

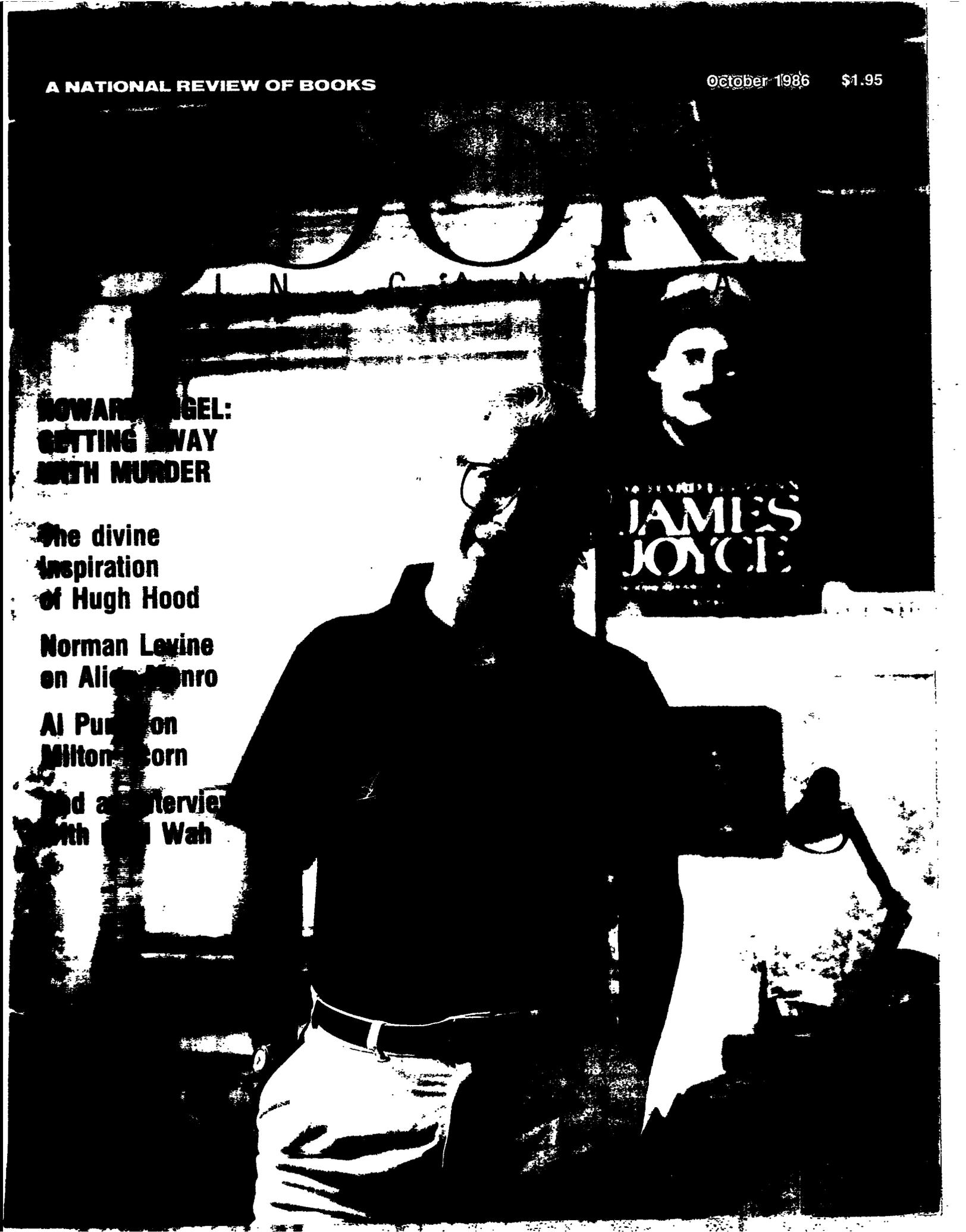
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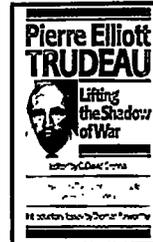
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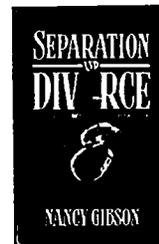
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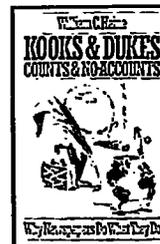
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The Empire writes back

Though multicultural unity is officially promoted, Singapore's writers are racially divided, and even the poetry of protest is polite

THE VOICE SOUNDS like a typical American disc jockey, although rather softer than the AM radio howl we all know and love: "I'm Arthur Kee Ong and I'll be playing the music. Next hour we'll be having part two of 'The Story of Acker Bilk' but first. . . ." Then an unbelievably optimistic pop choir begins, "We have a vision for tomorrow/ We have a goal for Singapore." The song concludes with the chorus, "Count on me, Singapore/ Count on me, Singapore/ Count on me to give my best and more/ Count on me, Singapore/ We can achieve together, Singapore/ Together Singapore, Singapore. . . ." The last two lines repeated four times.

I was in Singapore for a conference on Commonwealth literature, but like most of the foreigners there I was primarily interested in Singapore itself and all the exotic images that the name suggests. We were in for a big surprise. Singapore is much better defined by those radio voices than by either old movies or the horror stories of the Second World War.

The first thing one notices about Singapore is the high-rises. In fact, another pro-Singapore song, not unlike the one above, includes the line, "We love our high-rises." There is a coherent government plan to get rid of anything that looks in any way like traditional housing and to put everyone up in the air. A few traditional Malay encampments — "campongs" — exist, but the government will soon do away with them.

The Malays are more or less indigenous. The other major groups are Chinese and Indians. As in many multicultural societies, lip service is paid to the "out of many peoples one nation" principle, but the Malays are very much on the bottom, educationally and economically. Next come the Indians, who find their primary role in small business. There is no question that it is the Chinese who rule.

Languages are an even more vexing issue. The guidebooks say that everyone in Singapore speaks English, but a few encounters with taxi drivers will show any English-speaking tourist that government brochures cannot be treated as scripture. Still, this is rapidly changing through the official bilingualism policy. However,

bilingualism in Singapore means something quite different from the Canadian sort. Here, a properly educated person knows English and Malay, or English and Tamil, or English and Mandarin. Many of the older residents are unilingual in other Indian or Chinese dialects. Under the present streamlining they will be cut off from any official communication as minor dialects are excised from radio and print.

Just recently the Association of South East Asian Nations committee on culture and information produced a beautiful volume titled *The Poetry of Singapore*. Divided into four sections, Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, and English, it seems representative of local literary endeavours, both historical and contemporary. As one might expect of a country with such a confusing political past, literary history is complicated, with the pre-20th-century period primarily represented by Malay oral literature. Early Tamil and Mandarin material, written by those compelled to live far from their homelands, mostly extends from the classical literatures of India and China.

At the conference there were a number of readings by poets represented in the anthology, and it rapidly became clear that the various ethnic groups remain as separate in literature as they seem to be in Singapore life. To date almost no Malays have published poetry in English, so that group was prevented from consorting with the rest of us post-colonial anglophones. Salman Rushdie referred to the new literatures in English as "the Empire writes back," but like other indigenous peoples the Malays are in a doubly



colonial position. For them correspondence is a slightly larger task.

The Chinese and Indian also suit their heritages. Edwin Thumboo's "Ulysses by the Merlion" has the same weaknesses as much minor Indian poetry in English,

with arch images that turn Singapore into second-rate Victoriana. During his reading, the poet was invariably referred to as Professor Thumboo, an honorific that did little to decrease the "oh to be in England" flavour. Robert Yeo's poetry does a reasonable job of coming to terms with at least some of the complexities, perhaps partly because he combines a Malaysian and a non-Mandarin Chinese background. In "Coming Home, Baby," he quotes an aunt: "I was afraid you would come back/speaking like a white man/ coming out through the nose. . . ." Yeo's poetry is topical and down to earth, like the poems in English by other Singapore poets of Chinese ancestry and like the poems in Mandarin. (That is, if I can trust the translations: on encountering one very colloquial and witty poem, I spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out which Mandarin ideogram represents Kentucky Fried Chicken.)

But even Yeo's poems are somewhat repressed. I expected to learn something about multiculturalism from Singapore — something I could bring home. Instead I was constantly confronted by writers and writing devoted to maintaining the status quo. In one reading, Yeo delivered a poem that contained a mild attack on the anti-heritage effect of the high-rise fetish. He quickly explained that he didn't really mean to disagree with high-rises.

Of course, Singapore's government is in essence a right-wing dictatorship, so opposition isn't a game without penalties. But there is no sign of even a limited form of the student opposition that becomes quite violent in the more overtly oppressive and thus more dangerous South Korea. The Singapore's students seem much more concerned with learning English, the language of progress and becoming the only language of tertiary education. They must succeed scholastically in order to dress in Singapore style, which is the best contemporary Tokyo (which makes New York and Paris seem like bargain-basement Sears, 1979). Achieve together.

Late one night some of us decided to go for a swim in the student pool. We encountered not so much as a gate but simply a small sign that said, "Pool closed." Not the steel door of the Canadian pool or the high barbed-wire fence of Australian ones. Singapore, where

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people know their place. The land of the velvet-voiced no-no. It will be some time before a nation of such easy repression breeds the multicultural iconoclast that its contemporary poetry needs.

— TERRY GOLDIE

Notes from the underground

"IS THAT A good book?" says the large man with the portable tape recorder as he pokes his microphone under the nose of the young man on the platform of Toronto's St. George subway station. The young man, Sony Walkman attached to his ears and a copy of Plato's *Republic* in his hand, at first is reluctant to reply. "What's the book about?" persists the large man. "Is there anything you have discovered in the book that has had a profound effect on how you see your life?"

At last the young man seems to overcome his shyness, and begins to discuss the relationship between Plato's concept of the ideal republic and the Canadian political system. Is he interested in entering politics? asks the large man. No, says the young man — he plans to use Plato's insights to make big bucks in business. A subway train pulls into the station, and the interview quickly ends.

The large man (he has been described as "a large Larry Zolf") is Les Nirenberg, who for the past five years has contributed Transit Book Reviews — on-the-spot impromptu book reviews by subway passengers — to CBC-Radio. The reviews, which currently are heard on the afternoon program *Dayshift*, are an outgrowth of *Outside*, a Montreal radio show "where I walked the streets talking with people about whatever" that Nirenberg hosted during the 1960s.

"After that, I did a similar type of show on TV called *Quelque Show*," Nirenberg continues. "In 1976 I moved to Toronto, and was a producer for *Take 30*. I quit in 1981, and went to see Judy Brake, the producer of *Variety Tonight*, and suggested my idea for transit reviews. I had a regular spot on *Variety Tonight* for four years, and when Judy became the producer of *Dayshift*, she suggested I continue my reviews for her there."

The sound of another train alerts Nirenberg to watch for potential interviews. He spots an attractive young woman ("I especially like hitting on attractive young women," he whispers) with a fat paperback in her hand. He ambles up to her, introduces himself, and starts to ask questions. She smiles and explains she has laryngitis, but she'll try her best. She is a student nurse, and the novel she is reading is set in a U.S. hospital. To

her surprise, the book has had more bearing on her real-life experiences than she had expected it would.

"I try to make the reviews personal and human by getting people to reveal something about their own lives," says Nirenberg after the interview. "Even books as vapid as Harlequin romances provide interesting correlations with people's lives. I try to balance the sense of the book with a sense of a person's life in relation to the book.

"A couple of months back, I spotted a man reading a book about the Springhill mining disaster, and asked how he came to be reading it. He said, 'I'm from there,' and proceeded to describe movingly how the disaster had affected his family and the other people in the community.

"Not all the interviews are serious. Recently I approached a woman who was

reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and asked her what she thought of seagulls. She said, 'I know lots of nice people named Segal.'"

Nirenberg conducts his interviews on midweek afternoons, starting after lunch and stopping before rush hour. He likes St. George because "it's a crossroads station. I tried Yonge and Bloor and it was a pain in the ass. There are so many lunatics there — they were coming up to the microphone and screaming profanities into it. It's much more manageable at St. George and I can get a really good cross-section.

"It's important that I immediately establish that I am from the CBC and explain that I interview people in the subway about the books they are reading. People are relieved after that, because they know I'm not going to ask them anything threatening. It's a challenge to

cut through the psychological barriers that people put up. You have to treat people with respect — be careful not to invade their territory, and wait for permission to enter.

"I look for people who are at least half-way through their book. If they look like they'd talk freely, I approach them — but only on the platform, because they are less territorial. On the train, their imaginary capsules are much smaller, and if you invade them they get uptight. I'm basically a non-threatening personality. Definitely not a fancy guy — I look like a bedraggled slob."

Then he adds: "When I'm having a really bad day, I console myself by remembering a tape I once made of people saying, 'Get lost, deadbeat!' or 'What am I reading? None of your goddamn business.' It puts things in perspective for me."
— SHERIE POSESORSKI

ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

Help wanted

Editors are exposed to such massive doses of bad usage that they have become confused about standards that once were clear to them

By Bob Blackburn

RECOGNITION IS due CNN, the self-styled world's most important television network, for the major contribution it is making to the reduction of English usage to a state of anarchy.

One need wait only moments for this source to provide an example. I just tried it, and was almost immediately rewarded with "the point at which the airplane impacted the ground." I do not like to be made to giggle while listening to a report of a tragic accident, but I had to react to the fact that this was actually a correct use of *impact* as a verb. Undoubtedly, a falling airplane would impact the ground on which it fell, since the verb means to pack down tightly. However, it does not mean to hit, which I am certain was the word the speaker was searching for so desperately when he hit upon *impact*.

One must expect that sort of thing from television, but not from *Time*, which used to be one of the most meticulously edited magazines anywhere. Thomas Griffith, who writes a column called "Newswatch" in *Time's* press section, recently produced this sentence: "So, in the weeks before Reagan began his *real* vacation in Santa Barbara, his press aides have been busy arranging symbolic non-news and photo opportunities to show a caring and

involved president." What is needed here is a caring and involved editor to straighten out those verbs. There were further atrocities, but there's no need to go on.

One thing that is happening is that good editors are becoming contaminated by being exposed to such massive doses of bad usage that they become confused about standards that once were clear to them.

I frequently mention here that *plus* does not mean and. I do so because every month I become more appalled by the rate at which its misuse is spreading. It seems that the entire advertising industry is involved in a conspiracy to *make* it mean and. I am sure the hucksters will triumph. There is a TV commercial now that misuses the word in its zeal to convince parents that their children cannot get a decent education without the presence in their homes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. I expect to live to see the same thing happen in advertising for some dictionary. And writers *adore* the word for its powerful connotation of something for nothing, and I wouldn't mind their constant repetition of it if they would use it correctly. (They sometimes do, but probably by accident.)

A CNN reporter said someone had "culled through a huge amount of research." *Cull* means select. Do you

select *through* anything? I don't. We continually hear of police and jurists and such "sifting through masses of evidence." Again, why *through*? Do you sift through flour? No, you sift through a sieve. Rescue workers have taken to "scurrying survivors to waiting ambulances." The last time I looked, *scurry* was not a transitive verb. Probably the next time I look, it will be.

Police no longer seek the cause of an accident, they *investigate* the cause. I do not understand how you can investigate something if you don't know what it is, but I guess the police have powers the rest of us lack. These would be the same police, I guess, who are always said to "have no motive for the crime."

It seems people are no longer forbidden to do something; they are forbidden *from* doing it.

Old saws are being rendered toothless. Writers mangle them in ways that indicate they not only do not know them, but are not even thinking what they might mean. The best I've heard lately: "A wink is as good as a nudge to a blind man." The user obviously thought he was parroting an old saying, and had no notion of how ridiculous his misquotation made it. I will leave you with this response from an author who was asked about the inspiration for his new book: "As a matter of fact, it's based on truth." □

Partners in crime

Though both are distinctively Canadian, the fictional detectives of Howard Engel and Eric Wright are as different as are their creators

By Sherie Posesorski

RAYMOND CHANDLER regarded his private eye, Philip Marlowe, as a "modern knight in search of hidden truths." His moral anthem for Marlowe — "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, and who is not tarnished or afraid" — became the theme song of most of his imitators. For Marlowe those mean streets were to be found in Los Angeles, a city with which he is inseparably identified as Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade is with San Francisco, Nicolas Freeling's Van Der Valk is with Amsterdam, and Per Wahloo's Martin Beck is with Stockholm.

If Canadian writers did venture onto mean streets in their fiction, it too was Mean Street, U.S.A., or perhaps England. Larry Morse set his crime novels in Los Angeles, Sara Woods hers in

England. Other Canadian writers made strong contributions to the genre, notably Margaret Millar, but they lived outside Canada and sold their work to international publications. Until 1980, the streets of Canadian fiction were as clean of crime — and detectives — as Toronto the Good on a Sunday afternoon.

A pair of stiletto heels clicking up the stairs to the second-floor office of Benjamin Cooperman, licensed private investigator, signalled that the long, dry spell in Canadian crime fiction was over. Howard Engel introduced Cooperman — a nice, wise-cracking Jewish boy with the good looks of a chartered accountant — in his 1980 novel *The Suicide Murders*, and Benny has been keeping the streets of Grantham, Ont., clean ever since. Soon afterward, the streets of Toronto came under the jurisdiction of Eric Wright's Inspector Charlie Salter of the Metropolitan Toronto Police in the 1983 novel *The Night the Gods Smiled*.

Cooperman and Salter — two distinctively Canadian creations, operating in two distinctively Canadian locales — were greeted with critical and commercial success. Wright won the British Crime Writers' Association's first novel award for *The Night the Gods Smiled*, and has since produced a Salter book a year: *Smoke Detector* (1984), *Death in the Old Country* (1985), and this fall *A Single Death*. Since *The Suicide Murders* Engel has written four more Cooperman novels: *The Ransom Game* (1982), *Murder on Location* (1983), *Murder Sees the Light* (1984), and *A City Called July*. Both Engel and Wright have also won awards for novel of the year from the Crime Writers of Canada.

Engel and Wright work out of two different threads of crime fiction. Although Engel works within the conventions of the American private-eye novel, which were first established in the magazine *Black Mask* by such contributors as Chandler and Hammett, the pleasures of his books lie in his clever and witty inversions of those conventions, and in the eccentricities of the likable Benny Cooperman. Charlie Salter's vividness comes from his life outside the genre conventions.

The Salter novels are in the tradition of the police procedural (originated by Lawrence Sanders in his 1945 novel, *Vas in Victim*), a literary revolt against the hard-boiled school and aimed at bringing realism back into the crime novel. The European police procedurals of Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo in Sweden and Freeling in Holland examine a cop's relationship to his society in precise psychological and sociological detail. The pleasures of Wright's novels lie in his subtle and complex characterization of Charlie Salter, a middle-aged, angst-ridden cop on the outs with his police department, and in his incisive depiction of the social topography of Salter's Toronto.

AUTHORS OF CRIME fiction are particularly prone to the autobiographical myth that identifies creator with creation. For years Sam Spade was popularly believed to be a mirror image of Dashiell Hammett — despite the fact that Hammett resembled a lean, surly greyhound, and Sam Spade had the husky, blond good looks of an All-American football player. Similarly, it has been conjectured that Howard Engel resembles his private eye, Benny Cooperman (whom Engel has described as balding, rotund, dressed in a rumpled pinstripe suit and a shirt pulled

Eric Wright



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUTH KAPLAN

out of the nearest convenient laundry hamper).

When Engel opens the door of his downtown Toronto home, one glance settles the question: his resemblance to Cooperman is as close as Agatha Christie's is to Hercule Poirot. His head is haloed by long white hair; his gentle face is framed by large glasses that give him the air of a university don. Unlike Cooperman's shabby office, Engel's living room is furnished with a Victorian settee and a piano, both covered in books and papers and presided over by two restless cats, Henry and Alice.

