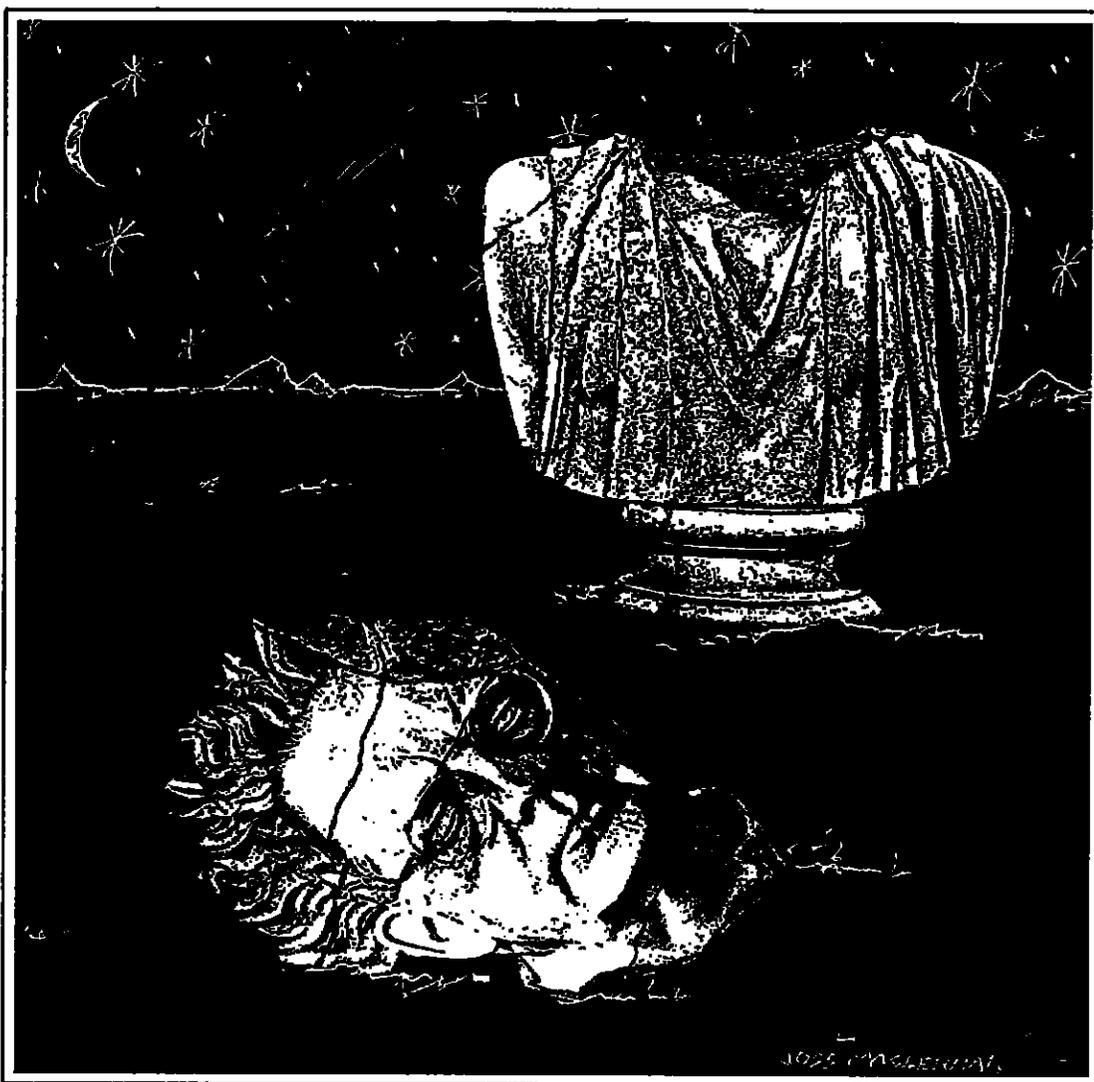


A NATIONAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

BOOKS IN CANADA

WHAT'S WRONG WITH NORTHROP FRYE



The moral vision of Margaret Atwood
Audrey Thomas on Anne Hébert
Mavor Moore on Canadian radio

