

*Cleveland's Second
Novel Hailed As
Strange, Beautiful*

De Capite Tells Unusual Story In *A Lost King*



Photo. Madison Geddes

A LOST KING by Raymond De Capite. *David McKay Co.*, 1961. Pp. 213, \$3.75.

RAYMOND DECAPITE was born in 1926 in Cleveland where he is now living. He holds an M. A. in English from Western Reserve University. *The Coming of Fabrizio* (1960) was his first novel.

REVIEWED BY Robert Price, Chairman of the Department of English at Otterbein College, who is a specialist in American literature.

PAUL CHRISTOPHER seemed touched, but with exactly what was a troublous question, though it must have been with something more than the whiskey his father, in indulgent moments, put in his coffee. Greeks would have said it was the gods, and Irish the fairies. Paul's Italian father mostly swore, then alternated between cuffings and excessive kindness before giving in to desperation at the whimsical fancies and irresponsibilities of his late-come and deeply loved son. The mother had died when Paul was only a stripling. Then Nina, the older sister, had married, leaving him to grow up through high school doing the cooking and housework and more and more looking after the father who, after hard years in the steelmills, was retiring to social security and broken health.

Paul is the central character in Raymond De Capite's second novel, *A Lost King*, published last September. Like the winsome hero of *The Coming of Fabrizio* (1960), Mr. De Capite's Paul Christopher has some very great problems, and they do not all arrive merely from the Italo-American environment so sensitively depicted. Paul, too, has to cope with something fundamental within. Now that he is graduating at last from Lincoln High, he appears to be completely incapable of finding a useful, practical place in the adult working world of his day-laborer neighborhood. Other boys from these Italian, Greek, and Polish families seem fitted by nature to become bank clerks, or to trim meat off beef bones for Big Deal Stores, or to hoist bags of potash all day at the American Chemicals dock, or to feed milk cartons into the endlessly hungry jaws of a gluing machine. But not Paul. His mind is sensitive to every passing bit of beauty and his fancy can

spin witty and whimsical and often charming nonsense, but he seems to be repelled by routines and cannot keep his interest fixed on practicalities. He has a gift for song that finds natural expression on a harmonica. There seems to be only one job he can hold --- selling watermelons on Sam Ross's horse-and-wagon outfit. And there is only one task in which he takes a vital interest --- caring tenderly, even though erratically, for his ailing father.

What comes of Paul's problem provides Mr. DeCapite's unusual story. *A Lost King* is a strange and beautiful narrative. Like *The Coming of Fabrizzo*, it has a rare individuality in both material and technique that has sent discriminating critics into enthusiastic shouts of "little classic" and "an evocative and oddly moving song." The Fabrizzos and Paul Christophers of this world are indeed endowed with unusually sensitive and often eerie insights. They have intensely emotional and glowing personalities. They have the qualities, in other words, that can send them to extremes of success and failure, hope and despair and hope again. Most readers have never met any one just like them --- except perhaps within themselves, for the stories became memorable in a highly personal way.

His Background

Raymond DeCapite is a native Clevelander, who draws the stuff of his books from his family and community heritage. Both his father and his maternal grandparents were immigrants from Italy. A graduate of Cleveland schools, DeCapite attended Ohio University and holds a B. A. from Cleveland College and an M. A. from Western Reserve University. He knows the grubbier side of fighting for a living too, we are told, having work-

ed, during his years of winning an education and creating his first books, as a shipping clerk, a restaurant employee, a cashier, a crane oiler and a trade magazine hack writer. This background may explain why these first novels seem to grow naturally out of a very real and vital world of experience.

In no sense, however, does Mr. DeCapite write a merely regional or local-color story. It is very significant of the way he views the story-telling art, I think, that even though both *Fabrizzo* and *A Lost King* are told largely in the simplest of natural-seeming dialogue, the author eschews dialect almost completely. Nevertheless, the talk is true to character. It is in turn comic, tender, racy, idealistic, but it seems to have little need for the distortions of speech and idiom or for the excesses of cheap shock talk that are often used to put mere surface on verisimilitude. True talk is made dynamic by gist and intent, by the inner drives of character. Like Paul Christopher's essential urge to find fullest expression in his harmonica music, there is something in a DeCapite story that seems always to be pushing for statement in poetry --- never, one hastens to add, with any lessening of the author's vigorous masculine vitality. A young novelist who can accomplish effects like these has much art already at his command. Since, we are told, two more novels are already in manuscript, we may well look ahead eagerly to see where Mr. DeCapite's fine controls are moving.

But back to Paul Christopher. The dying father knows that something must be done to jar this strange boy into growing up. He finally resorts to the seemingly only course --- he boots him out. What happens next in this tender-tragic-comic father and son narrative is unforgettable.