"When I began writing about Benny," Engel says, "it seemed to add an extra room to the house — a room where Benny and all these other people lived. I enjoy their company. I like the way I can go back to the typewriter every night and write about them, without having to reread previously written pages. It's so easy to resume the conversation where it ended the night before."

His affection for and delight in Benny Cooperman and the world of Grantham is shared by his readers. These days Benny seems to be everywhere: on CBC-Radio in dramatizations of *Murder on Location* and *The Ransom Game* and on CBC-TV in an adaptation of *The Suicide Murders*. Engel is just preparing to leave for Algonquin Park to supervise the filming of a TV adaptation of *Murder Sees the Light*.

Cooperman's fictional roots lie in Engel's home town, St. Catharines, Ont., the Grantham of the novels. Engel attributes his lifelong interest in crime fiction to his mother's having read aloud to him from the novels of Ellery Queen, Rex Stout, and Frank L. Packard. As he grew up, he fed his habit with the novels of Ross Macdonald and John D. MacDonald. A double-whammy 1978 Christmas present of Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Chandler's *The Big Sleep* led Engel to think seriously about the genre. His initial response to his burgeoning interest in crime fiction was to produce a CBC-Radio program on Chandler.

While Engel and his wife, Janet Hamilton, were recuperating from a car accident, he decided to try his own hand at crime fiction, and wrote the first six pages of *The Suicide Murders*. "I showed the pages to Janet. She said, 'They're great. Keep going.' So I did. It was a real challenge. I had been around writers for so many years, without writing anything myself. I felt a bit like a eunuch in a harem. The longest piece of writing I had published was an 11-page poem on the Welland Canal."

With Benny Cooperman, he sought to create a detective who would comically invert the traits of the American hard-boiled private eye while still solving crimes in a recognizably Canadian locale. "In the first book, Benny starts off doing mostly divorce work. He takes the kind of cases that Philip Marlowe would never touch. He is the newspaper on the floor of the bird cage of detective fiction. He lacks confidence and is completely out of his element in dealing with a murder investigation. Like all detectives, Benny stands outside society. He is traumatized to a certain extent for having just left home. He's kind of socially exhausted. He lives alone in a hotel room. A lot of his life is on hold. He is a tidier of other people's lives — but not of his own life."

Unlike the hard-boiled, heavy-drinking, taciturn dicks of private-eye fiction, the soft-boiled Benny drinks milk and is a talky wisecracker. "Benny is essentially a voice," Engel says. "What I try to do is find his voice, and let him do the talking. In a first-person narration, you hear the voice and take dictation. Radio writing has had a tremendous impact on my fiction writing. I learned that every word had to pay its dues — that compression and conciseness pay off. I particularly enjoy writing dialogue."

Engel chose St. Catharines as his model for Grantham because "I wanted to map out a piece of territory that hadn't been written about. I know the Niagara peninsula. I wanted to make it as visible as the streets of San Francisco in the pages of Hammett. Grantham is a place of memory. That's why I changed

the name — so I could move things around, rearrange St. Catharines to suit my needs."

Benny's Jewishness has evolved beyond comic inversions to become an intrinsic and natural part of his personality. In Engel's new novel, *A City Called July*, Benny confronts his Jewish roots when he is asked by the Rabbi of Grantham to investigate the disappearance of a prominent lawyer who has run off with \$2.6-million of the Jewish community's savings.

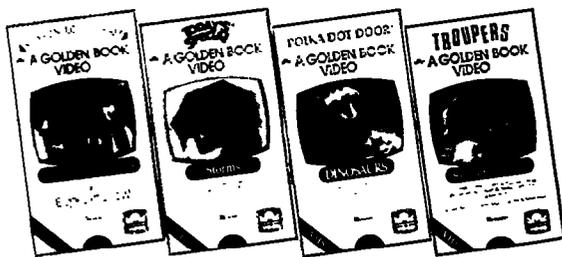
"A fair amount of my own feelings about growing up Jewish in St. Catharines are filtered through the book," says Engel. Born in Toronto in 1931, Engel moved to St. Catharines after his father purchased a ladies' wear store there. His memories are ambivalent. He waxes nostalgic about walking along railroad tracks, and a marionette theatre he and his brother David played with as children, but he adds: "As a child, I felt that I was an outsider. When I tried to get close to the social pale, I found a closed community. The Jewish community was small and isolated. There were many clubs that didn't admit Jews. I remember having a fight with a boy called John Birch over my being a Jew. It seemed funny when I later learned about the existence of the John Birch Society, that that boy had that name."

In *A City Called July*, Benny exhibits a growing professional expertise, and an emotional maturity far beyond his insecure bumbling in the earlier novels. Engel describes his first two novels as "fairly conventional private-eye stories" and his later two as a marriage of "the private-eye story with the British closed-community thriller." In his next novel, Engel is pondering whether to have Benny leave Grantham and go to Paris to solve a mystery.

Engel himself left St. Catharines to attend McMaster University, and later taught high school in Sault Ste. Marie. After a year, he moved to Toronto to work as freelance radio producer for the CBC program *Assignment*. "CBC was my first window

Howard Engel





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to a bigger world. I heard my first Shakespeare, Ibsen, my first book and movie reviews on the CBC. It gave me something to stretch toward. Although I read a lot, nothing had the impact on me of that CBC wavelength. I dreamed of working there."

After four years in Europe, during which he contributed interviews and documentaries to the CBC, and a marriage to novelist Marian Engel (which ended in divorce after 13 years), Engel became a staff producer on such programs as *Anthology* and *Sunday Supplement*. He lost his job in the budget crunch of 1985. Now he is known not as a CBC producer who writes novels but a full-time writer, a phenomenon he takes in wry stride. Of his five books, he says, "I now have a number of artifacts that do take up space on tables and shelves — and will press trouser creases, if necessary."

WHILE THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL myth doesn't apply in Engel's case, it does describe the relationship between Eric Wright and Charlie Salter. Like Salter, Wright lives in a Wasp enclave in midtown Toronto. He opens the door breathless from having rushed home from a photo shoot where he was asked to *dress* like Salter, whose standard attire consists of grey trousers, blue tweed jacket, white shirt, and a blue tie with red geese on it. Although Wright has minutely described Salter's clothing, he has avoided describing Salter's appearance. Why?

"I can't physically describe him because I'm looking through his eyes," says Wright. "I can't see Charlie because I'm inside his head. My friends say to me, 'For heaven's sake, Salter's you!' I shrug in agreement. I enjoy watching Salter have the reactions I wish I had. Some of his reactions are absolutely typical of me. Some of them are better. I guess he is an ideal me."

Whatever Salter may look like, Wright is trim, with clipped grey hair and a sharp-featured face, and he speaks with the resonances of a London accent. Like his creation, Wright exhibits an introspective, analytical turn of mind. He describes himself and his work with the emotional frankness of someone who has spent considerable time and energy brooding over both.

Wright began his life as a writer with an unusual success: he sold his first story, "Blitzkrieg Days," to the *New Yorker* in 1960. "I didn't realize how extraordinarily lucky I was. I couldn't figure out the constituents of that piece, though, to be able to write another, and soon became known as the guy who once sold a piece to the *New Yorker*."

It was 15 years before he began to write again. He was teaching English literature at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in Toronto, and had complained to his wife Valerie that he didn't want to go on teaching forever. "She turned to me and said, 'I thought I married a writer.'" Wright spent the next four years working on novels, all of which were rejected. The last rejection was accompanied by a note suggesting that he work on strengthening his plots. As an exercise, he wrote a detective novel, *The Night the Gods Smiled*. It was accepted by Collins.

In his creation of Salter and his Toronto world, Wright was influenced by the novels of Freeling, Wahloo, and Reginald Hill. "Those writers and their cops have taught me about social worlds and places. You read the first page of Freeling and you are in Amsterdam. I don't even care who kills who because the world the characters live in is so damned interesting. I care more about characters than plot.

"So I decided to write a novel about middle-class Toronto from a cop's point of view. I'm more interested in Salter's world, where Howard Engel is more interested in the world of detective fiction, and in baffling the reader. Those are aspects that I don't consider myself very good at."

Salter is a working-class Wasp, born in Toronto's Cabbagetown, who has risen, uncomfortably and self-consciously, to the middle class. His wife Annie comes from an upper-class Prince Edward Island family. "I gave him a lower-class background to displace him, make him class-conscious," says

Wright. "You only stay unconscious of class if you remain within your class. So I moved him up.

"I come from a violently class-ridden society. I had only been in Canada six months and found it comical when someone told me that there's no class system here. Class currents are everywhere, and they govern everything. I've always been astonished at how limited class awareness is in Canadian literature. One of the major functions of the novel is to describe class."

Salter solves his cases not by clever deductions but through the dogged accumulation of evidence. "I can't think of another cop that is quite as ordinary as Salter. He's not a deeply shrewd man. Salter and the murders are naturalistic, so it doesn't mat-

'I can't think of another cop that is quite as ordinary as Salter. Salter and the murders are naturalistic, so it doesn't matter that he isn't brilliant'

ter that he isn't brilliant." The novels balance Salter's criminal investigations against his investigation of his own condition. He learns more about himself by re-creating a psychological profile of the victim and a sociological profile of his world.

In his most recent novel, *A Single Death*, Salter explores the world of single, middle-aged women. ("A friend of my wife's mentioned that the highest percentage of unsolved crimes are the ones involving single women," says Wright. "I wanted to explore that.") Salter is asked by his first wife to reopen the murder investigation of a friend. In the course of his investigation, his long-held assumptions about women are challenged and demolished.

Wright's focus on Salter's inability to feel at home in his world is an expression of his own situation. "I'm never quite sure if I should write another Salter novel or write a memoir called *Growing Up in South London*. I don't know if I'm Canadian or English."

Born in 1929, Wright was the ninth of 10 children. His father worked as a carter, driving a horse-drawn van, and his family was preoccupied with rising out of the lower class. "My parents sent me to grammar school, and that moved me up to the lower middle class. I then became somewhat of an outsider in my family. I had two accents — my home accent and a school accent." He left school at 16, worked as a clerk for an oil company, and decided to emigrate to Canada at the age of 21.

"I felt slotted in, trapped into a class, into a job," Wright says. "I was going mad with boredom, and the narrowness of my future. We were a close family, but not an expressive one. They knew I was rattling around, looking for a way out. When I made the excuse that I wanted to see more of the world, they accepted it. From the day I landed in Winnipeg, life became interesting. I felt free." He worked for a month in Winnipeg, then got a job in Churchill as a clerk. When he returned to Winnipeg a year later, he decided to use his savings to attend the University of Manitoba. He then came to Ontario to do a master's degree at the University of Toronto.

He met his wife Valerie in Toronto. Like Annie Salter, she is a successful businesswoman — for 20 years she has owned and run a stationery store. Wright denies that Annie is based on Valerie, but in many ways the Salters' relationship mirrors the Wrights'. "I consider myself extremely lucky in my private life, in having such a secure and loving base."

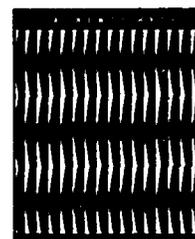
Today, Wright continues to teach at Ryerson, though on a part-time basis. In the meantime, like Howard Engel, he remains absorbed in the life and world of the character whose existence he shares. "People ask me how long the Salter series will go on. My response: until I've found out everything I want to know about Charlie Salter." □

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Chosen son

Now at its midpoint, Hugh Hood's 12-volume saga is, he says, a gift from God: a 'work of genius' that ranks with Beethoven's symphonies and Shakespeare's plays

By Joel Yanofsky

The Motor Boys in Ottawa, by Hugh Hood, Stoddart, 304 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 7737 5080 0).

IT'S A MUGGY, late summer day and Hugh Hood is watering the front lawn of his west-end Montreal home. The grass is muddy and there are puddles everywhere, but Hood decides to leave the sprinkler on anyway. He waters his lawn absent-mindedly, like a man who has a lot of other, more important things on his mind. Without very much coaxing, he will tell you what they are.

He will tell you, for example, that although he is generally pleased with the academic attention his work has received, what he really wants is "a big hit." Despite a prolific 25-year career and total sales of 150,000 books, it's something he has never had — something he is hoping his latest novel, *The Motor Boys in Ottawa*, will provide. For a start, it's a topical book (a lucky coincidence; Hood completed it two years ago) that deals with the 1965 Automotive Production Trade Agreement between Canada and the U.S. and offers a historical perspective on the current free trade debate.

But Hood's expertise extends beyond literature and politics. He can and will expound at length on everything from Hegelian philosophy to Bing Crosby imitators. An admittedly glib, non-stop talker, he doesn't, however, waste words on false modesty. The publication of *The Motor Boys in Ottawa* this fall marks the halfway point in Hood's 12-volume novel *The New Age* and he is more unequivocal than ever, if that's possible, in his assessment of what he is doing.

"I might as well say at the beginning I think the whole thing is a great work of art." Hood volunteers this answer before the question is even asked — before any questions are asked. His schedule is tight, after all. Intended to serve as a comprehensive, if idiosyncratic, record of 100 years of Canadian experience, *The New Age* is on a preposterous timetable that will see the final volume published on Dec. 31, 1999. By then Hood will be 72.

So he goes on, focusing, as always, on the big picture: "In the end when I have the whole row of 12 books on the shelf and people can see what's built into them, they will see that it's a work of genius and the only one a Canadian has succeeded

in producing — a thing like the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven or Shakespeare's history plays."

Settled in the rec room of the house he has lived in since he came to Montreal from Toronto, in 1961, to teach at the University of Montreal, Hood is a cheerful, disarming man with a puckish smile and a habit of laughing at his own allusive jokes. He can make the most audacious statements sound matter-of-fact. He is saying all of this for the record, of course, probably to get a rise out of the critics who have, on occasion, found his "work of genius" dull and unreadable, and who consider his grandiose opinion of himself arrogant, inflated and, worst of all, untypically Canadian.

But he also says these things because he absolutely believes them. Because as a devout Roman Catholic — a writer whose 21 books are "full of God" — he is convinced that *The New Age* is "an unearned gratuity," a gift handed down from on high, assigned, he adds unnervingly, by the Almighty.

Frankly, there are a lot of things about Hood that are unnerving, not the least of which is his ability to work on as many as six literary projects at the same time. Best known for such short fiction as "Flying a Red Kite," Hood is arranging the first volume of his *Complete Stories* and has a short novel due out in the spring. He is also collaborating with his wife, artist Noreen Mallory, on a commentary for a show of her paintings.

While Hood juggles projects, *The New Age* is on hold until January. The first draft of volume seven, *Tony's Book*, is already finished, but he is purposely staying away from it for six months — standard operating procedure for the series. The five remaining books are already mapped out in his mind. He knows the titles; he even knows the last lines — a prerequisite, Hood says, for anyone contemplating a 12-part novel. He realizes that he is stuck with the series, but he is happily, enthusiastically stuck. If anything, it's getting easier to write now that "a finite number of pieces in the puzzle have been placed."

A common complaint about *The New Age* is that the individual books tend to

Hugh Hood



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL ORENSTEIN

be long on rhetoric and short on plot, action, and structure. But now that "the elephant in the other room" — as Hood likes to call the series — is halfway through the door, he is delighted to point out all "the formal beauties and structural qualities" of his alternately lumbering and elegant beast: how all the patterns, motifs, and themes recur. Or how, for example, the fifth book, *The Scenic Art*, fits inside the second book, *A New Athens*, like left hand and right hand.

"I'm really writing like a poet, but a poet with an enormous canvas," Hood explains, expounding on his grand plan with the same enthusiasm that he shows on the subject of his four children. "This whole business is a way of bringing very distant things together and showing how the structure of being relates."

OPTIMISTIC PREDICTIONS aside, *The Motor Boys in Ottawa* will probably not be "a big hit" — a fact that can't really come as a surprise to its author. Hood knows better than anyone how exacting *The New Age* is. He knows the demands it makes on readers as well as the demands it makes on him: "The trickiest rhetorical problem is to write a book that is an independent novel in itself and at the

same time works out the assumptions of the previous books."

This is, in fact, the same problem Hood grapples with and never quite resolves in the new book — a novel that is neither as self-contained nor as satisfying as its predecessors. Readers who are unfamiliar with Hood's eccentric style will find the narrative interruptions and digressions in the latest instalment distracting.

On the other hand, fans of *The New Age* should have no trouble picking up the strands of Hood's continuing, eclectic tale. Minor and major characters reappear and series narrator Matt Goderich, the quintessential Canadian commentator, prudent, pedantic, "a bit of a fuddy-duddy," leads the way once again, pointing out the significant signposts along the route.

The story begins with George Robinson, a pharmaceutical tycoon, trying to set himself up in the Canadian auto parts business. He intends to use inside information about a free trade agreement with the U.S. to make a fortune and manoeuvre himself into a position of corporate power. This sounds like dull stuff, but Hood is very good at making it interesting, even crucial. In Hood's vision, the automobile industry becomes a symbol of Canadian survival and longing:

We have to depend upon our personal transportation, especially in winter, as much or more than any people in the world. . . . The car has been our great object of desire, of love, truly our mechanical bride.

What plot there is in the narrative concerns Robinson's efforts to keep Andrew Goderich — Matt's saintly father, now an NDP member of Parliament — from thwarting his plans. To get Andrew out of the way, Robinson arranges to have him sent to Red China on a secret, futile mission. It is in China that Andrew, overworked and unappreciated, dies. His death is the exact midpoint of the series, emblematic of the "loss of the divine being in the universe." (According to Hood, the rest of the books are going to be "pretty goddamned dark.")

But the plot is unimportant. The novel is really a patchwork of vignettes, unsolicited lectures, and witty asides about Canadian society and politics in the promising, "daffy and demonic" '60s. Hood pulls together all the disparate elements of the decade — from the consequential to the trivial, from Pierre Trudeau's emergence as Liberal leader to speculation on why John Turner's wife, Geils, spells her name that way.

A blend of fact and farce, tedium and



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charm, sociology and serendipity, the strengths and weaknesses of *The Motor Boys in Ottawa* amount to the same thing: the unwillingness, or perhaps inability, of its author to compromise. Readers who can't accept Hood's vision of the country and the world, who are unprepared to meet him at least halfway, will get very

little out of this book. For better or worse, the same can be said of *The New Age*.

Time will tell if Hood is really Canada's answer to Marcel Proust. In the meantime, he talks like a man who has a seat reserved for himself in eternity. Listening to him speak and reading his fiction

are curiously similar: often bewildering and frustrating, inevitably enchanting. In Hood's crowded mind, everything counts. If you don't always see how, be assured that he does. If you miss an allusion or can't follow a *non sequitur*, don't despair; like a bus, there will be another one along any minute. □

FEATURE REVIEW

A way with words

Written without a beginning, middle, or end, Alice Munro's stories assemble layers of experience to produce a brilliant image of life

By Norman Levine

The Progress of Love, by Alice Munro, McClelland & Stewart, 308 pages, \$22.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 6666 X).

Toronto, Canada.

Rachael Levine,
The Penwith Gallery
St. Ives, Cornwall,
England.

Dear Rachael,

I thought I would send you the enclosed two books by Alice Munro. The Penguin, *The Moons of Jupiter*, is her last collection. The new one (in hardback) *The Progress of Love* is due out over here by the time you read this. *Books in Canada* phoned and asked if I would review the new collection for them. I said yes, but there was a moment of hesitation. I hesitated because I remembered a writer (a good writer, older than I am) telling me, when I returned to live in Canada, that he made it a rule not to review any books by Canadian contemporaries. Then, about two years ago, I had a phone call from the Ottawa paper, the *Citizen*. The book-page editor asked if I could give him the names and addresses of some British writers that he could get in touch with about reviewing Canadian books. I asked him why? He said it was difficult to get Canadian writers to review Canadian writers' books. I didn't understand at first. But now I think I know what it is. There are not enough writers over here. So that you get writers puffing up friends . . . you rarely get criticism. If I had been sent the book, in England, by the *Sunday Times* or by the *Spectator*, this thought would not have entered my mind. I would go to town on it for I like the new collection very much. But here . . . inhibition sets in.