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Volume 12 Number 2

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CONTENTS

Volume 12
Number 2

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FEATURES

Beyond Survival. Second thoughts on a nationalistic approach to literary criticism. *By Paul Stuewe* 7
Mademoiselle Blood. Anne Hébert links passion and death in an eerie tale of vampirism. *By Audrey Thomas*..... 11
The Hand That Holds the Pen. Women writers alone are preserving literature's moral vision. *By John Hofjess*..... 12

REVIEWS

The Swell Season: A Text on the Most Important Things in Life, by Josef Skvorecky 13
Head of the Harbour, by Mark Gordon 14
Mantissa, by John Fowles 16
Going Through the Motions, by Katherine Govier 17
Mindkiller, by Spider Robinson; **Stargate,** by Pauline Gedge 18
Famous Players, by Greg Hollingshead 19
Signing On: The Birth of Radio in Canada, by Bill McNeil and Morris Wolfe 19
Dictionary of Newfoundland English, edited by G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson 20
Radical Tories: The Conservative Tradition in Canada, by Charles Taylor 22
The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1928-1932,
 by Lita-Rose Betcherman 23
That Old Gang of Mine, by Scott Young 23
Georgia: An Arctic Diary, by Georgia; **Inuit: The North in Transition,** by Ulli Steltzer 24
Ticket to Hell Via Dieppe: From a Prisoner's Wartime Log, 1942-1945, by A. Robert Prouse 24
The Spirit of Solitude: Conventions and Continuities in Late Romance, by Jay Macpherson 25
the presence of fire and Ideas of Shelter, by George Amabile 26
The T.E. Lawrence Poems, by Gwendolyn MacEwen; **The Green Plain,** by John Newlove; **Gradations of Grandeur,**
 by Ralph Gustafson 27

DEPARTMENTS

Field Notes, by D.W. Nichol and Robert Bringham 3
English, Our English, by Bob Blackburn 6
Interview with Donald Kingsbury, by Robert J. Sawyer 29
First Novels, by Douglas Hill 31
Children's Books, by Mary Ainslie Smith 31
The Editors Recommend 33
CanWit No. 80 34
Books Received 34

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The Empire strikes back: observations on the Canadian invasion of Britain

Edinburgh journal

ALMOST SEEMS like old home week sometimes. Although there was a paucity of Canadian events at the Edinburgh Festival, the past autumn has witnessed a considerable transatlantic migration. Canada has launched an invasion of sorts, flooding the U.K. in a wave of reverse colonialism. The paintings of Ivan Eyre were being exhibited at the Talbot Rice Centre in Edinburgh; there was an exhibition on recent trends in Quebec literature at the university library here; down south, Kate and Anna McGarrigle have been on tour; the Royal Winnipeg Ballet was recently over; Alcan is making inroads into British industry; the Canadian team of Cliff Thorburn, Bill Werbeniuk (dubbed King Weetabix by the Scots in Clark's Bar), and Kirk Stevens has potted the snooker championship.

On the literary front, Margaret Atwood, over to promote — how many? — three books, *Bodily Harm*, *True Stories*, and *Dancing Girls*, gave a reading at Canada House. Already a prime staple of Virago Press, Atwood's books now are being published by Jonathan Cape. A rare occurrence for any writer, Atwood was accorded a full-page, seven-column salute in the weekend *Guardian*. She is also the latest recipient of the Welsh Arts Council International Writer's Prize. Atwood's treatment of minority cultures has struck a chord with Welsh and Scots readers alike.

Around Edinburgh, the Canadian infiltration is humming. Dr. Lorraine McMullen is over on sabbatical from the University of Ottawa. Also visiting the Centre of Canadian Studies this year is Prof. Malcolm Ross of Dalhousie University, who is initiating the first full-fledged course on Canadian literature at Edinburgh. The centre has tended to focus on social sciences, although for the past five years a writer-in-residence post has been established. Prof. Ross has had to import his texts from the New Canadian Library series. There are, however, a few Canadian titles in British book shops: Alice Munro's *Beggar Maid* and *Lives of Girls and Women* are available in Penguin, as is the new *Leacock*,

and a few copies of Wayne Grady's *Penguin Book of Canadian Short Stories* are still around. A recent issue of *Aquarius* (no. 13/14) features 14 Canadian writers; and *Cencrastus* (5 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh) frequently carries articles by and about Canadians. Prof. Ross's course is something of a trial balloon in Scotland, and the signs look encouraging for a sustained flight. His inaugural lecture, which Ross modestly admits "I look forward to with dread," echoes the theme of his course: "The Impossible Sum of our Traditions."

