has really served. Consequently, it tends to feel superfluous—like yet another item tossed into an already highly flavored literary stew. (One wonders if Hellen is a writer with an astonishing variety of personal interests, who just couldn't resist sharing most of them in this, his third novel.)

Other times, Hellen may give the reader too much credit, lavishly lading on the lingo of a musician, for instance. This can be utterly cryptic, of course, for those of us who are non-musicians, and could hardly tell a pentatonic chord from a pentatonic scale or a flattened seventh, should they dance through the front door wearing brightly colored name tags.

Ultimately, though, these matters are superseded by the successes of this novel.

Here, Hellen takes us convincingly through a tumultuous time many readers will remember, while spriting us away to the apple orchards of lower Michigan, the juke joints of Chicago, the sidewalks of New York, a city-wide spelling bee in Madison, Wisconsin, even a railway post office between the Windy City and Detroit.

He does this mostly by giving us characters who captivate (although they sometimes remain a bit elusive). And it's worth mentioning that much of their credibility and vibrancy lies within their dialogue—the musicality of their conversations. (If Hellen has never penned a play or authored a script, he should most definitely give it a shot.) In a novel that goes on for 330 pages, hardly a single note of dialogue (and this is a fairly talky story) rings untrue or tiny or falls flat.

Like country blues, *Blues Lessons* tells a tale of sadness and joy, haplessness and happiness, woven together with heart-rending notes of nostalgia. At its center is Michigan, perhaps a surprising spot for a story about country blues. But Hellen's backdrop works beautifully, and should provide special appeal for all area readers.

Victoria Diaz is a Livonia resident and writes about books, travel, movies and theater for the *Observer & Eccentric Newspapers*.

Musicale honors scholarship winners

The Birmingham Musicale will feature the winners of their various scholarships in concert 1 p.m. Thursday, April 11 at the Birmingham Community House, 380 S. Bates. Members and the public are invited to attend.

After the program, the audience will have the opportunity to meet and congratulate the young

artists during an afterglow tea.

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