Start with *The Moons of Jupiter*. I particularly like those stories, told in the first person, that are made to read autobiographical. I'm thinking of "Connection,"

"The Stone in the Field," "The Turkey Season," "Dulse," "Bardon Bus," and "The Moons of Jupiter." And in the new collection, the title story, "The Progress of Love," and "Miles City, Montana." They seem more relevant, more immediate. And though our backgrounds are quite different (hers is small towns in rural Ontario . . . she's travelled to far places in recent years), I was surprised how often I was reminded of things in my life. Perhaps it is because she explores family matters, family life, and the stories often hinge on a visit or a journey. (Usually from Canada to the States or the States to Canada — but there is no sense of a frontier or a border crossed.) Or perhaps it is because when a writer reaches a certain age death inevitably becomes interlocked with what is going on.

I also noticed in *The Progress of Love*, in several stories, how she makes use of memory. By questioning it. How, in order to remember anything, we change it. But she takes this a significant step further. She implies that the way we change a memory tells us something about ourselves, and our feelings for other people.

And notice how she often ends with an unexpected perception. That lifts the story and pitches it onto a timeless level.

But it is her other stories, those told in the third person (where the hold isn't so close) that, on rereading, not only grew on me but I began to admire her skill in the way she gets them to work. She doesn't use plot in the conventional sense. But it is there nevertheless. Nor does she have a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Her stories start somewhere then move — back and forward and sideways — in time. The effect is of writing a story in layers — one layer overlaps another — and getting more out of the experience that way. In fact experiencing the experience the way you would in life. And she does this by forcing the reader to make the connections. You'll

see what I mean. Especially when you read the final story, "White Dump." (What a good title.) And, one of the best in the book, "Circle of Prayer."

This method of telling a story is not, of course, entirely new. Ford Madox Ford did it in *The Good Soldier*. And Graham Greene has also used it — he got it, I think, from Ford. But they worked it out in novels. The way she has made it work for her, in the short story form, is quite brilliant.

I also think you might find these stories interesting because they are often about situations where the feminine side is the one that is explored (a mother to daughter, a daughter to mother). And her style — a strong visual sense combined with her ability to analyse — is well suited for this. Now the force of a book usually comes from recording externals: "the surface of life, the surface of things, the surface of events." But the mental toughness comes from analysis. And she is especially good on analysis.

A couple of the stories didn't work for me as well as the others. That is no reason why they shouldn't work for you. The new collection shows how versatile she has become.

But in the end — after the perceptions, the subtleties, the crisp sentences, the humour — what are we left with? Images. The school-girls going into the funeral home . . . where one of them lies in her coffin . . . they start to sing. And as they walk by the open coffin they drop in something of theirs ("Circle of Prayer"). The mother burning the money . . . \$3,000 in bills . . . in the stove ("The Progress of Love"). The grandmother coming out naked from the water after a swim ("White Dump"). And what is a particularly strong image occurs in a quiet, understated, story ("Lichen").

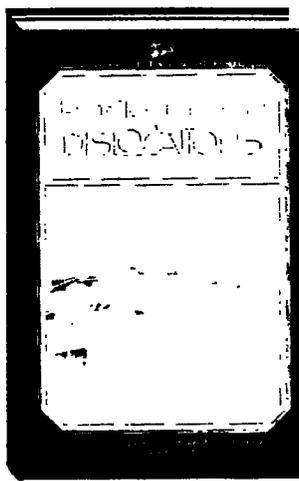
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onto your nervous system. With a story you are being led in, line by line, page by page, in a certain way. And it's what happens when you are reading that matters.

I remember when Pippa started to do some watercolours (she will, by the way, be going to a new school this year) I sug-

gested she might like to go to the Art Gallery of Ontario and look at the paintings.

When she came back I asked:

"How was it?"

"Spooky," she said. "I was frightened."

"Why?"

"Everything there is so real."

What is really attractive about Alice Munro's writing is how she writes the people and places into life.

And I envy you reading these stories for the first time.

Love,
Dad. □

IN MEMORIAM

'In love and anger'

Militant, ferocious, shabby, and shy, Milton Acorn (1923-1986) also had 'a unique greatness' both as a poet and a friend

By Al Purdy

WHEN A FRIEND dies, you remember the best things about him, the times when he was most truly himself. But Milton Acorn was never anything but himself. And all the conventional sentiments rush to my brain: "great loss" and "unique personality" and like that. I think those clichés are all true too, but they don't say anything about Milton Acorn.

It was 30 years ago in Montreal. Irving Layton had told Acorn I could give him some hints about writing plays. Milton came to my apartment on Linton Street, and stayed till midnight. During those three or four hours we became friends.

He looked like "a red fire hydrant in blue denims," as Bryan McCarthy once described him. True, but I've never seen a fire hydrant with Milton's personality. For instance, he was a Communist, with a capital C. Leonard Cohen — himself

about as cultured as you can get — said to Milton: "If there's ever a round-up of all the Communists in Canada, you'd be the first to get thrown in jail." Which isn't true: Milton would've made those cops coming to arrest him ashamed of themselves. They'd have left him with tears streaming down their faces for the working class.

When I say Milton was a Communist, there needs to be some qualification. Not as to feeling and commitment, but because he eventually joined all the party's offshoots and splinter groups, like the Trotskyites. He argued with everybody. There was something ferocious about Milton's humanism, and humanism is supposed to be gentle. His was militant. When he and I started a magazine called *Moment* together at my Linton Street apartment, it was produced on a mimeograph machine that I strongly suspect had been liberated from the Communist Party. It was a subject never discussed between us.

When I first met him, Milton lived in a furnished room on St. Urbain Street where he hammered an old typewriter mercilessly, producing both poems and stories for magazines. I don't know if he ever sold any stories (though I included two of them when I edited his *I've Tasted My Blood*), but he showed me a letter from Whit Burnett, editor of *Story Magazine*, complimenting him on his prose. I had a low opinion of Milton's poems at that time. He published a small book of them, *In Love and Anger*, in 1956. It had all the worst faults of a beginner, and I felt very superior. But only a couple of years after that, reading an Acorn poem about his home province of Prince Edward Island — "The Island" — I reluctantly decided that he was a much better poet than Purdy:

*Since I'm Island-born home's as
precise
as if a mumbly old carpenter,*

*shoulder-straps crossed wrong,
laid it out,
refigured to the last three-eighths of a
shingle.*

(That's what those old-time carpenters did, used the thin end of a shingle for small measurements.)

The room on St. Urbain was always knee-deep in crumpled paper, in the midst of which you'd sometimes see a science-fiction paperback or a poetry book that had surfaced momentarily, then disappeared forever. And Milton was always short of money: there is a poem about him savouring lovingly every single bean he ate in a greasy spoon at that time.

When he was broke with no possibility of quick redemption, Milton slept on the floor of our apartment (my wife and I had a spare mattress, minus box spring). He ate enormously and read all my books before I could read them myself. Once he consumed a four-volume book-club set of Freud from cover to cover, and confronted me with psychological absolutes when I came home tired out from work. I could have killed him. I say something like that — then remember.

In 1957 my wife and I built part of a house at Roblin Lake in Ontario. After two years we ran out of money, and were starving to death in rural splendour. We returned to Montreal to get jobs and regain lost poundage. She got a secretarial job at the CPR; I worked six months at Johnston's mattress factory in Montreal East, then quit. My wife remained in Montreal to finance things; I returned to Roblin Lake in late February, 1959, to work on the house. Milton came along to help out.

Freezing weather and snow besieged us in that partly built house. We ran out of firewood quickly, and hauled in truckloads of scrap lumber, courtesy of the CPR in Belleville. But there was only a handsaw to cut the stuff into stove lengths. We had to take turns sitting up

Milton Acorn



PHOTOGRAPH BY HERBERT LEE

at night, feeding the old cookstove. During the day we worked at the house interior, creating a shell around ourselves to keep out the bitter cold. We got our water from the lake by chopping through three-foot-thick ice; for light we clustered three coal-oil lamps together, and read nothing but masterpieces with large type.

And we argued. Milton had read more books than I had. He paraded his knowledge ostentatiously, dazzling me with facts and figures. I got back at him by verbal swashbuckling about things I wasn't very sure of, and had to look up secretly. And we laughed, and we sawed boards, and we hammered nails. And wrote poems. It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. . . .

In 1955 and 1959 I'd had a couple of Ryerson chapbooks published, and knew the editor, Lorne Pierce, slightly. So Milton and I got together a selection of his poems and sent them to Ryerson, along with a covering letter from me. But Pierce wouldn't believe there was any such person with the unlikely name of Milton Acorn. He thought it was a Purdy pseudonym, and that I was trying to sneak another chapbook past his editorial eye. But eventually Pierce was convinced of Milton's existence; the book was published as *The Brain's the Target*.

Around this time (spring, 1960), a poetry conference was going on at Queen's University. Milton obviously wanted to go, and I urged him to do so. "I haven't got any good clothes," he said. "Doesn't matter a damn; all poets are poor," I rebutted. And he went, hitchhiking to Kingston.

Milton didn't show up back at Roblin Lake for two days, looking bedraggled and bearded when he did appear. "How was the conference?" I wanted to know. Milton didn't want to talk about it, but I pressed him severely. It turned out he hadn't attended the literary gathering at all — had been too shy to speak to any of the poets. He'd seen them going inside the hall, had recognized James Reaney and others, but something shy in his personality had prevented him joining them.

Where did he sleep in Kingston? On a park bench near Lake Ontario. What did he eat? The few sandwiches he'd taken with him couldn't have lasted long. I don't know how much money he had, but I really don't think he'd eaten anything but sandwiches during those two days.

That incident helps to understand some of Milton's poems: the one about eating beans; another to a cockroach, and written in almost-cockroach language, as if he called them by their first names. And Milton was also that shabby and shambling figure I noticed crossing an auditorium floor years ago, passing other people, but perfectly remote from them, a planet unto himself. . . .

A City Called July

Howard Engel

Benny Cooperman's Latest Case

Called in to retrieve the stolen life savings of an elderly Jewish community, Benny Cooperman finds himself engulfed in a tangle of local politics, illicit love affairs and more bodies than he can handle.

ISBN 0670812684 \$18.95

 Penguin Books
Canada Limited



Straight from the Lip

by
Jean Déau

6 x 9 96 pages
\$9.95 softcover

Thirty-seven autobiographies of leading Canadian personalities — in step and out of it.



Fitzhenry & Whiteside

And his poems: I think Milton at his wildest and most rationally-irrational had a unique greatness. It isn't the sober and most terribly sane people who write memorable poems (the sane people drop bombs); it's guys like Milton. I've never before seen anyone like him, and do not expect to again. But it occurs to me: wouldn't that be a nice reward for living a few years longer.

There's a poem by Milton about someone else entirely; but I think it applies even more to what he was and what he will be — my friend:

*Never close the door on a parting friend.
Most inauspicious — that: hinting an end.
Watch him clear as he goes down the lane;
Photons from your eyes like a rain
Of blessings and good wishes. Hum
and memorize a song in his name
Which you'll hold secret till he comes
again.*

*Never give a sign it's over and done.
Greet every new friend partly for his sake;
Thinking of him as just now gone and
due back soon;
And if he doesn't return let loose that
tune
To find and call him back wherever
he's run.
Remember him behind in time, dream
of him ahead.
Follow these instructions — even if
he's dead.* □

defies anyone to tell him something about his work he didn't already know.

Metcalf's latest collection of short fiction, previously published in various literary magazines, includes two novellas, "Polly Ongle" and "Travelling Northwards," and three highly polished short stories. All are tales of loss and nostalgia



for a different if not better world, real or imagined: Metcalf has the satirist's double vision, a schizophrenic condition that also leaves him suspended in no worlds at all.

The feeling of displacement is most evident in the geographical settings of these fictions. Just one, "Single Gents Only," is firmly rooted in a single location, a run-down boarding house in the south of England. Metcalf's gimlet eye for working-class grit and the savage understatement of the narrative voice combine to produce a gem worthy of Maugham or Greene.

The other pieces in *Adult Entertainment* juxtapose the New and Old Worlds in several ways, most frequently through a main character born in England who emigrates to Canada. In "The Nipples of Venus," a sensual travel piece on Italy that recalls D.H. Lawrence's work in the same genre, Jack seems to be fully assimilated apart from a hint of accent. In "Travelling Northwards," Robert Forde (the "e" is Metcalf's private joke about the common misspelling "Metcalf") drinks his way through a Canada Council-sponsored reading trip to the north of nowhere and berates "pissy articles about the burgeoning of Canadian culture" while he himself — "a Victorian portrait painter who had refined his craft and art to a pitch of dazzling brilliance" — remains uncelebrated.

Forde is an impressive achievement. Effortlessly blending the separate voices of Forde's inner thought and the third-person narrator, the author also uses the character as alter ego to rant about the real John Metcalf's private and public concerns in a grotesquely ironic mode that never undermines the integrity of Forde himself.

The evidently classical virtues of Metcalf's diction and dialogue make the skilful explorations of voice control in "Travelling Northwards" almost invisible to the reader, quite unlike the sudden shift in the middle of "The Eastmill Reception Centre." Having described his fascination with a teenage delinquent in a dismal English reform school, the first-

person narrator abruptly halts the story to comment upon a vision — "fire at night seen through the forms of winter trees" — that made subsequent writing "tedious and offensive." Although the sentimental ending does not live up to this dramatic reversal, there is pleasure enough in watching Metcalf pull it off.

"Polly Ongle" carries these experiments in form and voice even further, but with unsatisfying results. Unlike the other central characters in *Adult Entertainment*, Paul Denton, a private gallery owner in Ottawa, is Canadian born and bred. However, he too is suspended between worlds, since he treasures the native art of a former British colony in West Africa where he worked for CIDA. While ruminating on the decline and fall of Western art and himself, Denton indulges two obsessions — a ravenous desire to get laid and disgust with his punk teenage son. Father and son literally bump into each other one night on separate drunken binges, and the last 14 pages of "Polly Ongle" constitute a diatribe against youth spewed out by Denton while his son spews vomit. Like the novella as a whole, the scene quickly becomes tedious and repetitious.

But other cracks have already appeared in Metcalf's craft throughout "Polly Ongle." Gone is the concise diction: the opening pages are dotted with unnecessary adverbs ("somehow," "now," "quite," "hardly"), usually the sign of lazy writing. This blurring of edges finds a parallel in the confusion of narrative voice. Rather than talking and thinking like a Canadian who has lived in a former British colony, Denton sounds more like a Sandhurst colonel, deploring his son's "abominable bloody music," wanting an issue "thrashed out," and calling him an "orrible little man."

Since the author publicly insists he is always in complete control, a search for hidden meaning in these anomalies is in order. Is Metcalf reinforcing the old adage that colonials are more British than the Brits? Or is there a veiled suggestion that Canadians, having no worthwhile art and language of their own, not only lust after steatopygous African statues but crave alien forms of linguistic expression as well? However, nothing else in the pellucid phrases of *Adult Entertainment* signals allegory of this kind.

Too much is wrong with "Polly Ongle": the hatred of youth overflows the bounds of Denton's character, while the use of "crunchy granola" as a supreme insult in both this novella and "Travelling Northwards" reveals the darker corners of no one's psyche except the author's. Still, "Polly Ongle" is the exception in an otherwise gratifying and often moving exploration of language's protean ability to mimic the soul. □

REVIEW

Displaced persons

By Mark Czarnecki

Adult Entertainment, by John Metcalf, Macmillan, 208 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9896 3).

FEW WRITERS HAVE been as vocal about their craft — and its public reception — as John Metcalf. In his virulent mix of polemic and apologia *Kicking Against the Pricks*, Metcalf concluded that most Canadian reviewer/critics, obsessed with weighty matters of theme and content, were incapable of appreciating a writer like himself whose forte was pinning down emotion with the elegant skewers of pungent satire, precise diction, and unflinching voice. Whatever one thinks of Metcalf's self-appraisal, it is difficult to ignore when new work appears: both casual and professional readers become more conscious — and self-conscious — with respect to an author who loudly

Paris is burning

Though dominated by her account of the riots of 1968, Mavis Gallant's journalism offers glimpses of the glow we want so much to see in Paris

By **Wayne Grady**

Paris Notebooks: Essays and Reviews, by Mavis Gallant, Macmillan, 239 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9610 3).

READING MAVIS GALLANT'S account of the events in Paris of May, 1968 — when an isolated student protest suddenly escalated into something resembling civil war — one is reminded of a fact that, reading her short stories, one is apt to forget: that for six years before her flight to Europe in 1950 to become a writer of fiction, Gallant was a newspaper and magazine journalist in post-war Montreal. Her apprenticeship with the now-defunct Montreal *Standard* served her well in these Paris notebooks — a two-part series that first appeared in the *New Yorker* in September, 1968, and that now forms about half of the present book. As she says in her review of Günter Grass's novel, *From the Diary of a Snail*, contained in the second half of this book, "Writers nearly always imagine it is easy to be a reporter, not to speak of a moral philosopher. The latter is simpler. One of the hardest things in the world is to describe what happened next."

What happened next is precisely what Gallant's notebooks describe brilliantly: they do not constitute a history, but they provide the primary material from which history is made. They are Gallant's impressions of the turbulence and confusion of those riotous weeks, but they also amount to an intellectual analysis of the effects of the students' revolt upon the citizenry of Paris — and hence are an analysis of Paris itself. This may seem too much of a leap to the North American mind: similar clashes here tend to remain between the students and the police (Kent State is the obvious analogy), but in Paris, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his followers managed to involve the entire city in a struggle that was as much a philosophical disputation as it was an act of civil disobedience. As Gallant observes in her introduction to this book, "The difference between rebellion at Columbia and rebellion at the Sorbonne is that life in Paris every section of society was set on fire, in the space of a few days."

As a war correspondent, then, Gallant was diligent and perceptive. Everything

that happened to her and about her — even her dreams — assumed a new or heightened significance and was recorded: newspaper articles, radio newscasts, accounts of shopping expeditions ("Shopkeepers have no solidarity with anyone"), student meetings and marches, encounters with gendarmes and right-wing agitators (who, in the final weeks, wrested the philosophical dispute out of the hands of the students and turned it into a pitched battle for higher wages). All is meticulously recorded in a brisk, staccato style that is quite unlike her fiction style, and which conveys the impression of notes scribbled hastily, on the run, unedited and filed to the newsroom from a pay phone:

Talk with M.B. She saw the police charge, outside the Balzar Brasserie. Says their apartment full of tear gas — they live on the fifth floor! Wouldn't let her daughter talk on the telephone in sight of windows. Police think: nothing of throwing grenades into houses. . . .

As these journal entries accumulate, they form a kind of impressionist portrait of Paris, a burning city torn between half a dozen conflicting stances, with everyone, pensioners and politicians, shop clerks and *lycée* students, leaping into the debate if not actually onto the barricades. Gallant picks out each salient detail, records each telling encounter, to probe subtly the depth of the social malaise of which Cohn-Bendit's insurrection was a symptom. In the midst of the chaos of police charges and student barricades, for example, she finds the calm that serves to accentuate the swirling storm:

Walk in morning rain to Luxembourg Gardens, on an impulse I cannot define. To see uninjured trees? Gates are shut, chained, and padlocked. Behind them the silent trees. Walk all the way around, past the Senate, past the occupied Odéon — its curb a hedge of spilled garbage. This is the fringe of the battleground: more and more spilled *ordures*, a blackened car still running, another car looking as if it had been kicked and punched. Something dreamlike about the locked secret garden: green on green, chestnut petals all over the filthy pavement; behind the iron-spike fence a Sisley in the rain, a Corot with the sun gone. A fountain jet still playing. The final unreality — three workmen and

a small bright-orange jeep-like thing for transporting rakes and shovels. I believe — I do believe — they were about to sweep and rake the gravel.