Another literary ambassador from Canada — to balance the critical with the creative academic — is Kent Thompson from the University of New Brunswick. His predecessors include Graeme Gibson, Ken Mitchell, Dennis Lee, and Fraser Sutherland. (His Scottish counterpart in Canada is Andrew Greig, whose base for the year is Trent University.) Although the writers-in-residence are essentially free beasts, they are



generally amenable to giving readings of their works and lectures on their culture, both throughout the U.K. and on the Continent.

It is not quite as cushy as it sounds. For one thing, although the writers' grants are generous, the cost of living in Scotland is fairly high, and any savings to be made overall might be savaged by mercurial exchange rates. Apart from that, there's the culture shock of it all — Scottish folksingers doing Joni Mitchell tunes; excessively leaded petrol (excuse me: *gas*) fumes belching out on bus queues; archaic fuses that require step-ladder, torch (oiks again: *flashlight*), screwdriver, and wire to change. I've been here three years now and I still can't explain a *gango*, dual-lane

carriage-way, or the continuing popularity of Cliff Richards. Stevenson described Edinburgh as "a downright meteorological purgatory," and that's an understatement.

For some, even attempting to adapt a Canadian concept to a Scottish setting can be hazardous.

While searching for a location for his ice-hockey play, *Kid Humley's First Game*, Kent Thompson decided to rent a pair of skates and test the ice out for himself. After a few moments of exuberance in Murrayfield arena, he hit a rough patch, went straight up, then down face-first. One of his top front teeth was knocked out. Looking more like a Leith brawler than a Canadian playwright, Thompson had to cope with an alien bus route, unrelenting drizzle, and a four-hour wait in hospital, only to be asked if he'd retrieved his incisor. He hadn't. Otherwise they might have simply stuck it back in; but he'd been so dazed by the accident that he scarcely realized his mouth was bleeding. Happily, the gap was filled with a dental clone shortly before he was scheduled to attend a posh luncheon with the Canadian high commissioner in London. Determined as ever to see his play through, Thompson has managed to arouse some interest from Scottish television, so *Kid Humley's First Game* may prove to have been worth the penalty.

Outside the university, you'll find a number of Canadians who hold prominent positions in the arts. Bob Palmer, the drama director of the Scottish Arts Council, grew up in the Atlantic provinces before going to Toronto's York University, where he directed a production of *Marat-Sade*. The administrator of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, Charles Hart, was born in Charlottetown and brought up in Nova Scotia. He became a stage manager for several companies in Montreal, including Centaur Theatre, and worked with the CBC before laying his professional roots down in Glasgow. Ian Burgham worked for Canongate Publishers and was largely responsible for carrying Macdonald Publishers of Edinburgh out of financial doldrums before he returned to Canada.

One of the most dynamic and influential theatres in Britain — the Traverse — is currently under the artistic director-

ship of Peter Lichtenfels, whose interest in drama blossomed at Queen's University, Kingston. Asked what Canadian plays he might have in mind for future productions, Lichtenfels eschewed nationalism in theatre: he "champions international." German-born, Canadian-bred, British-based (since 1974), Lichtenfels is more concerned with originality than origin. Eclecticism courses, as it must, through his veins as well as his program. Festival successes at the Traverse this summer ranged from the black South African performance of *Woza Albert!* to *Honi & Chuck*, two veteran New York tap-dancers, aged 65 and 73 respectively. Both shows had over-capacity audiences.

Lichtenfels started his professional directing career in Britain by assisting on a production of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, which closed well before the end of its run. He thinks that the intense lyricism and bald overstatement that characterize so much of Canadian writing tends to put British audiences off. The initial flop didn't deter Lichtenfels from finding more work, nor did it keep him from trying to inject some Canadian culture into some stale British veins. He staged Michael Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but again the material was thought too "open" for British sensibilities. More encouraging was the reception given to Michel Tremblay's *Quatre Chaises* company which gave a reading of *Forever Yours, Marie-Lou* in 1979. The two Canadian playwrights Lichtenfels is most interested in hearing more from are Tremblay and Hrant Alianak.

Now that Honest Ed Mirvish has taken over the Old Vic — that hard-hit bastion of the best of British theatre — it's time to declare our cultural invasion. Let the Lloyd Webbers of the world beware: The time is ripe for a Mississauga rock-opera. — D.W. NICHOL

The oldest profession

AT THE END OF this month occurs one of the most important annual events in the country having to do with fiction and poetry, though it has nothing to do with writing. Smack in the middle of document-hungry Toronto, with precious little fanfare, we celebrate our varied and rich *illiterature* at the Toronto Festival of Storytelling, now in its fifth year.

I trekked out last year from Vancouver to see if something was up, and something was. Nothing special, you understand — just the wholesale

reinvention of human culture, kind of low-key and offhand. So when I was asked if I'd participate in the festival this year, I had some trouble making up my mind. I had to weigh my heart, as the Egyptians used to say, to see if I was worthy.

Storytelling vies with hunting and fishing and one or two other things for honours as the oldest human profession, but its current renaissance in Toronto is a phenomenon of the last 10 years. Less than a decade ago, a man named Dan Yashinsky started telling folktales and other kinds of stories from the corner bandstand in a restaurant in Toronto. Out of that grew a Toronto institution, the 1001 Nights of Storytelling — year-round open sessions at which amateurs



and professionals alike tell stories of all kinds. (It still goes on, in a café-like setting, every Friday night at the Toronto School of Art.) Out of those sessions grew the festival, in which Yashinsky is still the driving force, and out of the festival has grown the Toronto Storytellers' School.

At this year's festival, to be held Feb. 26-27 at the Annette Street Public Library and adjacent church, something like 30 storytellers and singers will participate in sessions running concurrently on both days. It's possible to move from room to room, hearing a story or two in each, or to stick with one for as long as you like, hearing a mixed bag of raconteurs, troubadours, and griots deal with related themes. On Saturday there is a session devoted to hero tales, another to fairy tales, a session of native tellers (Mohawk, Inuit, Ojibwa, Micmac, Cree, and possibly Coast Salish), one called "Wit, Wisdom and Lies," as well as a program for small children, "Seven Stories High." On Saturday night the featured storyteller is Alice Kane, one of the best I've ever heard.

On Sunday there will be more concur-

rent sessions, including one devoted to Hans Christian Andersen's tales, and one devoted to ballads, sung fables, and the revived tradition of oral narrative poetry. That night you can hear the eminent Québécois troubadour Jocelyn Berubé, a fine storyteller from Toronto named Rita Cox, and several others — myself included, so they say.

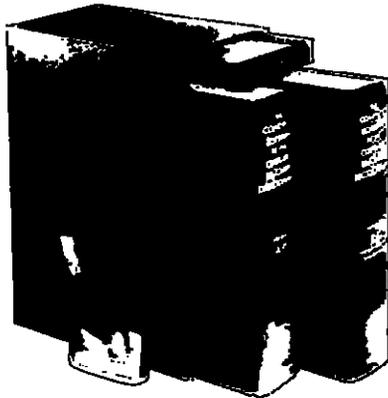
If you like those dry occasions called poetry readings, perhaps you shouldn't come: oral poetry is different stuff — highly crafted, but with hair and teeth, full of sound if not always of fury, and empty, thank you, of academic reserve. Folk art and high art have one thing in common at least: their love of performance, their love of the mask. The poetry reading — an American invention, naturally — has about it the dreadful earnestness of self-help societies and the rising middle class. But storytelling, now, storytelling embraces the lovely extremes of the art: both grandpa sitting by the cookstove spinning yarns, and the high art of Homer, the African griots, and the Anglo-Saxon bards.

My own determination to make poetry in that tradition stems, I suppose, from the obvious source: the stories I was lucky enough to have had told to me as a child. But there have been a number of other salutary jolts along the way. One came when I first heard Dylan Thomas intoning his "Ceremony After a Fire Raid." That was through a recording, of course. When Thomas drank himself to death in New York at 39, I was a seven-year-old immigrant kid in Alberta learning how to skate. But when I heard those recordings I knew something deeply important was going on. It wasn't the performance itself, really — nice though that was — but the door it opened to a whole new kind of composition. Thomas, like Yeats, wrote with his voice, not his pencil. And when Thomas or Yeats spoke their poems it was as if they were rediscovering them in the air word by word, line after line.