By the end of part one (the division seems to be more the *New Yorker's* than Gallant's) the notebooks have become what Gallant calls "a study of siege psychosis," as Paris in 1968 begins to exhibit signs of becoming what one imagines it was in 1941. Rationality, upon which Parisians pride themselves most, is totally suspended, and the effect of that suspension on Parisian behaviour entrances Gallant. As certain common items become scarce in some shops — as delivery vans give up trying to manoeuvre past abandoned cars — housewives begin hoarding everything: matches, bread, canned food, sugar. Gallant watches stupefied as one woman buys five pounds of table salt — "Enough," says Gallant, "to last me five years." A day-care centre puts out a plea for bread and milk, even though "there is plenty of milk and bread in the Quarter." Stores are looted, gasoline is siphoned from parked cars. Gallant finds herself unable to read, work, eat, or even listen to music, as if the shutdown of the city's metabolism were paralleled in her body's.

What comes through most poignantly in these notebooks is Gallant's wavering sympathy with the students. At first, her feelings are incontestably with them: battles between students and police are described as between "armed men and unarmed children." But as *les événements* become *les contestations*, as trees are cut down along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, as cars are stuffed with bags of garbage and set on fire, as paving stones fly through innocent windows, as the "cultural revolution" dwindles into "sordid negotiations about salary percentages," Gallant's (and Paris's) sympathies falter. What, she asks, has such senseless violence, such motiveless malignancy, to do with anything?

The real subject of the notebooks, as of the whole book, is Paris itself: Gallant's study of the May crisis is really a pathologist's report on a breakdown of civic order, and the essays and reviews that make up the bulk of the book have, in most part, been chosen to accentuate

this theme. Almost all of them illustrate what Gallant has called Paris's most attractive quality: its willingness to accept people on their own terms. The desire on the part of literate North America to imagine a Paris infused with a warm, intellectual light (a recent review in the *New Yorker* of Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality* refers to Paris as "the capital of intellection") is a hangover from the 1920s, when Paris was the icon before which all aspiring writers knelt: Gallant went there in 1950 not to bask in the shadow of Gertrude Stein or Edith Wharton, but rather, as she told Geoff Hancock in an interview published in 1978, because she "found Paris the most open city, the one that leaves you alone most, the one where you can live exactly as you like." As a city, she found it not unlike most other modern cities. As she says in a review of Theodore Zeldin's *The French*, "The French [by whom she means Parisians] do not wear berets or eat bread as a staple diet. They divorce, don't write to their parents, drink hard, forget to go to church, often perform work that leaves them bored and empty, fret about their sex lives, quarrel with their teen-age children — in short, they behave like men and women in an industrialized Western society," although she does admit later on that "the French are easily upset by criticism but touchingly grateful for sympathetic attention," which no doubt distinguishes them from, say, New Yorkers.

Most of the reviews are of biographies of French writers: André Malraux, Jean Giraudoux, Louis Ferdinand Céline, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, Colette, Georges Simenon. "When I write book reviews," she told Hancock, "I don't write them with the author in mind. I write them for the people who are going to pay \$13.50 for something so they know what they're paying for. That's all." In doing that properly, however, Gallant's reviews offer glimpses into a world, just for a moment, that has something in it after all of the intellectual glow we North Americans want so much to see in Paris. Though "everyday French discourse," she writes in an essay on Marguerite Yourcenar, "has become increasingly diffuse, imprecise, and dependent on clichés" — as has everyday English discourse — she goes on to say that every literate Parisian would recognize Yourcenar were she to walk down the street. One is suddenly reminded that Paris cares about its reputation among writers, and that it has nurtured or at least succoured more than its share of this century's most impassioned intellectuals, not the least among whom is Gallant herself.

There are, of course, a few odd notes in the book. Not all of the reviews have

to do with Paris, or even with France: Vladimir Nabokov lived in Paris in the 1920s, immediately after his exile from Russia, but this is not mentioned in, nor is it relevant to, Gallant's review of *Transparent Things* (1972) — a review that, unfortunately, does little more than say "what happened next" in Nabokov's opaque plot. Neither is there anything of Paris in Günter Grass's *From the Diary of a Snail* or Victoria Glendinning's biography of Elizabeth Bowen.

In 1956, in a review of Gallant's first book of short stories, *The Other Paris*, William Peden noted that, like Henry James, Gallant "is fascinated by the idea of the American in Europe. The best of her stories delineate the contrast between American and European values, mores, states of mind." To some extent, that fascination still informs the Paris notebooks. But notebooks, journals, essays, and reviews are intended, like the opinion polls and statistics upon which Gallant accuses Theodore Zeldin of basing his misconceptions of the French character, "to live no more than a day." In her interview with Hancock, she admits that, though she is a habitual keeper of notebooks, she never refers to them when writing fiction, and in the introduction to the present book she goes so far as to say that "if the *New Yorker* had not asked to see the record . . . I might never have bothered to type my notes or put them in order." Gallant, it seems, shares something of Umberto Eco's assessment of the value of journalism to the serious writer: "I believe an intellectual should use the newspapers," he says in *Travels in Hyperreality*, "the way private diaries and personal letters were once used. At white heat, in the rush of an emotion, stimulated by an event, you write your reflections, hoping that someone will read them and forget them." □

REVIEW

Hollow laughter

By Paul Wilson

Nine Men Who Laughed, by Austin Clarke, Penguin, 225 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 14 008560 2).

IN HIS HEYDAY (his first novel came out in 1964, and since then he has published at least 10 books of fiction) Austin Clarke was a true pioneer, one of the few writers around dealing with the life and times of Caribbean immigrants in Toronto. His earlier work crackles with an energy, an inventiveness, and a sly, ironic humour

that still reads freshly today. (I recommend *When He Was Free and Young and He Used to Wear Silks*, published by House of Anansi in 1971.) His characters — mostly Bajans, or Barbadians like himself — were lovable, roguish, marginally honest, upwardly mobile people trapped in a society and a subculture from which they sought, in ways both devious and direct, to escape. Temporarily "incarnated" as Rosedale domestics, Bay Street office cleaners, or university students, they longed to enter the mainstream, yet were constantly frustrated by what, from their perspective, was a deliberate effort to keep them in their "place." With a disarming lack of hypocrisy, they screwed each other around, bucked each other up, and generally huddled together against the cold and violence of the society around them. Canada fascinated and repelled them, but both their anger and their ambition had an engaging exuberance about it that you couldn't help liking, and even identifying with.

Though it apparently inhabits the same territory, Clarke's new book of nine short stories is to his earlier work as bitter lemon is to sugar cane. His characters are older, more worldly wise, more cynical. His men, most of them from the upper classes of their own societies, tend to have unrealistic and thwarted ambitions. They have got so used to blaming the world for their misfortunes they have lost the power to reflect upon themselves. Several are engaged in elaborate con-games directed against women, and the women themselves are almost invariably seen either as objects of sexual desire, financial advantage and security (Clarke says that the "system" is a woman), or disgust and loathing (they are frequently seen scratching their scars, wiping their eyes and picking their noses). Love is absent, calculation has filled the void, and relationships have dwindled to empty routine. Where Clarke once attacked real problems, like police violence, that have real solutions, he now seems to have given up, and given in to a kind of vague, catch-all condemnation of "the system" that leads to a "what's the use" attitude. And even when his characters do show normal human emotions and perceptions, they still can't behave in significant ways. It is not just that they feel helpless — they actually decline to act. When the female bank teller who narrates one of the stories receives a panic-stricken phone call from a colleague she is desperately trying to befriend, she makes no effort to help, with tragic consequences.

Clarke's literary universe — Toronto seen through Bajan eyes — has apparently undergone a deep and disturbing change. Once a world of magic newness, where wonder combined with pain and

laughter, he now shows us a place that is more akin to Graham Greene's noxious portraits of fading Third World capitals. The pain has become chronic, the laughter hollow, and the primary emotions are disgust, hatred, self-loathing. His humour — the title notwithstanding — has soured. And where there was once lilt and lyricism in the speech — a melodic representation of Bajan English — there is now a duller, clunkier, and far less consistent tone.

What has gone wrong? What is at the root of such a fundamental and disturbing change in such a skilled writer? Is it the world that has altered so radically, or has something tainted the inspiration Clarke originally found in the life of the people around him?

Clarke has written an introduction that provides a few clues, some more revealing than others. He says, for instance, that the stories were written "as a means of escaping the physical and mental torment skinned by the prepossessiveness of the new culture," but that could be said of his earlier work too. He also says that the nine men of the title are, metaphorically, himself. That makes more sense, and helps to explain the sensation of being thrust into a series of dark, brooding self-portraits that mirror a state of mind more than any "objective reality." But Clarke obviously intends those metaphors to stand for a reality outside himself, for he says that he wrote the stories "to destroy the definitions that others have used to portray so-called immigrants, black people. . . to rip away the film, the cataract of perception, in order to provide clear vision, even if what is seen is crueller, less palatable than the picture exhibited previously."

His vision is certainly crueller and less palatable, but is it really clearer? In his earlier work one felt the author's deep love for his characters; now one feels a sense of ennui and impatience, as though they had become less important to him than some message that — as metaphors — they were meant to convey. Somewhere in this "clear vision," Clarke's middle ground has collapsed, leaving only polarized, paralysed extremes. Even the best story in the collection, "The Smell" (a gripping and skillfully told tale of incest), is crippled by an abrupt and inconclusive ending, as though the author, having broached the subject, declined to go into it any further.

Clarke is clearly going through a troubled period in his creative life, and it may not be too fanciful to suggest that the author's public position in our society may have something to do with it. As a vice-chairman of the Ontario Censor Board, Clarke has assumed over his fellow citizens a position of power which, I believe, contains the seeds of corrup-

tion. In a recent interview with *Now* magazine in Toronto, he had this to say about his work:

Censorship is not just snipping the films. It is making the decision to state that a scene should not be shown because [it] represents a skewed representation or characterization of a group or a class.

To my mind, Clarke's view of his job goes far beyond his mandate, but in any case, I don't believe a writer should ever have anything to do with censorship, period.

Scissors can be an honourable tool of the writer's trade, but only when they are used to cut and rearrange his own work. Could it be that Clarke's power as an official censor is playing havoc with his power and integrity as a writer? If it were, it would certainly not be the first time in the history of modern literature. After all, suppression and creation are irreconcilable forces, and though they are constantly at war within us all, the illusion that they have nothing to do with each other or, even worse, that they can somehow be made to co-exist peacefully, is dangerous and debilitating. Clarke clearly believes that political censorship is justified, and though he couches his views in the rhetoric of social concern, his attitude is arrogant and elitist. It is also proto-totalitarian. As George Orwell once pointed out, the effect of such an attitude on literature is almost always bad. □

REVIEW

King and Country

By Jack MacLeod

Lily: A Rhapsody in Red, by Heather Robertson, James Lorimer, 327 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 38862 945 0).

IT'S HARD TO label Heather Robertson's new book: historical novel, imaginative spoof, comic novel, political satire? It's much easier to describe its quality: brilliant, bizarre, and richly entertaining.

Robertson, an accomplished and controversial journalist and author of five non-fiction works, won the *Books in Canada* First Novel Award for her 1983 romp on Mackenzie King, *Willie*.

This sequel is even better. When a first novel is a smash hit, second novels are notoriously difficult to pull off, but in *Lily*, Robertson's prose is stronger and more assured, her cutting edge sharper. She takes Mackenzie King and his fictional wife Lily Coolican from 1919 to 1935 with a sly vigour that is both satisfying and witty.

There are flaws. The shift of voices can be confusing, anachronisms creep in, and the satire is sometimes more bitter than deft. Robertson knows her Marxist canon well enough to cock humorous snooks at Canada's Reds of the 1930s, but she seems seriously persuaded that those few scruffy Stalinists meeting in barns and telephone booths were more important than J.S. Woodsworth and the CCF.

However, this is not to object to her wily use of history. Actual letters and diaries of Willie are trotted out with good effect. Although she is much less than lavish in her appreciation of King's many accomplishments, and although it is easy to portray our longest-serving prime minister as a clownish prig (she makes King seem like a cross between Good Ol' Charlie Brown-as-pervert and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi), Robertson has done her historical homework and asks the novelist's proper question of her material: what if? Then she runs with it, and takes off, and does loop-the-loops. Fair enough. The writer of political fiction is not required to recount facts slavishly, but only to be convincing. This she is, in spades, and she is bold enough to call horse manure "shit." Canadian politics is often grubby, Canadian English is often profane, and Robertson wades right in wielding a wicked pen. It may not be history, but it is grand fun.

Moreover, Robertson's brightness, acuity, and capering wit are mostly on the mark. She gives us the feeling and flavour of the times; many readers will be prompted to go back to their history books to check and refresh their memories, and that top is a plus. Historians usually lack the licence to draw the characters as vividly as they appear here: Lord and Lady Byng as "Bungo" and "Memsahib," Dr. Norman Bethune, R.B. "Buggerall" Bennett, the hustler Dr. W.L. McDougald, Charlotte "Charlie" Whitton, Alberta's raunchy Premier Brownlee; even Bartholemew Bandy makes an appearance, not to mention the Bronfman Import-Export Company of Bienfait, Sask. It's a vast and varied cast of characters that are set dancing, and they perform a most frolicsome jig.

In fact, *Lily* has such sweep and sizzle that no short review can do justice to the book's fascination. The author spins us through strikes and riots, scandals and swindles, fascist and commie rogues, elections, a constitutional crisis, kinky sex and political intrigue, shifting the narrative gears frequently, but keeping up a fast pace.

It's great stuff. If you missed *Willie*, you might go back and read it before you give yourself the treat of sitting down with this thoroughly enjoyable book. I'm already eager for volume three. □

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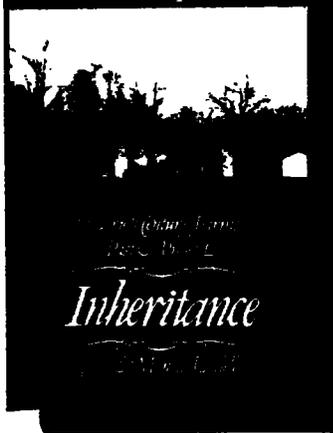
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BRIEF REVIEWS

FICTION

Momentum, by Marc Diamond, Pulp Press, 117 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 88979 179 6).

THE FACT THAT Marc Diamond's *Momentum* was the winning entry in the 1985 Three-Day Novel Competition does not diminish its unity as a coherent, brisk-paced narrative. It was subsequently revised by the author, and the action in this short novel is continuous throughout. The setting is unmistakably Vancouver, and the protagonist, whose name is Still, is a "downwardly mobile," inveterate horse-player in his 30s, with a studied aura of existential irony about him.

Still spends most of his unemployed time at the racetrack, betting on long shots and winning. He becomes peripherally involved with several women, and the episodes that arise from his bizarre encounters with them shape the storyline. Although the characters are mere outlines, Diamond is quite adept at exposing the trendy values they breathe. The construction of Expo 86 — mordantly referred to as "The Thing" — provides an ominously surreal background to life in Yuppie Town and Skid Row. Even "The Thing's" ritualistic frenzy of fireworks punctuates the passing of time, like a combined Disneyland-Las Vegas taken to its absurd extreme. To survive in this *kitsch*-encrusted circus, Still plays against the odds.

Momentum is also a subtle criticism of New Age business people and entrepreneurial scams. It reveals the tawdry shallowness of a provincial government whose idea of cultural pride is a fast-buck midway with long line-ups. Marc Diamond certainly succeeds in turning his society upside down. And to our dismay, we begin to realize that con artists are running the show. — LEN GASPARINI

The Next Best Thing, by John Ralston Saul, Collins, 304 pages, \$22.95 cloth (ISBN 0 00 223043 7).

THIS IS A better book than the cover illustration (a boa constrictor coiled around a golden Buddha) would suggest. John Ralston Saul's third novel is his most accomplished performance to date. Through some deft characterizations and a well-wrought plot he has taken the political thriller out of its genre and given it the resonance and moral weight of the literary novel. There are echoes here of

Conrad in the inner struggle of his art dealer protagonist, James Spencer, whose obsessive quest for 20 11th-century statues of Buddha leads him on a nightmare odyssey through the Burmese jungle.

Saul is at his best in evoking this fetid, life-draining environment. ("From unseen roots high in the trees, the vines twisted down thick and bare, like a field of hangmen's ropes.") The jungle, a noman's-land between Thailand and Burma, is the natural habitat of private armies whose territorial warfare is as persistent and vicious as the maurauding mosquitoes and blood-sucking leeches that infest its seductive shades.

With the help of Matthew Blake, a missionary turned jungle fighter, the innocent Spencer takes on the feuding warlords and opium dealers who stand between him and his precious statues. The jungle he penetrates is also a vivid metaphor for the darker reaches of the human heart. Spencer's quest for truth and beauty leads him through a tangle of shifting alliances and moral dilemmas before he emerges into the sunlight of self-realization.

John Ralston Saul is in total control of his material; the only flaw in this finely crafted work is the occasional philosophical excess: his characters have a tendency to preach, and not to listen to each other. — TONY ASPLER

Subversive Elements, by Donna E. Smythe, Women's Press, 263 pages, \$8.95 paper (ISBN 0 88961 102 5).

AS THE TITLE promises, Donna Smythe's novel subversively and synchronously combines in its storyline the elements of a journal exposé of the uranium mining and nuclear power industries, a polemic against chemical pollution and consumerism, a '60s back-to-the-earth idyll, and a metaphysical, feminist love story.

The main plot focuses on the politicization of the unnamed narrator (evidently Smythe herself, according to the newspaper stories at the end of the book), who moves to rural Nova Scotia to escape the chemical pollutants in the air and food in the city. Her hopes for an idyllic life

of farming and breeding goats are disrupted by the plans of Aquitaine, a nearby mining company, to explore land in her region for uranium. She joins a community-action group and becomes increasingly involved in its struggles to oppose Aquitaine. The secondary plot contains the narrator's meta-fictional novel, which tracks the love affair between Beatrice, a woman of 60, and Brother Bonadventure, a monk in his 40s.

As urgent and significant as all these political and personal issues are, whatever power and meaning that is contained in *Subversive Elements* is subverted by its structure and prose. Reading it is like leafing through someone's scrapbook of newspaper clippings, favourite quotations, personal journals, library research (all elements used by Smythe to tell her story) while the owner relates, in a self-righteous and indulgent monotone, the importance of it all. Smythe's concerns would have been more convincingly and coherently expressed in a memoir or magazine article. — SHERIE POSESORSKI

The Wandering Fire, by Guy Gavriel Kay, Collins, 298 pages, \$22.95 cloth (ISBN 0 00 223044 5).

AN INTRICATE TALE of fantasy and adventure, *The Wandering Fire* chronicles the lives of five Earthlings caught in the conflicts of another world. The land of Fionavar is a place of magicians and dwarfs, a place of the battles of Dark and Light. Though the story incorporates a fair bit of psychological complexity, its form — the myth tale of good versus evil — is a straightforward one.

The plot revolves around the problem — produced by the Dark Magician Metran — of winter weather in midsummer. The Light forces, with the help of the Seer Kim, discover Metran's whereabouts and engage him in battle. The story is interesting in that the forces of good seek not merely the end of winter, but the destruction of the power that creates winter. The return to normal climate is clearly not the climax of the book.

Though based on a simple dichotomy, the tale is not simplistic. Kay engages his characters in a good deal of introspection and, particularly when this centres on love, there is a real appreciation of life's ambivalences and shadings. When the depressed Kevin, for example, is approached by a lethal wild boar he thinks: "At least somebody wants me. . . ." A humorous quip, but it may not be far off,



given the complexity of human emotions.

Though generally absorbing and often vivid, the story has occasional problems with pacing. Large events such as the slaughter of the wolves and the battle with Metran are over too quickly. They require a longer build-up and need to be surrounded by greater adversity.

One is most impressed here by the work's breadth and detail. Kay's Fionavar is a world fleshed out.

— GIDEON FORMAN

FOLKWAYS

Me n Len: Life in the Haliburton Bush 1940-1949, by Richard Pope, Dundurn Press, illustrated, 132 pages, \$12.50 paper (ISBN 0 9199670 3).

THE RECOLLECTIONS OF Len Holmes, the engaging personality behind *Me n Len*, have been recorded with the deft, if occasionally self-indulgent assistance of Richard Pope, who met Holmes while investigating a piece of property. The texture of a singular lifestyle is captured, due in no small part to the astonishing recall of Holmes, who recounts the operation of a logging camp in the early 1920s as if he had put down his axe yesterday. Acutely sensitive to fluctuations in the natural environment, Holmes reveals a knowledge of flora and fauna that would humble many ecologists.

What really gives the book its zest, however, is Holmes's speech, painstakingly preserved by Pope, and with good reason. Holmes is a natural tale-spinner with an enviable stock of sublime similes ("Lovely trout. And fat! Bellies on em like poisoned pups"). *Me n Len* reads like a lively and informal journal, an impression reinforced by Neil Broadfoot's watercolour illustrations and the photographs, both rendered in sepia tones.

— HELEN HOGARTH

MISCELLANY

In Search of the Perfect Lawn, by Michael Dean, Black Moss Press, 64 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88753 145 8).

ON READING THIS facetious account of lawn history, it is easy to fault Michael Dean for wasting his time. Invigorating as "a green thought in a green shade" may be, the author's quasi-mystical experiences with lawns seem fatuously self-indulgent. What are we supposed to infer from the chapter "A Translation of *The Great Gatsby* Into Lawns"? The idea itself is pointless. Who cares? Yet Dean persists in trying to convince us that his vision is whimsical and unique, and that his quest is a symbolic one.

Perhaps *In Search of the Perfect Lawn* has something to do with aesthetics, Euclidean geometry, or both. At any rate, one suspects anecdotal masquerading as high camp and speaking in an earnest voice.

In one of his dreams about lawns the narrator encounters a strange girl named Rosemary. This character acts like an oracle and seems to possess a wisdom beyond her years. The narrator's relationship with her becomes a mildly erotic dream sequence that is interwoven with various lawn patterns. One almost expects the great god Pan to make a cameo appearance. Never has a patch of grass been so thoroughly subjected to anthropomorphic analysis. And that is the problem with this tale: it is a romantic fallacy from beginning to end. Dean's prose style is clear, and it would have been effectively suited to a more durable theme than seasonal lawn cutting.

In the final chapter, when Rosemary states, "In every garden a wild area should be established to serve as a sanctuary for the nature spirits. . ." one wishes the nature spirits had had a full romp instead of a fairy ring.

— LEN GASPARINI

THE PAST

Discovery of the North, by Daniel Francis, Hurtig, illustrated, 224 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88830 280 0).

THE CANADIAN ARCTIC is a paradoxical land, at once beautiful and deadly, welcoming and yet shrouded in mystery. This has always been a final frontier, a land of mythic proportions, where standard rules of behaviour, even the measurement of day and night, are altered or reduced by the implacable, inexorable landscape. In his third book, Daniel Francis has captured much of the character of the North in his examination of the history of exploration in the Canadian Arctic.

Balanced between the academic and the popular, the book emphasizes the explorers' conditions of life on shipboard during long and dangerous voyages and wintering over in a barren, inhospitable land. Throughout the book Francis credits Inuit knowledge of the country and assistance to the explorers as decisive for European gains: without their ingenuity and experience it is unlikely that any of the various European adventurers would have survived.

Beginning with Martin Frobisher in 1576, the narrative briskly traces the changing political motivations and state policies of European nations looking for a short route to the Orient, attempting to expand the fur trade or interested in scien-

tific exploration and discovery.

Tales of isolation, hardship, and incredible endurance, and of jealousy, murder, cannibalism, and debauchery, call out for a blend of fact and romance capable of producing a deeper fictional truth. Francis, of course, is not writing a novel, but in relying on the diaries, notebooks, and letters of the explorers, he conveys much of the psychology and conflicting emotions with the same tantalizing involvement historical fiction can offer.

Discovery of the North is an interesting, occasionally thrilling read. It is in such chronicles of the Canadian Arctic that undiscovered passageways to the North can be glimpsed as entries to the confluent terrains of myth, dream, and adventure harboured in historical fact.

— DENNIS CORCORAN

POETRY

Candy from Strangers, by Diana Hartog, Coach House Press, 72 pages, \$7.50 paper (ISBN 0 88910 287 2).

DIANA HARTOG'S second volume of poetry is a solid confirmation of the skill that produced the award-winning *Matinee Light*. In *Candy From Strangers*, the woman whom Robert Kroetsch called "one of the best love poets of our time" extends her artistic vision to incorporate a wide range of themes. The mysteries of birth, love, and death, fodder for poets since the beginning of time, are given due treatment. Throughout the book as well are poems of a more light-hearted nature, in which Hartog draws upon memories from the past to enrich and explain the present. The most successful are her prose-poems. Particularly humorous are her ruminations on the perils of washrooms on moving buses, as well as her account of outsmarting the nasty neighbourhood Doberman to the amazement of all ("... as if I'd just run barefoot over hot coals, or been introduced to Mick Jagger without once glancing down at his lips").

Hartog's greatest skill is her ability to breathe significance into the simple routines and occurrences of everyday life. The ordinary events that mark our days — watching the preparation of a pie, listening to an opera on the radio, untangling a knotted necklace — are transformed into rites infused with ceremonial, almost magical importance. To read Hartog's poetry is to be like a child presented with the big box of Crayola crayons: the colours are so beautiful and varied that one is overcome with a giddy sense of wonder.

Whatever Hartog's tone, quietly contemplative or delightfully playful, her

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— MICHELE MELADY

SCIENCE

The Polar Shelf: The Saga of Canada's Arctic Scientists, by Michael Foster and Carol Marino, NC Press, illustrated, 130 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 920053 63 7).

CANADIANS ARE NOT well acquainted with the sleeping giant that is our Arctic. That was even more the case in the 1950s when the Canadian government initiated the Polar Continental Shelf Project. It was the decade of Sputnik, of the first under-ice Arctic submarine crossing, and of a new law giving countries rights to their own part of the continental ocean shelf — and Canada knew less about her own land than the British, Americans, or Soviets. The ground-breaking scientific work of the PCSP is documented on the occasion of its 25th anniversary in *The Polar Shelf*.

The dozens of colour and black-and-white photographs in this government copublication with NC Press are striking images of the vulnerability of human endeavour in a climate that is unforgiving but breathtakingly beautiful. The photographs are accompanied by a brief history of the PCSP and by comments from among the hundreds of men and women who have worked on PCSP projects over the years. The grainy quality and harsh lighting of the black-and-white photos gives them a remarkable immediacy. Among the moments captured: a scientist and a lemming, nose to nose; a debonair pilot in his morning dressing gown, *Paris Match* clutched under his arm, against a background of barren tundra; and a man greasing the blades of his dogsled with Cream of Wheat. As one PCSP worker said of the far north evoked in this unique book: "It's one place in the world where you can be in absolute stillness."

— JULIA BENNETT

SOCIETY

The Expo Story, edited by Robert Anderson and Eleanor Wachtel, Harbour Publishing, 259 pages, \$8.95 paper (ISBN 0 920080 81 2).

AFTER ALL THE hype, it seems the last thing we need is another book on Expo 86. However, Anderson and Wachtel have assembled a highly intelligent collection of essays examining critical aspects

of the Vancouver spectacle that escaped the attention of most mainstream media.

These essays, commissioned especially for the book, explore the history of world fairs, the importance of architecture, the effects of British Columbia's Sacred government on the planning and execution of the exhibition, and other topics that contributed to the controversial Expo. The contributors include Ian Mulgrew, Sean Rossiter, Margaret Slade, Max Wyman, and others. Informative and well-researched tales of union-busting and the question of native participation highlight problems that existed before and which will remain long after the last tourists have gone.

Much of this material is no doubt more interesting to B.C. residents than those of New Brunswick, and some of the articles, given their complexity, would have been better suited to specialty publications. Though the book was completed in haste to coincide with Expo, a larger presence on the part of the editors would have been welcome to eliminate some of the repetitious passages.

These faults aside, though, this book is an enlightening guide for the residents of any city preparing for a mass undertaking, whether it be a domed stadium, the Olympics, or another world's fair.

— MATTHEW BEHRENS

WORK & WORKERS

Double Day, Double Bind: Women Garment Workers, by Charlene Gannagé, Women's Press, 235 pages, \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 88961 00 9).

AS IF IT were one of the garments made by Ruth, Theresa, and the other women and men whose voices dominate *Double Day, Double Bind*, Charlene Gannagé rips apart the popular image of the needle trade. Like the layers of a coat, the stereotypes of the industry are pulled away to reveal a complex pattern of marginal profits and frustrated opportunities. Such fascinating ground in the book as the emergence of the garment unions in the 1920s and '30s, however, is secondary to the world of women who have come relatively recently to the female ghetto within the clothing industry. They have in common the burden of a "double day of labour" for a disproportionately small share of the wage pie — and an even smaller role in the all-powerful unions that dominate their lives.

Gannagé's book, based on two years of interviews in Toronto's downtown garment district, reads a little too much like the Ph.D. thesis on which it's based. But its painstaking look at the lives of the women interviewed reveals many things:

the male-female tension in the shop; widespread ethnic antagonism; conflicts between "old-timers" and the younger working men and women; among immigrants, the warm, special place of the extended family and the fears involved in making a start in a new country. Unarticulated but equally vivid is the bigger picture evoked by the female voices in *Double Day, Double Bind*, of the dreams, fears, guilt, and hope of the working woman.

— JULIA BENNETT

REVIEW

Everyday miracles

By Mary di Michele

Other Fires: Short Fiction by Latin American Women, edited by Alberto Manguel, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 222 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88619 065 7).

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to this collection, Alberto Manguel remarks: "The writers are all women because it struck the editor as curious that so many of the best untranslated books from Latin American countries had been written by women." This observation seems rather naive in terms of sexual politics, but then Manguel's interest in the writing of these women — and his work in making their literature accessible to us — more than make up for it.

Isabel Allende, in her foreword, talks about a "rule of silence" imposed on Latin American women from birth, but whose rule is this? The women translated in this book are published in their respective countries in their own language, and some of them, like Marta Lynch, are among Latin America's best-selling authors. Manguel suggests that a superficial interest in Latin American literature among North American readers has singled out only a couple of male writers for attention and obscured the real Latin American literary landscape.

The real landscape is illuminated by some very intense lighting — the "other fires" for which the collection is named. It has always seemed to me that much of Latin American surrealism is more Catholic than unconscious or intellectually contrived. I have found myself well prepared for reading these fictions by my separate-school textbooks, where the miracles — which others read as magic realism — abounded.

"The Fall," the first story in this anthology, is an ironic echo of the Hebraic-Christian myth of Eve and the apple. In Armonia Somers's tale, the wax

statue of the Blessed Virgin melts, becomes human. No longer content to watch passively and endure events, she comes down from her pedestal in a flop house and is freed by the touch of a poor black fugitive, a touch she solicits and controls. No longer the Holy Mother, the perfect receptacle, and not Eve, she becomes human with a full range of emotions and the power to act: "I cannot be the Immaculate; I am the true Mother of the Child they killed. I need to walk, hate, cry on this earth. I need to be of flesh, not cold and lifeless wax." A fine tale, translated in rhythmical and dramatic prose.

"Metonymy, or The Husband's Revenge," by Rachel de Quieroz, is brilliantly ironic. It begins as the author's reaction to a review of her first novel, in which the reviewer criticized her use of metonymy, a figure of speech where one word is used for another associated with it. With the help of her Latin professor, she does more than rebut the critic's argument through classical uses of metonymy. She tells a story, "a crude example, drawn from my own experience," of "practical or applied metonymy." Through her tale, she reveals the real and psychological power of associating words and things. It is a sophisticated, self-conscious, and incisive piece about the power of emotional projection, and on another level about how we create symbols.

The stories show a range of theme and treatment, but one quality that many share is a sense of irony or ironic reversal, such as the delightful "The Night Visitor," by the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, in which a female bigamist charms even the entrenched bureaucrats of the legal system. Unable to save her from a jail term, the official who had been so eager to condemn her in the end competes with her husbands for attention during visiting hours.

Another feature of many of the stories is their focus on observation, distant and detached — something that Marta Lynch's "The Latin Lover" and Clarice Lispector's "The Imitation of the Rose," a most painfully introspective and detailed story of emotional paralysis, share. Even the bizarre "The Bloody Countess," an account of the torture and sexual mutilation of hundreds of young girls by an aristocrat who spends the rest of her time looking in the mirror, seems to be explained by the narrator more as the way by which the countess tried to escape aging and death than as "delight" in sexual sadism.

Not all the fictions are equally accessible. I had trouble with Elena Garro's "It's the Fault of the Tlaxcaltecas," perhaps mostly through ignorance of the historical, social context of the work. Even so, I think I would have trouble with

any piece that has dialogue on this level of abstraction and symbolism: "I had forgotten, Nachita; at the end of Time, we would both burn into one another, we would enter real Time, transformed into each other." However, whether parable or social realism or fantastic, these stories that help Allende feel "interpreted" as a Latin American woman do just as much toward illuminating the life of this "mad housewife" in the north. □

REVIEW

Firefly lanterns and golden owls

By Patricia Keeney Smith

Miriam Waddington: Collected Poems, Oxford, 422 pages, \$24.95 paper (ISBN 0 19 540535 8).

IN MIRIAM WADDINGTON'S poetry, you always know you're getting the truth, palatable or not and (one might also say) poetic or not. With an almost puritanical fervour, she pursues integrity, consistently refusing to sacrifice her own plain song for the sake of poetic power or decorative presentation. Fortunately, her need to say clearly what she means and identify what she thinks important coincides with a genuine lyric gift. In Oxford's new edition of her collected poems, you get a life that can rise to ecstasy or sink to an ill-conceived snarl.

Very early poems, such as "Green World," ring with a music still audible 40 years after their publication. It is composed of those lovely sounds issuing from all the old and subtle weavings of rhyme and rhythm. It is a world of curves, concaves, and crystals that throws reader and poet up into a windy golden space Waddington has reached for throughout her long writing career. This mistress of music writes personal poems that express the wily, isolated, yearning nature of her sensibility:

*You and me, it is always you and me,
But sometimes it is me, alone
Like a design in a Navajo rug
Or pottery, continuous and strange,
Spaced and blocked, and me alone.
Sometimes it is me
Moved from togetherness with you
Flowing back to me, into
My special shape, symmetrical
And clever, dark and sad.*

She also hits the world hard, as in "St Antoine Street," composing a gravelly jazz from her environmentalist's sense of impending disaster.

Waddington's is not the breathless geometric aesthetic of a contemporary like P.K. Page. More akin to Dorothy

Livesay, Waddington harnessed a poet's vision to a social worker's career, and produced poems of vivid detail about derelict people, alcoholics, and prisoners. In these, there is more than sympathy; there is a painful probing of self that questions the right to interfere with such individuals at all and that ironically wonders why law-abiding citizens like herself are so completely resistible.

Yet the poet does not always understand how best to use her lyricism. A 1950s poem, "The Music Teachers," beautifully evokes the life of a favourite mentor, a woman whose nights are spent in her dark apartment dreaming of dances with dashing unmet princes, and whose eyes are filled with lost Atlantis. Waddington plays with an almost decadent Romantic ideal and her touch is sure. Then, by way of contrast, she gives us Vera "from Missouri a girl filled with corn/ and crazy music." The last stanza is an unsatisfactory ending more suited to an essay than a poem. Too often Waddington lets the poem's energy run out rather than ending it.

Adjusting her sensitivities to a fragmented post-atomic world, replete with both new hope and new anxieties, Waddington felt the need to chop her music into very short struts, thereby seriously undercutting its melody. This, combined with a thinning of romantic imagery into the sentimental or the maudlin, is responsible for a number of poems that may be emotionally honest but seemed flawed as art. There are far too many watery fairy tales and nostalgic pinings after the frills of history and romance.

On the other hand, her lyric gift can cut right through a subject and still give you reason to come back again and again. "Looking for Strawberries in June" is about "the words I used to know," so sheer and light, a "certain leaf language," and how those words ran out the way railway ties do in the middle of nowhere when you're walking along looking for strawberries in June. This poem strikes just the right balance between what you know and what you want to know, between the world you make with your desire and the reality in which you stand.

Paying attention to her authentic feelings, rather than to dreams or wishes born of loneliness or resentment or frustration, Waddington achieves her finest poems. In "Icons" she tells us that "there is/ no such thing/ as love left in/ the world but/ there is still/ the image of it." In "Ten Years and More," her stunningly direct elegy for a dying husband separated from the poet by "a mountain/ a lake three/ cities ten years/ and more," Waddington manages a precise balance between the sensations themselves and the images that carry them. They are ordinary pictures of

everyday living but poised apart like birds on fenceposts in a quiet country morning.

Typically enough, the piece suggests exciting imminence; there is much underneath and always more to come. Elsewhere, she can abandon herself joyously to nature without abandoning the poem. "Poets Are Still Writing Poems About Spring and Here is Mine: Spring" exudes that first ever awareness: "You're an ice-thing/ a landslide, a whale,/ a huge continental/ cold nose-ring."

Miriam Waddington's combined Russian-Jewish and Western-Canadian heritage has produced a tough survivor and a forthright speaker. In the *Collected Poems*, you spend a lot of time visiting and revisiting Winnipeg, Moscow, Toronto and, like an old, familiar shoe, York University — grudgingly, apprehensively, painfully, embracingly. There is homesickness and dispossession; there is more than a hint of self-pity, and there is anger. Here is a poet who in later years also wages a tremendous struggle with old age and death.

The best writing around all of these themes is gritty, terse, often funny, sometimes gently mourning, or, like both Dylan Thomas and her contemporary, Irving Layton, defiantly triumphant and transcendent. In "Past the Ice Age" one hears "the new music/ in everything." Waddington also deals with her personal and the historic dead, "visitants" who "sing to you/ in a choir of stone voices" and come finally "with their firefly lanterns/ to lead you amazed/ through their blazing/ gateways of stone."

Happily, the *Collected Poems* of Miriam Waddington, echoing both the melody and cacophony of a life fully



lived, closes with the tones of a talent still deepening and stretching. Strangely diverting pieces, such as "Aspects of Owls" take the reader into austere regions of hope and imagination, for

*Certain owls are golden
you can see them
sometimes
asleep at the bottom
of very deep wells*

and

*It is necessary
to respect owls
they are aspects
of future
odd little fragments
of feeling.*

REVIEW

Lives of girls and women

By Patricia Morley

Learning by Heart, by Margot Livesey, Penguin, 248 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 14 008157 7).

FROM SCOTLAND, via London and Toronto, come 10 stories with astonishing insights for a writer in her early 30s. *Learning by Heart* is Margot Livesey's first collection, and with it she's off and running toward solid recognition.

Livesey is not afraid of a good story line, but the strength of her fiction lies in her depiction of characters and their difficult relationships. Her stories present a broad range of contemporary characters and situations set in Scotland and England.