Not everyone liked it then, and not everyone does now. The very year the Toronto Festival was founded, the late, great poet John Glassco, in the *Globe and Mail*, inveighed against the "frothy rant" of Dylan Thomas and the "breathy melodrama" of Ezra Pound. "Poetry," he said, "is best received in a state of isolation and tranquillity, through the printed page." It doesn't seem so to me. I don't aspire to a poetry that sounds like a refined version of Upper-Canadian speech. I aspire to one that revels not only in the quiet subtleties of speech, but in the power of oratory, chant, and song. If the way to encounter the poetry of Shakespeare and Yeats is really in silence, running the eye across a

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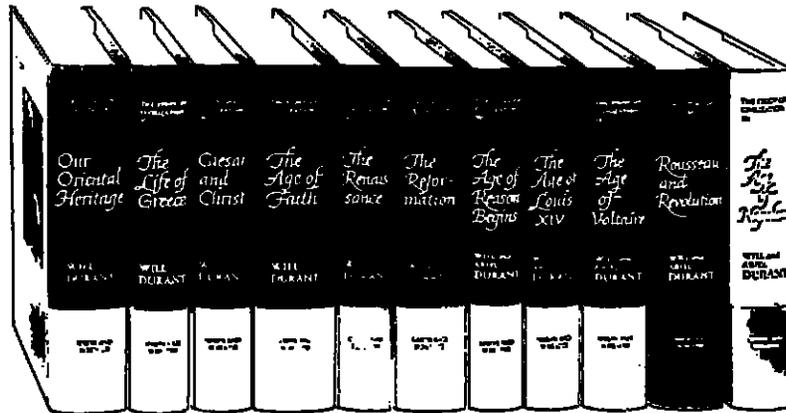
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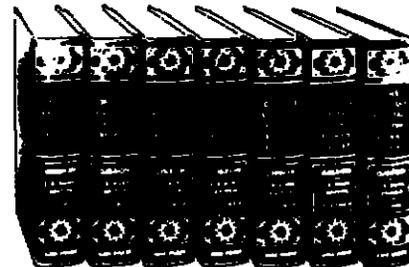
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printed page, then the same should be true of the piano sonatas of Beethoven; we shouldn't sully them with performance, we should sit in our armchairs silently reading the scores.

Speaking or telling or chanting or singing a story or poem is something drastically, if also subtly, different from reading it, and that difference is what led me to the Festival of Storytelling a year ago. Storytelling is art as process,

not as product. Crass materialists that we are, we lust to see our poems and stories written down. Telling them instead — for all that we also publish them in books — is a gesture against possessiveness: a gesture against a culture in which too many of us would rather own than understand. Like being in love, it reminds us that this moment is this moment: *tempus fugit*: nothing lasts.

— ROBERT BRINGHURST

ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

News editors and lexicographers should be haled into court after keeping us on tenterhooks about the spelling of 'forte'

By BOB BLACKBURN

HERE'S A SCRAP of dialogue from a TV series:

"Cooking isn't my forte [pronounced 'fort']."

"That's pronounced 'fortay'. Take it from me. I used to be a schoolteacher."

Ever since I heard that I've been wondering whether it was simply the commission of a common error or an attempt to be funny at the expense of schoolteachers. The latter possibility seems unlikely, because it would be a rather sly joke, and the series in question was not noted for the subtlety of its humour.

Probably most people pronounce the *e*. It's one of those errors that are so common that one is tempted to give up and go along with the crowd. Perhaps the mispronunciation stems from confusion with the Italian *forte*, in which the *e* should be pronounced, or perhaps it's just that people think the *e* must be there for some good reason. In fact, it is there for no good reason, as the *OED* tersely explains: "As in many other adoptions of Fr. adjs. used as sbs., the fem. form has been ignorantly substituted for the masc.; cf. *locale*, *morale*, . . . etc."

If you look up *locale* in the same dictionary, you will find it dismissed out of hand: "Erroneous form of *local*." However, if you look up *morale*, you will find it treated as a legitimate word. All of this tells us a couple of things about the *OED*, much as we may love it. (I took the problem to my *College Webster* and surmised that the lexicographer had long ago trodden the same path I had just taken — that is, he had looked up *forte* in the *OED*, then checked the cross-references and decided to give up.)

A NEWSPAPER WHOSE editors should know better recently reported that someone was on "tenderhooks," another common error. The word, of course, is *tenterhooks*, and to be on them is to be in suspense or filled with anxiety. One supposes that everyone knows the word *tender* and associates it with a condition of delicacy, while the word *tenter* is not really on everyone's lips. A *tenter* is a frame on which cloth is stretched after milling to prevent shrinkage while drying. The cloth is held in a state of tension on the *tenter* by means of hooks called *tenterhooks*, and none of this has anything to do with tenderness.