The title story, a 70-page novella, contains two time-frames that gradually converge. Time present involves a young woman in Canada who, learning of the death of her stepmother, must return to Scotland to pack up her things and settle the small estate. Time past involves the life of the deceased woman from her birth in 1904 in a poor croft in northern Scotland to her marriage at 53 to the narrator's widowed father and their subsequent relationship. Livesey has used her own experience in "a fairly isolated" part of Scotland to craft a panoramic view of that country's movement out of rural poverty at the turn of the century into small-town and urban life.

As a young girl the narrator has a touching desire to please her stepmother. Slowly, the relationship sours and the girl is forced to conclude that with every passing year "she liked me less." New information after the stepmother's death helps the narrator to understand the harsh experiences that had warped the older woman's life: "the old, hard facts fall into a new pattern." The narrator's observation could be taken as a comment on the stories as a whole. Livesey manages to turn facts into patterns that illumine lives.

Other stories concern loneliness, sexual jealousy, and the power struggles that underlie many relationships. In "Jean and Little Aunt," two elderly sisters jockey for control as the failing eyesight of the older one begins to alter her lifelong habits. As in marriage, servitude and love are closely mixed. The phrase "for better or worse" hints at the parallel. The story ends in a draw as the sisters,

leaving a cemetery arm in arm, are caught by a sudden gust of wind: "In union the sisters raised their free hands and held onto their hats."

"A Small Price" is a devastating portrait of loneliness in a young girl who has just arrived in London from Scotland. Work in a bakery gives her a tiny human community, but weekends remain a problem. A casual contact leads to a love affair and to the painful realization that she is being used. Contrasts in class and experience are nicely drawn: "Paul asked if I'd ever been abroad. I shook my head; I couldn't tell him that I thought of London as abroad."

In "The Acrobat's Grave" an orphan of 28, in search of her roots, returns to the Scottish village where her father and grandfather were born. Her search becomes strangely mixed with the story of an earlier seeker, an acrobat who had died in this village from an accident the year before. As his photograph dissolves into a mass of dots, we realize the universality of the search.

The least conventional among these stories is an intriguing fantasy called "A Story to Be Illustrated by Max Ernst." (The German painter and philosopher was a member of the Surrealists and the earlier Dadaists.) Part fable and part SF, it seems a lyrical offshoot from *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*.

"Peter and the Asteroids," the collection's weakest story, failed to hold my attention. Sexual musical chairs can be boring. The same theme is handled more deftly in "The Ring," where the infidelities in two marriages are linked to the ruins of other civilizations (Stonehenge, an ancient fort) and to a hard look at human nature: "So even their sacrifices are useless," John said quietly. "Surely humans haven't always been this way? . . . How did we become so fickle and inconstant?"

Livesey's dry, understated humour is as refreshing as a cold drink on a hot day. "Obituary" comments ironically on the universality of death through an eccentric character who is brought to the gradual realization that "the only death he had to look forward to was his own." Here, as in most of the stories, humour is inseparable from the eye that shapes and records.

The viewpoint is clearly feminist, although Livesey mounts no soapboxes. Sympathy for the hardships common to women's lives at every stage is a clear though muted note. The death of a black-faced ewe, struck by a careless driver, suggests the lives of several protagonists. The narrator would like to bury her hands in the rough greasy wool of the dying ewe so that she will know "she is not alone," but finally decides that this might frighten rather than console.

Livesey's language is fresh and clear, her images lively, her touch sure. *Learning by Heart* is a strong first collection. □

REVIEW

West side stanzas

By Dona Sturmanis

Vancouver Poetry, edited by Allan Safarik, Polestar Press, 197 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919591 06 X).

THIS YEAR'S VANCOUVER centenary stimulated many publishers to produce city-oriented literary anthologies, particularly with the encouragement of a specially formed Vancouver Centennial Commission literary committee, which doled out official endorsements and, in some cases, funding to book projects they felt were deserving.

Vancouver Poetry is one of the finest to emerge in terms of both significance and range. The selection of poems and poets is comprehensive and thoughtful. Allan Safarik has also written a thoroughly researched, fascinating intro-

ductory essay on Vancouver's rich literary history, which goes back to the turn of the century.

"Perhaps no city of its size in North America has equalled Vancouver for frenetic literary activity," Safarik confidently states in his introduction. He addresses his claim through expert, focused editing, and in many respects succeeds in shaping a literary persona for the city: moody, exotic, and traditionally irresistible to creative souls. A good quarter of the book is devoted to Vancouver poetry before 1940; the remainder to superstars of the '50s, '60s, and '70s (Al Purdy, Earle Birney, Dorothy Livesay, Bill Bissett, George Bowering, Pat Lane, John Newlove, bp Nichol, Tom Wayman) as well as the talented if not so nationally known (Norm Sibum, Tom Osborne, Judith Copithorne).

Poetry has been an integral part of Vancouver's cultural fabric since the turn of the century, when a group of moneyed dilettantes created the Vancouver Poetry Society, the first of its kind in Canada. One of their favourite visitors was Bliss Carman, who in his 1929 contribution to this anthology, "Vancouver," perceived the city with "tomorrow's light on her brow." During the 1930s a young Dorothy Livesay arrived as representative of the radical *New Frontiers* magazine

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and established a writers' centre at an English Bay beach house. And of course the gifted Pat Lowther was bludgeoned to death by her professionally jealous husband Roy in 1975. These tidbits and many others are documented in Safarik's well-written introduction.

The quality of the poetry is generally high, and extremely diverse. Not only are there the usual hymns to mountains and sea but also tributes to the city's urban core which is not always pretty, and some highly personal poetic sagas. In the first category, Earle Birney goes classical in his seven-part "November Walk Near False Creek Mouth," in which he describes the city in a mythical, rhythmical light: "At the edge of knowledge the Prince Apollo. . . / floats in a paperblue fusion on air/ gulf/ Mykenean islands." John Newlove captures the spirit of the downtown eastside in "Alcazar," a homage to pub patrons: "It would be alright, she said/ if he wouldn't burn me with cigarettes." Joy Kogawa grimly recalls her experience as one of the many Japanese who were interned during the Second World War in "What Do I Remember of the Evacuation?": "I remember my father telling Tim and me/ About the mountains and the train/ And the excitement of going on a trip."

Safarik also chose many poems that have peculiar social or historical significance, and these are often the most fascinating. In the early section, turn-of-the-century French poet Blaise Cendrars contributes an eerie waterfront impression, "Documentaries: VIII. Vancouver": "That lurid spot in the dank darkness is the station of the Canadian Grand Trunk." Society doyenne Annie C. Dalton blasts the English Edith Sitwell in "The Ear Trumpet," thinking that the English eccentric was making fun of her own deafness in her onstage poetry performances: "Some day Edith/ too, may need one./ How she'll shiver/ when she knows it."

Of the more contemporary inclusions, bill bissett recounts his near-fatal accident. When surgeons opened up his brain, they found cells shaped unlike anything they had ever seen, in "Th Emergency Ward": "voyage woke up in the middul/ of th operation gave em a poetry/ reading sure was fun." Pat Lowther foresees her own bloody death in "Kitchen Murder": "i pick up a meatfork,/ imagine/ plunging it in." Red Lane, who died prematurely of a cerebral hemorrhage, similarly prophesies in "Death of a Poet": "And God changed the sponge into a grain of sand/ And turned / walked away from the beach."

The design of the book is as alluring as much of the poetry. The cover is an uncommonly effective silkscreen of a city nightscape by Terra Bonnieman, who has

created prints for such West Coast notables as Toni Onley and Jack Shadbolt. The book's pages are further graced by woodcuts from the first Vancouver Poetry Society chapbook, published in 1925.

If there is one major shortcoming of this anthology, it is the sketchy biographical notes. While coherent to those familiar with the B.C. writing scene, others might find them too cryptic to be useful. This is surprising, considering the thoroughness of Safarik's historical research, and 200 pages of material devoid of typographical errors.

On balance, however, *Vancouver Poetry* is a democratic, comprehensive survey. Its collaborators, I'm sorry to say, have gone on to other things: Safarik is now B.C. director of the National Book Festival, and publisher Polestar Press has returned to a primarily tradebook program. □

REVIEW

A mixture of frailties

By Rupert Schieder

The News from Ireland, by William Trevor, The Bodley Head (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), 285 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 370 30695 3).

ONLY RECENTLY HAVE readers on this side of the Atlantic been made aware of the attractions of William Trevor. The appearance of his stories in the *New Yorker*, *Good Housekeeping*, and the *Atlantic* have helped to extend the reputation long established on the other side of the ocean. Since 1958 this Irish-born writer, now 58, has produced 10 novels, a half-dozen collections of short stories, and plays for stage, radio, and television. Although never a highly publicized best-seller, even in Great Britain, he has, like David Lodge, A.N. Wilson, and Barbara Pym, attracted a loyal audience. This latest collection of 12 stories, *The News from Ireland*, will satisfy his fans and probably enlist new members to the club.

The long title story immerses the reader in typical Trevor territory. Set on an Irish county estate in the famine years 1847 and 1848, it meticulously delineates the complicated, stratified interrelations of the landowner lately arrived from England, his family, their estate manager and governess, and the Irish servants; the landowner naively hopes to create a "realm of heaven" on his inherited property. The reader observes the progress of the minuscule events through the eyes and

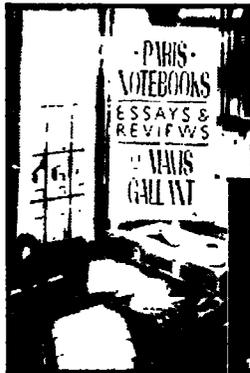
diary entries of the governess. The characters are all alien to one another. The generous hope of a "realm of heaven" withers; for "reality . . . kept shattering the dream, and may shatter it irrevocably in the end." The prediction is accurate. Only a dreary accommodation to events is left to the governess at the conclusion.

The news is not just that "from Ireland," but the latest report of the state of the inhabitants of the world of William Trevor's fiction. While not so ill-omened as that suggested by Anthony Burgess's recent title, *The End of the World News*, these latest bulletins from the Trevor world are not cheering. The 12 reports come in from rural and suburban Ireland and England (equally dismal) and from Venice, Florence, and Sienna, which promise but never afford escape from reality. The news items feature no public figures; only little people obsessed with petty concerns, victims or victimizers, the deceived or the self-deceived: the aging chorine hoping for the appearance of "Mr. Robin Right" ("Lunch in Winter"); the crippled woman, captive of her own wild west library ("The Property of Colette Nervi"); the trapped wife ("Running Away"); the impotent travel writer ("Cocktails at Donery's"); the salesman of women's undergarments who has been led to believe himself a composer ("Music").

The news items feature no public events, but private realizations of the painful facts of individual situations: the effects of minuscule cruelties, of "petty, unimportant lies" ("On the Zattere"), of an "undramatic revenge" ("The Wedding in the Garden"). The revelations lead not to any change but to a sense of entrapment, an impasse with no hope of solution or even communication. At the end of "On the Zattere," the daughter sits in Venice "staring at the lights across the water, until the fog thickened and there was nothing left to see."

In the face of such material, the uncommitted reader might well ask why fans of William Trevor willingly subject themselves to such a world. It may be that many share Trevor's sardonic view of the human predicament. The final effect is not necessarily negative, however; like Hardy and Conrad, Trevor at his best can imbue the reader with his own understanding and compassion. Then there are the attractions of being in the presence of a fine writer, a skilled craftsman whose flexibility enables him to realize in small compass the tangled interrelations of the inhabitants of his world, what he terms the "cobwebs of human frailty." By minute strokes ("his hazelnut face") and by his ability to convey idiosyncratic speech rhythms, Trevor sketches his characters, both comic and pathetic. In

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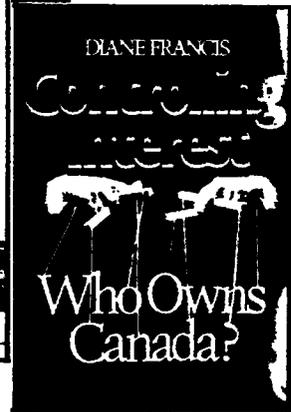
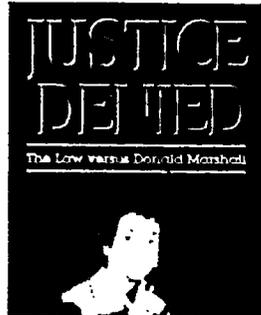
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the title story he has masterfully compressed, in suggestive detail, the social, economic, racial, and historical aspects and implications of Anglo-Irish relations, ostensibly in 1847-48 but also in 1986.

Of Elizabeth Bowen, his countrywoman, Trevor said: "Like many Irish writers, she found the short story a natural form and wrote most naturally when bound by its conventions." The same can be said of Trevor: his novels, such as *The Old Boys*, *The Children of Dynmouth*, and *Other People's Worlds*, are composed of small units, each operating on its own, small circles that touch or intersect, presenting his "cobweb of human frailty." It would be limiting, however, to label him an "Irish" writer. John Fowles observed: "I don't know who now has the right to claim Mr Trevor, England or Ireland, nor do I much care, since it is clear to me that his excellence comes from a happy marriage of central values in both traditions. Art of this solidity and quality cannot be written from inside frontiers. It is, in the best sense of the word, international." □

REVIEW

Against the stream

By Ted McGee

Zygal: A Book of Mysteries and Translations, by bp Nichol, Coach House Press, 128 pages, \$8.50 paper (ISBN 0 88910 216 3).

canada gees mate for life, by bill bissett, Talonbooks, 128 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 232 0).

blind zone, by Steven Smith, Aya Press, 64 pages, \$8.00 paper (ISBN 0 920544 41 X).

Parisian Novels, by Richard Truhlar, The Front Press, 70 pages, \$6.00 paper (ISBN 0 919756 06 9).

Convincing Americans, by Jim Smith, Proper Tales Press, 60 pages, \$5.00 paper (ISBN 0 920467 03 2).

DESPITE A RECENT warning in *What* about the risk of the dreadful "epithetic frenzy," categorizing these five writers might give us some superficial unity at least. All have published books to make the finger-tips of a bibliophile tingle with delight — except for Jim Smith, whose *Convincing Americans* lacks costly paper, drawings, and curious typesetting. All make the Toronto poetry scene (seemingly small and inbred when one writer does the cover notes for a book dedicated to him) — all but bill bissett "2,000 feet above see level in th karibu." All sound

poets? Not Jim Smith, despite performance pieces such as "the torture of the book." All translators ("naif," "open," "homolinguistic," or anglophonic)? Not bissett; his spell(ing) is his own. Then they are all "experimental writers" — by God, they are, all of them! — inviting us to think in terms of intertextuality, self-



reflexivity, écriture and meta-blank, writing descriptive and recursive, the tabling of content to foreground the literariness of literature. But this categorization and this fashionable terminology, which *do* apply, are most helpful because they throw into relief how distinctive (and distinctively weird) are the various experiments.

Since Coach House accepted *Zygal*, bp Nichol has gone on to write more books of *The Martyrology*, novels such as *Journal and Still*, several children's books and episodes of *Fraggle Rock*. As a result, his latest publication is a throwback to the early 1970s, when *Zygal* took shape as the second volume of a series that started with *love: a book of remembrances* (1974). But only the "translations" of Catullus — translations based on what Latin sounds like to an English ear (which have the interesting effect of creating an imaginative world more Petronian than Catullan) — seem an experiment peculiar to that period. All in all, *Zygal* epitomizes Nichol's abiding concerns.

Beautifully designed, the book takes its title from the word for the crosspiece of an h-shaped fissure. As that "h" suggests, for Nichol the language is literally literally significant. His approach to it in *Zygal* is informed by two predilections of his youth, archeology and mathematics, but the alphabet is now his arithmetic, language his dig. The former leads to "Probable Systems" in which prose, poetry, words, syllables, and letters are added, subtracted, divided, squared, tabled, square-rooted, etc. The latter lies behind poems for his saints ("song for saint ein" for Gertrude Stein), comics based on frames by Alexander Toth, Xerox and photographic images, line drawings of "H" (the "I.T.A.N.U.T.S." series), and poems in which "words fall apart only to create other words." Fortunately, Nichol knows that some of his hobby-horses are just that; hence the cryptic "I.T.A.N.U.T.S." for the cliché, "Is there anything new under the sun?"

Though particular pieces may seem amusing at best, or inconsequential, or not worth the effort needed to decode

them, Nichol's work as a whole reveals a lively, original mind at work or, to be more accurate, at play, as it is in his handling of many traditional genres (pastoral, emblem, song, sonnet, lament) in *Zygal*. He is also carefully developing the line used in the latest parts of *The Martyrology*, "a longer line to let the words stretch out the voice beomes more mine . . ." And some "traditional" lyrics are deeply moving, for in them Nicol gracefully aligns his constant theme, the poetic process, with larger struggles to speak, give, and love.

Reading *Zygal* and *canada gees mate for life* together might make one think that Nichol and oissett live in different worlds. Instead of rarefied pataphysica, we get bissett's unique "take" on everyday life from "famine in afrika" to a "big mac attack," from "th spirit ship" to "th kruis." The contrast is more surprising when one remembers that 20 years ago the two poets were among the first Canadian writers to explore concrete and sound poetry. These early preoccupations, like bissett's familiar quasi-phonetic morphology, persist, so that in *canada gees mate for life* there are vocal works ("seeeeeaaaaatulllllll") and prose poems in which the format shapes the impact (the beautifully delicate "baybees breath"). Less radical than Nichol in delving into the character(s) of the language, bissett has gone farther as a story-teller. Indeed, this book consists largely of personal anecdotes, the latest pieces of an emerging autobiographical mosaic.

It is hard not to admire bissett's integrity, the keynote of this book certainly. The quality is evident in the directness with which he recovers painful memories and in the constancy with which he celebrates his values: being "in yr body thru th sweet breezes," harmony with Nature, inspiration for the poet-painter bissett.

Breadth of vision sets Nichol and bissett apart from the other writers under consideration here. Richard Truhlar and Steven Smith, half of the sound poetry group o(WE)n so(U)nd, have published small, handsome books, and while they are not their latest ones, they are, I think, representative.

blind zone certainly is, for it collects poems written over the past eight years: poems for other writers; love poems, linked by just the trace of a narrative line; slightly revised excerpts from *white cycle* (1977), a book of five-finger exercises on each letter of the alphabet; a final eclectic section, "blind zone," which shows how promising Steven Smith's writing is. His spare style makes for some unforgettable images, but such minimalism demands control, and Smith loses it, so that lovely effects are destroyed by a metaphor thundering in or a platitude

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("you are a teacher/ [as we all are]") rising to preach. But the last section is impressive. Here he displays his widest tonal range, which includes the comic and satiric, and integrates most smoothly his scientific knowledge of electro-chemical man. Here sensuousness, the sensuousness blindness heightens, gives "blind zone" a subtle but compelling unity.

The idea for *Parisian Novels* remains more intriguing than the finished product. Untitled, unopened novels in a painting constitute a silence inviting speech, pages inviting inscription. Truhlar's eight poems accept the invitation, as it were. At first spellbinding in establishing the complexity of experience, *Parisian Novels* grows tiresome through repetitions, especially of "perhaps" with its insistence on the tentativeness of things. The seminal image, fascinating at the outset, is trite by the end: "novels which do not speak and can only imitate a gesture/ a pure gesture of inscription in the movement of discourse."

Jim Smith is part of the Toronto poetry

scene, but his part is a rebellious one. While others struggle to overcome psychological writing blocks, he proposes in "Novel Five," a work of 11 lines, to explain his "notion of transference, and how it has been a major battle in my life to achieve silence." He is similarly irreverent about writing writing; in "The Big House," a house of fiction he shares with Blake, Borges, Burroughs, and Brueghel, he resists the central thrust of the meta-function: "The typewriter likes to write about typing because that is what it does and knows best. Like a negative shepherd, I must watch for this tendency to remain in the fold's safety to show, and cut the umbilicus of self-referentiality."

Nothing sets Jim Smith apart from post-modern aesthetes more than his polical commitment. Odd, isn't it, given Foucault's desire for a book that would be a sort of "Molotov cocktail" or Derrida's sense of his origins, the French Revolution of 1848. From the cover illustration that highlights the military decorations sported by one stolid

American to the biographical note at the end that mentions Smith's involvement with ARTNICA, *Convincing Americans* is politically engaged and, except for the "Translations Naif" of poems by Parra, Vallejo, and Alberti (an experiment better left in a creative writing class or a writers' workshop), never dull. With a surrealist's flair for the bizarre, the author dramatizes the mad mind-sets informing oppressive, violent structures, economic, political, and social.

These books may be less important in themselves than in the development of the criticism of Canadian literature because as the canon changes so must the critical theory and terminology. These writers who are writing writing and de-/re-forming forms of literature, and others like them — this being but a small sample of the experimental work being done — push us beyond the critical paraphrases by which literature is disciplined, so that one would never know that it wasn't really psychology, sociology, history, political science, or the like. □

FIRST NOVELS

The lost and the loved

A failed writer's drunken self-pity, the perils of a whiny outcast, and the suppressed passion of a Newfoundland midwife

By Douglas Glover

A FIGHT WITH his ex-wife, an ultimatum from his landlord, a photograph of his child left on the kitchen table — Eugene flips out. He smashes his arm through a plate-glass window, smears the walls of his apartment with blood, then picks up his five-year-old daughter and flees with her to Jamaica.

For the next 18 hours, Eugene wanders from bar to bar, spiralling into a drunken, urine-smelling, disconnected hell. Jamaica at night is his own mind turned inside out, and he finds himself destined to repeat the same failures again and again. The woman he falls in love with turns into a facsimile of his former wife. The lies he tells about his wife coming down to Montego Bay come true the next day. And in the morning when, panic-stricken, he races up the road to his hotel, he finds his daughter in a bed covered with shards of glass as a headless bird smears blood around the room in its death agonies.

David Gilmour's semi-autobiographical first novel *Back on Tuesday* (Coach House Press, 224 pages, \$12.50 paper) is stunning. It shares a mood (riotous youth/domestic sadness) and its

intoxication theme with last year's U.S. best-seller, Jay MacInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City*, but is far and away a better written, more honest, less gimmicky book. Gilmour's Jamaican backdrop is wonderfully realized; the hero knows it, fits into it, describes it, revels in it. The author catches an expatriate atmosphere that is reminiscent of the drunken-boys-wandering-around-Spain scenes in *The Sun Also Rises*.

There is a dark subtext here: Like *Bright Lights, Big City*, or like Richard B. Wright's *The Weekend Man* (another close relation on the narrative family tree), *Back on Tuesday* is a novel of young male Wasp self-pity. In all three novels, the protagonist is a failed writer, abandoned/rejected by his wife (with or without child) more or less because of his inability to come to grips with economics

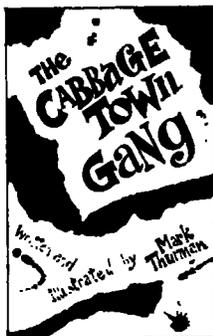
and family life. In each case, the self-pity is concealed behind a blind of brave humour or intoxicated language. Related examples of the genre are J.P. Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, Thomas McGuane's *Panama*, and Barry Hannah's *Ray*, and the prototype for all these is, of course, *Under the Volcano*: "When I was reading *Under the Volcano* — or, to be truthful, when I thought I was in *Under the Volcano*," says Eugene.

A.M. Kabal's *The Adversary* (Irwin, 224 pages, \$17.95 cloth) is a gory, fiery, fast-paced thriller set in exotic Egypt. After spending 10 years in the desert cataloguing and translating obscure Coptic manuscripts, Chas Winterton discovers St. Peter's Will, a piece of parchment that proves the Rock of the Church died in Alexandria, not Rome, and passed his mantle to Copts, not the Catholics. Forgotten, grantless, in poverty, Winterton proposes to sell an interest in the document to U.S. billionaire collector David Medina who, in turn, plans to use it to further his political ends by destabilizing the tottering Egyptian government.

A zealous Coptic abbot spills the beans to Rome, and the Pope sends out a holy hitman to destroy the letter. Caught be-



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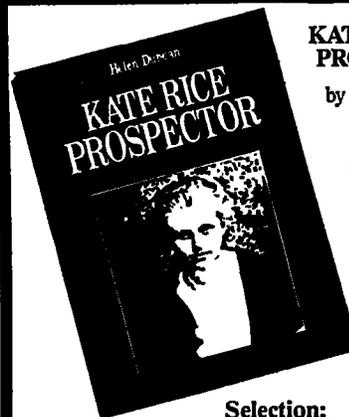
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tween the sadistic priest, Medina's sadistic (and gorgeous) female bodyguard (improbable love interest here), and a sadistic CIA operative (the CIA doesn't really know what's going on, but gets involved out of curiosity), Winterton races all over archaeological Egypt trying to save the document and his life. I won't say how *The Adversary* comes out, but Winterton does survive having a gas fire lit under his testicles and strangles a CIA man with another agent's small intestine. This is not a book for the weak in stomach.

Kabal, by the way, is the pseudonym of H.S. Bhabra, whose other "first" novel, *Gestures* (his publishers call it his first literary novel), was also recently released by Irwin. *The Adversary* is a good read, suspenseful and studded with action, but it lacks the literary reach of *Gestures*, to which Bhabra chose (for whatever reason) to affix his real name. The mainspring of the plot — the discovery of a piece of evidence that will discredit the Roman Catholic Church — is not particularly new, and the supporting cast is all stock spies, crooks, and amoral businessmen. But most of the fun of reading a suspense novel is not in why or where but in getting there.

Kathleen Timms's *One-Eyed Merchants* (Methuen, 208 pages, \$19.95 cloth) is a detective novel starring an insurance adjuster and featuring a plot that would make a chartered accountant feel vertigo. Paul Galliard, red-haired son of a K.C. Irving-like New Brunswick millionaire, recently bereaved by the suicide of his would-be jet-setting wife, turns to the routine of insurance adjusting in Toronto to take his mind off his grief. His case of the moment involves a \$750,000 claim for losses incurred when a finance company branch manager in Niagara Falls apparently turned crooked, making irrecoverable loans, taking kickbacks, and the like.

Galliard follows an intricate trail of documents, real estate flim-flam, personnel files, and corporate accounts to the wrong conclusion and nearly gets killed as a result. In a climactic scene, surely a first in detective literature, Galliard disarms his opponent by passive resistance — dropping into the lotus position, thus shocking his would-be slayer out of his murderous rage.

There are some good things about *One-Eyed Merchants*, particularly the unravelling of the layers of fraud (some fraud turns out to be less evil than other fraud), the tracing of corporate chains of command, and the use of real estate law and procedure. But Timms does other things less well. Her plot creaks with coincidence (Galliard's biggest clue comes in an otherwise irrelevant domestic conversation with his sister), indirection (in the

middle of the book, Galliard takes his young daughter on a Florida vacation — if the hero doesn't feel any sense of urgency about his case, why should the reader?), gratuitous sex (a company employee he hasn't even met visits his motel room and drops into the sack with him), and pointless incident (Galliard's daughter is kidnapped, then released; the police and Galliard do nothing about it).

The real problem with *One-Eyed Merchants* is that the murder plot and the insurance-adjuster plot don't link up until the very end of the novel. Timms tries, using unearned intuitions and the flimsy kidnapping, to increase suspense. But Galliard just isn't investigating a murder (two take place in the novel). When he accidentally discovers a victim, he is shocked, but quietly accepts the police theory (easily discounted if he'd just bother to look into it) of domestic violence. The elements war against each other: his fraud investigation and the murders never coalesce into a satisfying whole.

The year is 1948, and Newfoundland is caught up in a frenzy of confederation debate. But in the lonely outpost of Steadman's Cove, 34-year-old Hannah Holt, the eponymous heroine of Robina Salter's *Hannah* (McClelland & Stewart, 352 pages, \$19.95 cloth) pursues the age-old calling of midwifery under the watchful, loving eye of Dr. John Weatherston, an American who has given himself to the island.

Dr. John has a discontented Southern belle for a wife; Hannah has a tubercular fisherman husband, a crippled mother, and a son who, due to a difficult birth,



is somewhat sickly. Suppressed passions boil near the surface as the two dutiful medical people save a mother and infant from certain death, spend a night in a trailside shack during a blizzard, and rescue a sea captain dying of peritonitis.

Hannah does and does not belong in the Cove — her father was a mysterious Swedish sailor who landed there in a storm. She reads, appreciates the finer things in life, and has a sister who married

rich in Montreal. Her son is spiritually incapable of killing baby seals and so cannot follow in his father's rubber bootsteps. Dr. John is obviously the right man for her, but she remains faithful to the earthy man she married.

Then, through a series of coincidences and acts of God, the crippled mother dies, the husband dies, the Southern belle divorces Dr. John, the sickly son discovers a vocation as an arts and crafts entrepreneur, Dr. John happens to sit next to Hannah's long-lost father on an airplane, Newfoundland joins Canada, the couple get married, and Hannah gives up midwifery to open a library.

Despite its wealth of Newfoundland dialect and folkways and its depiction of the difficulties of outpost life, *Hannah* is a women's mag romance, a variation on the nurse-doctor situation. The lovers see each other through a gauzy film; they titillate each other and the reader with meaningful glances, chaste (sort of) kisses, and suggestive conversations.

He found as he gazed at her that morning she seemed to quiver before his eyes, much as heat waves tremble above a hot city pavement. To his surprise, he saw her in a soft diffusion of light, like a halo around her entire body. . . .

When fate finally lets them get together, sex becomes a riot of cliché:

Wherever he touched her the quiver of brush fire spread throughout her body. One tidal wave after another rose and fell. Then she lay back in John's arms and half dreamed of pale-blue butterflies slowly taking off one after another from somewhere near her heart.

The fact that Hannah, on marrying Dr. John, gives up her midwifery to become a library fund-raiser is a clue to the tacit premise of this book. Salter goes out of her way to distance her tall, fair, book-loving heroine from the good-hearted but illiterate, seal-slaughtering, rotten-toothed Newfoundlanders. When Hannah symbolically shucks off her "heavy" rubber boots and watches them "riding out to sea on the waves like the tiny Wellingtons of a toy sailor," we know we are moving with her into the realm of fantasy.

Irene Shubik's *The War Guest* (W.H. Allen, 160 pages, \$24.95 cloth) is the story of a Jewish girl sent to Canada from England in 1941 to escape the war. Little Dolly (we're not given her name till halfway through) dislikes Toronto, the private school she's sent to, and her religious relatives, and longs to return to England. She hangs out with other outcasts (she's not an outcast because she's Jewish; it's because she's such a wet blanket), goes to university, falls in love with a Greek boy she eventually leaves because she can't bring him home to Momma, then heads back to England.

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Over the next 30 years she gets a Ph.D., watches her parents die, has a couple of futile stabs at relationships, then returns to Canada for a vacation — only to meet and capture (in two days) the golden-boy counsellor of her first summer at camp in Algonquin Park.

Dolly is whiny, priggish, discontented,

and prudish. (Men keep sticking their tongues in her mouth, and she doesn't like it.) Shubik's style is flat, relatively sceneless, and relies heavily on the rhetorical question — a stylistic mannerism that appears to stand in for thought and feeling. She insists on transcribing Dolly's parents' accent in

comic-strip phonetics ("Ve all haff to go sometime") and footnoting Yiddish slang. (Apparently she is unaware that Canada has a strong tradition of Jewish writing.) The love-match conclusion is totally improbable and makes a joke of any literary aspirations Shubik may have had. □

CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Growing pains

A new anthology shows how much children's writing has developed in Canada, but its omissions may be as significant as its inclusions

By Mary Ainslie Smith



WHEN MARY ALICE Downie, Elizabeth Greene, and M.A. Thompson made their selections for *The Window of Dreams: New Canadian Writing for Children* (Methuen, 191 pages, \$19.95 cloth), they did it simply on the basis of what they liked best, without regard to such restrictions as age appeal, topical themes, and regional representation. The result is an anthology that is varied and

interesting, has a predictable preponderance of works from Ontario, and perhaps loses a bit of focus by trying to appeal to a wide range of readers.

The contents — 19 stories and 11 poems, the work of 29 writers — are arranged in order of difficulty, with the simplest first and the most challenging, in terms of vocabulary and plot, last. Reasonable as this arrangement may seem, it suggests a problem for the book as a whole. The first entries — "The Lion Sweater" by Suzanne Martel, a tale about six-year-old Thomas and his adventures with talking animals, and "The Three Little Nippers," a verse by Dennis Lee — would appeal to pre-schoolers. The last entry, "Chris and Sandy," a post-nuclear-holocaust story by Monica Hughes, is probably most suitable for readers as old as 11 or 12. This wide range of age might limit the book's usefulness as a classroom text, if that is an important consideration for the publishers.

But we expect anthologies to present an overview; obviously anthologizers cannot hope to please everyone with their choices. And *The Window of Dreams* does present an entertaining cross-section of themes and genres. Magic is represented by such stories as "The Boy Who Loved Fire" by Nancy Prasad and "I'll Make You Small" by Tim Wynne-Jones. "Mysteries" by Susan Robinson is a realistic story about growing up and learning about the unfairness and prejudice in the world. "The Visitor" by

Elizabeth Brochmann is also about growing up, a reflection of a little girl's changing perspective of others.

A glimpse into life in other parts of the world is provided by Meguido Zola's "When the Sultan Came to Tea," a funny tale about two young entrepreneurs on the island of Zanzibar. "Goodbye, Tizzy" by Jean Little is a moving story about a girl forced to say goodbye to the puppy she has raised in preparation for its training at seeing-eye school.

The poetry in the collection ranges from visual poems and word-play, such as "Seamus's Acrostic" by George Johnston and "Play" by Gail Manning, to reflective lyrics, such as "The Dying Story" by Jannis Allan-Hare and "Morpheus and the Boy" by Mary E. Choo — the poem that provided the book's title.

Unity is provided for the diverse contents by black-and-white illustrations throughout the book — the work of five illustrators, two of whom, Peggy Capek and Tom Asplund, have also written stories in the collection. The eerie and beautiful silhouettes designed by Jillian Gilliland are particularly striking illustrations for such fantasies as "The Adventures of Gran'ma Jane or The Ragentangle Race" by Muriel Maclean and "The Day of the Cantaloupes" by Jan Truss. Warmth and humour are suggested by the more down-to-earth drawings of Gina Calleja and Lesley Fairfield.

Because there are so few places for Canadian children's literature to get exposure, this anthology serves an excellent purpose. It would, indeed, be wonderful if it could be expanded into an annual publication. But there is, perhaps, one unfortunate aspect of the book. It seems too bad that in this anthology of "new" Canadian children's writing, all of the space could not have been devoted to writers new to this kind of writing. Such established children's writers as Dennis Lee, Jean Little, and Monica Hughes are worthy, and perhaps were included to add

stature to the collection, but they do not need to be brought to our attention as much as some new writers who did not quite make the editors' cut. (They drew from more than 600 submissions.)

The fact that such new writers do exist is proven in *Quarry* magazine's special issue of writing for and about children (Winter, 1985), edited by Downie, Greene, and Thompson in conjunction with their preparation of *The Window of Dreams*. The *Quarry* issue contains 10 stories and 10 poems by different writers, only nine of whom are represented in *The Window of Dreams*. Writers such as Karleen Bradford and Barbara Greenwood, who have previously published work for children and who deserve more recognition, have entertaining stories in *Quarry* that would have stood up well in the book. It is fitting that writers such as Elizabeth Brochmann, Tim Wynne-Jones, and Gwen Molnar, who are just developing their reputations as children's authors, should be present in both publications, but the omissions seem as significant as the inclusions.

One Canadian writer whose fame and reputation are secure is James Reaney, who has long since made his name as a poet and playwright. Take the *Big Picture* (Porcupine's Quill, 175 pages, \$8.95 paper) is his first work of fiction for young people in a number of years. (Part of it, "At the Bigfoot Carwash," appears in *The Window of Dreams*.) It is a large, strange piece of writing, funny and at times annoyingly ridiculous, concerning an eccentric family made homeless because someone else's ecological mistake is causing their house to fall into a river.

Colin, the oldest child at 17, has enormous responsibilities. His parents' fecklessness and naivety cause him great concern. He must try to control his two sisters and three brothers, triplets who go wild if their diet is not kept completely free of all additives. And finally it is up to Colin to persuade his grandmother, a

grumpy old lady who cannot stand the triplets' rambunctiousness, to allow the family to stay with her in her huge home. This he accomplishes in Arabian Nights fashion, spinning a story that goes on evening after evening and that only he can tell convincingly. In addition, the main plot contains a bank robber, a confidence woman, an idiotic school principal, and a brutal carwash owner whose life's ambition is to capture and exhibit a Sasquatch.

It seems unlikely that many children will have the patience to read this book. It rambles on, sometimes apparently out of control, and the story-within-the-story device makes it very complicated. However, Reaney has a wonderful grasp of the imagery that shapes our consciousness. It is not only the triplets who

are tantalized and terrified by one of the central images in the book, the Sasquatch, the wild man of the woods. And Reaney can use language to create wonderful pictures:

As Lucy ran back to the house, André stood by the wharf and watched the long shadow the sun made behind her, the shadow of his wife, her head even now at his feet. She paused for a few seconds at the top of the hill; he knelt down on the grass and grabbed hold of the shadowy hair, but it flowed without sound through his fingers up the dewy lawn and into nothingness. Colin and the triplets saw him kneeling down by the wharf and wondered what on earth he was doing.

William Bell's *Crabbe* (Irwin, 169 pages, \$9.95 paper) is a much more straightforward story. The main situation

is a well-worn one: a young man, seeing no purpose to his life, goes off into the wilderness to escape and to put himself to a test. Franklin Crabbe, rich, clever at school, runs away just before his final examinations, leaving behind his parents' plans for the life they want their son to lead and his own growing addiction to alcohol. Not surprisingly, Crabbe, unathletic and ignorant of the ways of the wild, almost perishes. He is saved by a mysterious woman, Mary, who is also hiding from something, but who has become self-sufficient and capable of teaching Crabbe how to survive.

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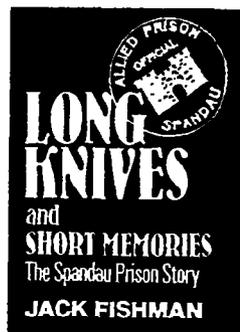
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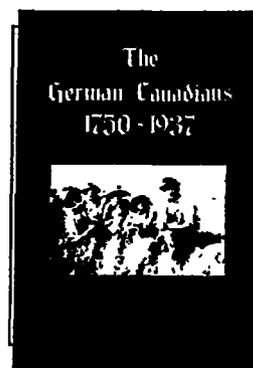
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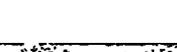
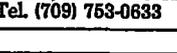
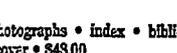
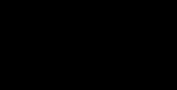
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The
German Canadians
1750-1937



confused man are the positive features of this novel. Negative points are the triteness of the plot and the callous way in which the author disposes of Mary once she is no longer necessary to the story.

A survival story for younger readers is *Cry to the Night Wind*, by T.H. Smith (Viking Kestrel, 160 pages, \$12.95 cloth). David Spencer, the 11-year-old son of a British naval captain, has accompanied his father on a charting voyage to the northwest coast of America in the 18th century. David makes enemies of three mutinous members of his father's crew. They are pursuing him when he is captured instead by Indians who enslave and abuse him until his mysterious kinship

with a baby seal convinces some members of the tribe that he is a spirit child sent to them as an omen.