On the same front page of the same paper the same day, someone was said to have been "hailed" into court, and that could have been what happened. It's more likely that he was haled into court.

hailed before a tribunal." *Haul* denotes a physical action. Finally, *hail*, as Theodore Bernstein puts it, "is what you do to the chief, a friend, or a taxicab." You cannot be *hailed* into court, although that, too, is sometimes written. Finally, the phrase "hail [not *hale*] fellow well met" describes one with whom you are on friendly terms or with whom it is easy to get along. A *hale* fellow is simply one who is in good health.

AFTER IS A USEFUL and flexible word. It has a number of meanings and can be used as a conjunction, an adverb, a preposition, or an adjective. In view of its readiness to serve, it's a wonder that so many writers go to such lengths to find ways of abusing it.

One increasingly common misuse is in news reports: "Six people are dead after two cars collided head-on last night." One supposes that, in the interest of tight writing, the reporter is trying to avoid having to explain that three of the people were killed instantly and that the other three were fatally injured but lived until morning. It would be inaccurate to say all six died *when* the cars collided, and possibly misleading, although not absolutely inaccurate, to say that all died *after* the cars collided. So he writes ". . . are dead after . . ." His problem is that he is assigning to *after* one of its meanings as a preposition ("following," or "as a result of"), but is actually using it as a conjunction, and so is in trouble. There are many ways he could have avoided the error, the simplest probably being to say ". . . are dead after a two-car, head-on collision . . ." That would have taken three more characters than his construction, or only two if he omitted the comma, as he almost certainly would have done.

What this offender wrote, in effect, was that "six people are dead as a result of two cars collided," and surely it's not necessary for a professional writer to make a detailed analysis of the sentence to know that it is wrong. Yet variations of this misuse of *after* pop up with alarming frequency in the press. It's not the evident ignorance of the rules that's bothersome, it's the lack of *feel*.

Here are some other recent journalistic offences:

Of a traffic jam: "It will be a permanent bottleneck for the rest of the day."

Of a possible cure for herpes: "The data is too preliminary to warrant optimism."

"Pianist Glenn Gould, who sadly died last month."

"The reason was because . . ."

"A contentious debate . . ."

"This is the anniversary of their first meeting exactly six months ago today."

Et cetera, et cetera. □



Haled means hauled, but is normally used in the narrower sense of being forced to go (somewhere), as in "he was

BEYOND SURVIVAL

Ten years after Margaret Atwood's popular thematic study, some second thoughts on a nationalistic approach to Canadian literary criticism

By PAUL STUEWE

THE CONCEPT OF "influence" is often used in a rather nebulous manner, since it is as difficult to quantify as it is comparatively easy to identify. But if any one critic of Canadian literature can be said to be influential, it is Northrop Frye. Two contributors to the *Literary History of Canada*, Desmond Pacey and Malcolm Ross, have described his importance in no uncertain terms: for Pacey he is the originator of "the dominant school of Canadian criticism," and according to Ross "nothing of serious speculative import has been offered to us which has not been affected by Frye's thought." Pacey predicts that Frye's view of Canadian literature "will soon have launched a thousand theses and a score of books." Aside from the theses, there are already at least half a score of books in existence that take off from a consideration of Frye's work.

In what does this influence consist? Most important, in a conception of Canadian literature that transposes it onto both sub- and meta-literary planes. The sub-literary aspect arises from Frye's assertion, in his celebrated "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*, that Canadian literature is not really "Literature" in that it does not possess a sufficient degree of excellence:

Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers. . . . There is no Canadian writer of whom we can say what we can of the world's major writers, that their readers can grow up inside their work without ever being aware of a circumference.

Since this is the case, there is simply no point in attempting to apply traditional literary standards to Canadian writing:

The conception of what is literary has to be greatly broadened for such a literature. . . . Even when it is literature in its orthodox genres of poetry and fiction, it is more significantly studied as a part of Canadian life than as a part of an autonomous world of literature.

This position has one very important consequence, namely that Canadian literature, since it isn't really "Literature" at all, might as well be discussed in a historical, sociological, or any other conceptual framework you'd care to choose — as long as that framework isn't literary.