But David's position as a semi-god is tenuous, to say the least. In an exciting climax, he barely manages to escape becoming a human sacrifice and to rejoin his father. Smith's convincing details of life aboard ship and in a coastal Indian village add a great deal of interest to this adventure story.

A survival story of a completely different sort is Joy Kogawa's *Naomi's Road*, illustrated with black-and-white drawings by Matt Gould (Oxford, 82 pages, \$7.95 paper). During the Second World War, Naomi Nakane, a little

Japanese-Canadian girl, is sent with her older brother from Vancouver to an internment camp in interior British Columbia and then, with relatives, to a poor farm in Alberta. Naomi experiences loss, loneliness, and prejudice but forges some friendships that support her and give her childhood some happiness and hope.

Naomi's Road is, of course, based on Kogawa's adult novel, *Obasan*, published in 1981 and winner of the *Books in Canada* award for the best first novel of that year. It is hard to imagine reading *Naomi's Road* except in reference to the depth and detail of that powerful, painful book. This is her first work for children. □

INTERVIEW

Fred Wah

'It turns out race is food. I feel Chinese because my father cooked Chinese food. But I don't know what it feels like to feel Chinese'

By John Goddard

FRED WAH won the Governor General's Award this spring for *Waiting for Saskatchewan* (Turnstone Press), a collection of poetry and short prose in which he explores his mixed-race background and comes to terms with his father. Born in Swift Current, Sask., in 1939. Wah grew up in Nelson, B.C., and now lives in nearby South Slokan. He teaches applied writing at Selkirk College and has published 11 books of poetry, including *Among* (Coach House Press, 1972), *Loki Is Buried at Smoky Creek:*

Fred Wah



Selected Poetry (Talonbooks, 1980), and *Breathin' My Name with a Sigh* (Talonbooks, 1981). He is also managing editor of *Swift Current*, an electronic literary magazine available through a database at York University. At a recent reading festival of the Strathcona Writing Workshop, in the mountain wilderness of central Vancouver Island, he was interviewed by John Goddard:

Books in Canada: *Your father was the offspring of a Chinese-born father and an English-born mother and your mother was Swedish — a colourful ethnic mix. Tell us first about your grandfather Wah.*
Fred Wah: He came to Canada in the 1880s to work on the CPR. Before he left China his family made him get married and have children, and he was obliged to leave this family behind to support his parents. He also got married in Canada, to an English lady, and they also had children, one of whom was my father. When my father was four or five, he was sent to live with my grandfather's family in China, in a rural area 20 kilometres outside of Canton.

BiC: *How was your father affected by this uprooting at an early age, and again when he returned to Canada?*

Wah: When he went to China, he would have just acquired English and was not able to speak Chinese. At 19, he was brought back to Canada and hit with the language thing again. He would have been a bit of an outcast in China, and I remember him saying several times that he was outside both the Chinese and Anglo communities here. Neither side

trusted him totally. I think the trauma of it was responsible for his singularity, his inner anger. My father didn't have problems speaking English or Chinese, but he had a deep anger, something inside him that I can feel inside myself. On the other hand, he got along all right with both communities. He was in business, and when you're in business you make friends with the rest of the guys on the block.

BiC: *How did your father happen to marry a Swede?*

Wah: He fell in love with her. She worked across the street after school at Cooper's Department Store, or maybe he met her at a basketball game or something. That was an inter-racial thing again. She was an outcast by her family. She married a Chink, and that's no good.

BiC: *What did your father do for a living?*

Wah: He was brought into the restaurant business by my grandfather. He worked at different restaurants, owned a number of restaurants, finally got out of it late in life and bought a motel.

BiC: *Waiting for Saskatchewan includes a section called "Elite," pronounced in the local Chinese style, Ee-light. What special meaning does "Ee-light" hold for you?*

Wah: Ee-light Cafe was a common name for the typical Chinese-Canadian restaurant or small café. There are a few still around, but now you're more likely to see names like The American, or The Canadian. I use Ee-light in the book as a way of dealing with growing up in Canada on the Prairies. The section is not just about the café.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN GODDARD

BIC: *What is the section about?*

Wah: I'm trying to understand my father better, and understand some of my own feelings about the racial business. One reviewer said it is a search for identity. I had never thought of it as that — I just thought I had to deal with my father. Men don't deal with their fathers, they're always dealing with their mothers. They just want to get the fathers out of the way. Then we become fathers ourselves.

My father died 20 years ago. Then 10 years ago, in a sort of delayed reaction, I just all of a sudden felt this overwhelming emotion come out of me. I was just totally saddened, and I guess started to have a new sense of myself, about who I was, and who he was, and things we hadn't dealt with together.

BIC: *How much have you had to deal with racial dichotomy in your life?*

Wah: I'm one-quarter Chinese and I was called a Chink. I think most kids of any ethnic identity have to deal with some ethnic slur, and it certainly was there in my life, but I don't harbour any ill will toward anyone about that. A lot of Canadians know the feeling of not being racially pure, particularly growing up and not being able to say, "I'm Canadian."

I remember when I was in grade one or two, we had to fill out a form that asked our racial origin. I didn't know what to put down, so I had to ask my teacher, "Am I a Canadian?" And the teacher said, "No, your racial origin is Chinese because your father is Chinese." When I went home, I asked my mother and father, "Well, what's a Canadian then?" I couldn't figure out the difference between nationality and racial origin.

BIC: *How Chinese do you feel now?*

Wah: Race is not something you can feel or recognize, and that's one of the things I'm investigating in that book. It turns out race is food. I feel Chinese because of the food I enjoy, and that's because my father cooked Chinese food. But I don't know what it feels like to feel Chinese.

BIC: *Part of the book deals with a one-month trip to China and Japan you took with a tour group in 1982. Did you feel more Chinese in China?*

Wah: No, I did not particularly identify with the Chinese, their way of life, although I was knocked out by their tenacity, attacking a hillside and making sure the hillside was going to yield some rice. I realized my father had a tenacious character. He was up at five every morning and working until nine or 10 every night, all his life.

BIC: *What has winning the Governor General's Award done for you?*

Wah: I'm happy; it's great. I've been publishing for 25 years, and the award is a validation. It means what I'm doing is

O.K. in the eyes of my peers, because the award is made by a jury of peers. I've never considered myself a very popular writer. I've always considered myself more of an experimental writer. I like to play around and try different forms. But this book is probably more accessible because it has more narrative, and maybe because I'm getting better.

BIC: *Do you still play around with forms?*

Wah: I play around with translation quite a bit, an experimental mode of translation. I don't read French — I don't know what the words mean — but I translate French poetry to English. The most interesting writing I've come across lately is what some of the Quebec women feminist writers have been doing, particularly Nicole Brossard. I had this incredible experience with her when she came up once to the Kootenays to read. We were sitting around at my house one night. There were just the two of us, and we were having this great conversation about poetry.

We were talking about language, and we somehow got to a point where she read five love poems to me called "Ma Continente," which I think means "my body." We had had a few glasses of wine, and I said, "Nicole, that's really great — I love hearing you read in French. I feel I can almost understand it." I was feeling the mystery of the language and pick-

ing up references here and there. And I said, "Could I have copies of these poems? I would really like to look at them more closely."

So we made copies, and later I "translated" the poems. I would sound out the French word and translate the sound into something that sounds the same in English. I didn't publish them; I just got very intrigued by the notion that one could intuit language by aspects of the language other than meaning. □

RECOMMENDED

THE FOLLOWING Canadian books were reviewed in the previous issue of *Books in Canada*. Our recommendations don't necessarily reflect the reviews:

FICTION

The Gates of the Sun, by Sharon Butala, Fifth House. The first of a two-part series, this story of one man's deep love for the prairie and of his struggle to find meaning in his life expresses an existentialism that is profoundly moving.

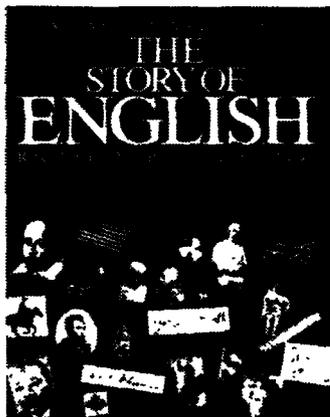
NON-FICTION

A Hot-Eyed Moderate, by Jane Rule, Lester & Orpen Dennys. Like warm, interesting, stimulating conversations with a dear friend, Rule's essays on writing, sexual-

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ity, and art reflect a logical mind, a gentle humour, and a refreshing point of view.

POETRY

The Night the Dog Smiled, by John Newlove, ECW Press. One of the least bombastic and most self-critical of our established poets, Newlove has not been heard from for a while, but all the strengths of his earlier work — and some surprises — inform this new collection.

RECEIVED

THE FOLLOWING Canadian books have been received by *Books in Canada* in recent weeks. Inclusion in this list does not preclude a review or notice in a future issue:

Allergies and Children: A Handbook For Parents, by Dr. Milton Gold and Dr. Barry Zimmerman, Kids Can Press.
And I'm Never Coming Back, by Jacqueline Dumas, illustrated by Iris Faabo, Annick Press.
Arctic Animals, by Fred Bruemmer, M & S.
The Bare Naked Book, by Kathy Stinson, illustrated by Heather Collins, Annick Press.
The Bottle and the Bookman: Poems of The Prodigal Son, by Mohamud S. Togane, The Muses' Company.
The Camp Cook Book, by Tom Macdonald, illustrated by Norm Macdonald, Boston Mills Press.
Canada Handbook, Statistics Canada.
Canadian Family Law, by Malcolm C. Kronby, Stoddart.
Canadian Manufactured Exports: Constraints & Opportunities, by D.J. Daly and D.C. MacCharles, Institute for Research on Public Policy.
Canadian Statistics Index 1985, Volume 1, edited by Rosemary McClelland, Micromedia.
Celebrating! Twenty-Five Years on the Stage at the Shaw Festival, edited by Katharine Holmes, Boston Mills Press.
Cloud Gate, by Claudia E. Lapp, The Muses' Company.
Coaching to Win, by Tony Walters, Totem.
The Coming of World War Three, Vol. 1, by Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos, Black Rose Books.
The Cremation of Sam McGee, by Robert Service, illustrated by Ted Harrison, Kids Can Press.
Days and Nights in Calcutta, by Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee, Penguin.
Dear Doctor, by Drs. Saul Levine and Kathleen Wilcox, Kids Can Press.
Dislocations, by Janette Turner Hospital, M & S.
Driving Offensively, by Richard Stevenson, Sono Nis Press.
1885 And After: Native Society in Transition, edited by F. Laurie Barron and James B. Waldram, Canadian Plains Research Center.
Fit to Eat, by Ann Budge, Hurtig Publishers.
Foul Pas from Dead Dogs, by Crad Kilodney, Charnel House.

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HERRING COVE PRESS announces the publication of Sparing Mills' third book, *My Round Table: myth poems* \$6.95. Send to 35 Purcell's Cove Rd., Halifax, NS, B3N 1R3.

OLD AND RARE BOOKS. Canadiana Catalogues. Heritage Books, 866 Palmerston Ave., Toronto, Ontario M6G 2S2.

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CANWIT NO. 114

A COMMENT by Hugh Hood elsewhere in this issue — that he already knows the last lines of his next five novels — set us thinking about a contest we have conducted before. In honour of Edward ("It was a dark and stormy night") Bulwer-Lytton, we have previously solicited the worst possible opening sentences to a novel, but how would such a loathsome book end? We'll pay \$25 for the worst closing sentence — or list of closing sentences — that we receive before November 1. Address: CanWit No. 114, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9.

Results of CanWit No. 112

THE COUNTRY may have a new government, but our contestants persevere. The most striking feature of the acrostic poems we received (in which each line begins with a letter from the subject's name) is a continuing preoccupation with Pierre Trudeau. His memory provided the inspiration for the winning entry, by Carla Mobley of Powell River, B.C.:

*There is a man of greatness
Real and true
Undying in his pride,
Democratic and athletic,
Energetic, charismatic,*

*And when he's mad he says F
U.*

Honourable mentions:

*Patrician he, whose lofty brow did
scorn
Inferior breeds, as to the manner born,
Expressing in his brilliant logic such
Remoteness, chill, without the common
touch;
Rapid his wit yet rude his repartee,
Enraged by taunts he answered digitally.*

*Tanned, cultured, elegant and of
amorous fame,
Restless in office he craved world
acclaim,*

*Unheard he of Biafra's shores and yet
Danced royally unseen a pirouette;
Elected leader by the people's choice
And in his downfall saw his foes rejoice;
Unusual man, aloof, alone, he keeps a
silent voice.*

— Alec McEwen, Ottawa

*Man of La Mancha? No, from Baie
Comeau,*

*Unknown to all until some years ago.
Leaping to fame beyond the rank of
Clark,*

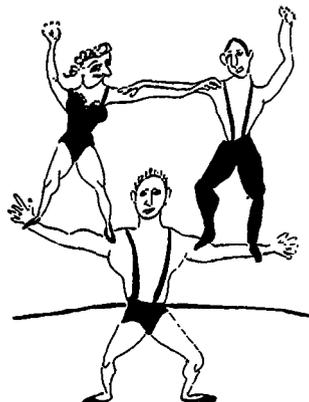
*Ran from Nova, like old Scotland,
dark,*

*Ottawa's bastions to gain,
New boy causing old ones pain.
Except that now he's losing all his fold,
Yon Brian, greatest Tory ever sold!*

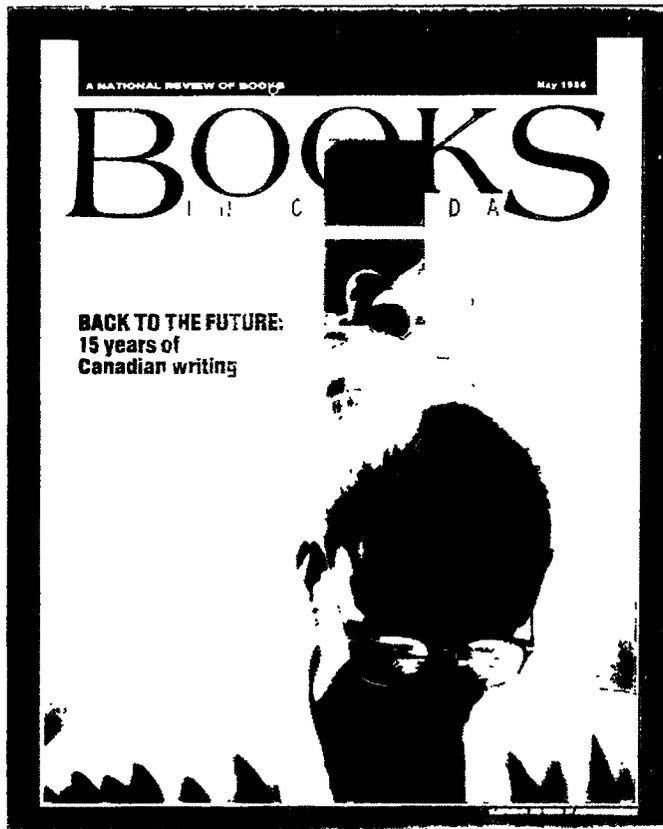
— Barry Baldwin, Calgary

Gordon Shrum: An Autobiography, with Peter Stursberg, edited by Clive Cocking, UBC Press.
Hal Hal, by Réjean Ducharme, translated by David Homel, Exile Editions.
Hired Hands, by John B. Lee, illustrated by Michel Binette, Brick Books.
The Historic Churches of Prince Edward Island, by H.M. Scott Smith, Boston Mills Press.
The Imperial Canadian, by Claude Bissell, U of T Press.
Incurable Trucks & Speeding Diseases, by Crad Kilodney, Charnel House.
Inspecting a House, by Alan Carson & Robert Dunlop, Stoddart.
In the Spirit of the Times, by Ken Norris, The Muses' Company.
Justice Denied, by Michael Harris, Macmillan.
Letters from Some Islands, by Anne Marriott, Mosaic Press.
Like Yourself and Live, by Jack H. McQuaig, Hunter Carlyle Publishing.
Living Details, by Thomas Cowan, Stoddart.
Madam Piccolo and the Craziest Pickle Party Ever, by Kaila Kukla, illustrated by Mary McLaughlin, Annick.

Never a Dull Moment, by Peggy Holmes, Totem.
Nicole's Boat, by Allen Morgan, illustrated by Jirina Marton, Annick.
Nighty-Knight, by Mona Elaine Aditman, Dollapoems.
Not Enough Women, by Ken Ledbetter, Mosaic Press.
On the Triangle Run, by James B. Lamb, Macmillan.
One Chance to Win, by Gillian Richardson, Ragweed.
One Watermelon Seed, by Colin Barker Lottridge, illustrated by Karen Fatkau, Oxford.
Open Windows, by Gabriel Salfie, Jonquil Press.
Pardon Me, Mom, by Gail Chislett, illustrated by Joanne Fitzgerald, Annick.
The Power of the Lamb, edited by John E. Toews and Gordon Nickel, Kindred Press.
Rats in the Sloop, by Nan Doerksen, Ragweed.
Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill, 1941-1945, by Martin Gilbert, Stoddart.
Le Ronge C'est Bien Mieux, par Kathy Stinson, illustrée par Robin Baird Lewis, Annick Press.
Roughing It in the Bush, by Susanna Moodie, introduction by Margaret Atwood, Virago Press.
Shivers in Your Nightshirt: Eerie Stories to Read in Bed, Children's Writers' Workshop.
Simple Stories for Idiots, by Crad Kilodney, Charnel House.
Skeleton at 60, edited by Barbara E. Turner, Porcupine's Quill.
The Smaller, Independent Manufacturer, by Gerald d'Ambolse et al., Institute for Research on Public Policy.
Sometimes the Distance, by Bernice Lever, Mosaic Press.
Tiger in the Skull, by Douglas Lochhead, Fiddlehead Poetry Books/Goose Lane Editions.
Toronto: No Mean City, by Eric Arthur, revised by Stephen A. Otto, U of T Press.
The Unlikely Pioneer, by David Watmough, Mosaic Press.
Vancouver Entertainments, edited by Larissa Hooley & Josephine Robinson, Whitecap Books.
Vibrations in Time, by David Watmough, Mosaic Press.
Vimy, by Pierre Berton, M & S.
A Way of Life, edited by Ed Hall, Northwest Territories, Department of Renewable Resources.
The Well-Tempered Critic, by Northrop Frye, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
What Feathers Are For, by Maria Jacobs, Mosaic Press.
Who Goes to the Park, by Warabe Aska, Tundra Books.
Wilderness Dream, by Jeannette Beaubien McNamara, Braemar Books.
Wittgenstein Etologies, by Jan Zwicky, Brick Books.



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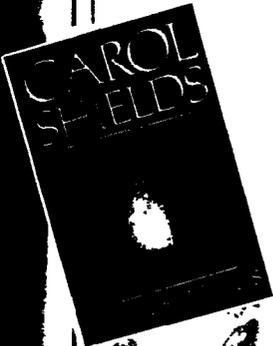
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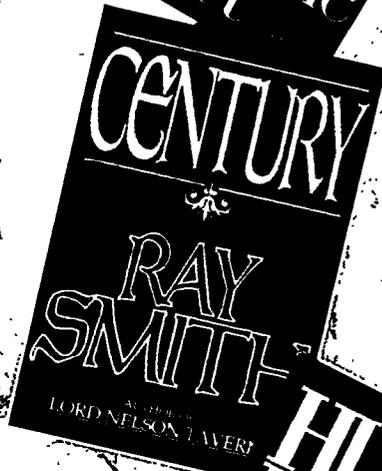
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