Moreover, though Frye argues that traditional literary

values do not apply (that "the conception of what is literary has to be greatly broadened for such a literature"), he makes extensive use of value judgements ("Canada has produced no author who is a classic in the sense of possessing a vision greater in kind than that of his best readers") in establishing that Canadian writers are not of world-class rank. Although one is surprised to find this on-again, off-again attitude at such a basic level of argument, a glance at the wider corpus of Frye's work is sufficient to establish that it is quite characteristic of his thinking.



In the "Polemical Introduction" to *Anatomy of Criticism*, for example, Frye expounds at length upon the deficiencies of value judgements as a means of literary analysis. He describes them as "casual, sentimental, and prejudiced" and argues against their independent validity by maintaining that "Every deliberately constructed hierarchy of values known to me is based on a concealed social, moral, or intellectual analogy." And yet, if we turn to examples of Frye's practical literary criticism in *The Bush Garden*, we find numerous cases of value judgements being made without any indication of their dubious ontological status. We read that "... the general level of the writing is good enough. . . no poem in the book is bad,"

and "Everyone can learn to write poetry up to a point — the point of discovering how difficult it is to write it unusually well." Perhaps most strikingly, we are told that "must constantly struggle for the standards of good and bad in all types of poetry." If the notion of "standards of good and bad" can be equated with the application of value judgements, as seems eminently reasonable, we are forced to conclude that Frye is simply unable to do without in practice that which he finds so distasteful in theory.

If this is the case, it tends to undermine Frye's contention that Canadian literature requires special handling. Since there is good and bad Canadian writing, why not assess it in traditional literary terms? We might even learn something about why some succeeds and some does not. And if we have produced nothing that deserves to be called a "classic," this is still not sufficient reason to lump all of Canadian literature into

some category designated "mediocre." Certainly we will want to remind ourselves that the statement "This is an important work of Canadian literature" is not equivalent to "This is an important work of English, or Western, or World literature." But this is the commonsensical kind of qualification that we constantly apply in other areas of our lives. It would not seem impossible to do so in the realm of literary analysis.

If Frye's attempts to reduce the study of Canadian literature to that of various aspects of Canadian life is not very convincing, his efforts toward abstracting its significant themes onto a meta-literary plane are a good deal more substantial. This procedure requires both analysis and comparison, and as a consequence it must be grounded upon actual literary evidence rather than sweeping assertions. If there are certain general themes that characterize our writing, it is obviously important to identify and define them.

The deficiencies of thematic criticism as a method are matters of degree and practical-application. For now, I will simply point out two of the obvious pitfalls awaiting anyone who undertakes what is essentially a content analysis of individual works of literature. The first is what might be termed the "statistical fallacy," which arises from the understandable tendency to consider those themes that appear most often as the themes that are the most important. Thus in Frye's work it is but a step from the observation "everything that is central in Canadian writing seems to be marked by the imminence of the natural world" to the more pointed statement that "the central theme [of Canadian poetry, in this case] is really a riddle of inexplicable death: the fact that life struggles and suffers in a nature which is blankly indifferent to it." We have moved from natural phenomena marking "everything that is central" to "life . . . in nature" as "the central theme," and no matter how comprehensible this sort of progression may be in terms

of unconscious thought processes, there is certainly nothing logically compelling about it.

This leads directly into the second major hazard awaiting the practitioner of thematic criticism, which consists in its tendencies towards exclusivity. Since themes are a kind of content, discovered through the empirical process of critical reading, it is tempting to claim that thematic criticism is a more scientific method than such traditional modes of literary analysis as the examination of stylistics, fidelity to reality, or richness of imaginative invention. But it is equally obvious that even if thematic criticism is more scientific, it is not necessarily better in a qualitative sense (unless we accept "scientific = better," an equation many members of social scientific disciplines have begun to question), nor does it begin to supersede the variety of historically fruitful considerations of literature. If thematic criticism is a useful and valid mode of literary analysis, this does not mean that it is the only such method, although as we shall see many of those influenced by Frye make this argument in a covert but discernible manner.

IF NOT FOR a large and growing band of disciples, Frye's criticism of Canadian writing might well have been ignored in favour of discussion of his more grandiose general theories, since the former constitutes a very small part of the total of his critical writing. But in fact there has been a plethora of critical studies heavily influenced by Frye, of which two of the most important are D.G. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* and Margaret Atwood's *Survival*.

Although each book will be considered separately, it is important to note here that both begin with an avowal of purpose strongly reminiscent of what I defined as the sub-literary and meta-literary aspects of Frye's work — and rather similar avowals at that. Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* is introduced as

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being "not primarily a survey, nor does it attempt to deal fully with any single author or work. Rather, by isolating certain themes and images it attempts to define more clearly some of the features that recur in the mind, the mirror of our imaginative life." Atwood's *Survival* "does not survey, evaluate, provide histories or biographies or offer original or brilliant insights," but "attempts one simple thing. It outlines a number of key patterns which I hope will function like the field markings in bird-books: they will help you distinguish this species from all others, Canadian literature from the other literatures with which it is often compared or confused." In Jones the meta-literary technique of thematic criticism is clearly paramount, although the sub-literary note is echoed in his declining to "deal fully with any single author or work"; in Atwood both are evident, with the explicit refusal to evaluate reminding us of Frye's attempts at avoiding value judgements.

Butterfly on Rock exhibits thematic criticism at its best, although much of the book's impact derives from an additional element that has nothing to do with "isolating certain themes and images." Jones illustrates his chosen themes with such numerous and well-chosen examples that he does make a good case for both their frequency of appearance and their intrinsic significance. But he discovers more than a certain kind of content that characterizes Canadian literature: he also discerns a dynamic process at work, one in which our more perceptive writers actively embrace the natural world as a means of achieving a "greater sense of vitality and community." This is an ethical component, "a view of life that not only comprehends suffering and death but sees in them the conditions that make possible the highest human values." This moral dimension is given richness and validity by the provision of thematic examples, and it transcends them with its vision of a realm of values arching over the world of facts.

If *Butterfly on Rock* uses thematic criticism within the context of a much broader thesis, Atwood's *Survival* displays it as an embarrassingly inadequate instrument when used in isolation. Atwood is not unaware of this herself, as her disclaimer demonstrates. But even the limited goal she does announce — the outlining of "a number of key patterns" that distinguish Canadian literature from other literatures — is undertaken in such a sloppily casual fashion that one would dismiss it out of hand if the book had not already become widely used in Canadian classrooms and effusively recommended by several of our more widely read reviewers.

In order to accept *Survival's* conclusions, one must first swallow some grandiose and poorly grounded assertions. We are told that "every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core." While Atwood describes this as a "sweeping generalization" and an "oversimplification," this does not stop her from going on to suggest that the American symbol is "possibly . . . The Frontier" and the English symbol "perhaps The Island," or from progressing from equivocation to certainty in stating that "The central symbol for Canada . . . is undoubtedly *Survival*." If there is any principle at work here, it seems to be that as long as you confess to your sins in advance, it is perfectly all right to go ahead and commit them.

And if one feels no need to prove one's most sweeping assertions, one can evidently say just about anything that comes to mind. Thus we are informed that "The Canadian author's two favourite 'natural' methods for dispatching his victims are drowning and freezing, drowning being preferred by poets . . . and freezing by prose writers." Think for a moment about the kind and volume of evidence required to demonstrate the truth of this proposition, and then consider whether Atwood's fewer than 10 examples — at least half of which in fact contradict her argument — even come close to doing so. To proceed from a few examples to a firm statement of general

principle, as Atwood does here and throughout *Survival*, simply makes a joke out of the practice of thematic criticism.

The deficiencies of the thematic approach are also clearly visible in *Patterns of Isolation* and *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*, by John Moss, even though the author claims to be dissatisfied with Frye's criticism. Moss's strategy is to choose a general theme of a psychological nature — "isolation" in the case of *Patterns of Isolation*, "identity" in that of *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* — and then to claim that each is more universal and therefore more revealing than the themes chosen by Frye and his adherents. Thus in

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Patterns of Isolation he replaces Frye's "garrison mentality" with a four-part schema including "garrison," "colonial," "frontier," and "immigrant" types of isolation. But since he then proceeds to fill up his categories with examples, and uses the existence of the examples as proof of the existence of the categories, this is no more convincing than the similar "seek and ye shall find" procedures used by avowedly thematic critics. In *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel* Moss is much more obviously thematic, as his opening observation of "the remarkably high incidence of sex and violence in the Canadian novel" quickly becomes "ample evidence of the extent of sex and violence as theme, form and subject-matter in the Canadian novel." I could not invent a better illustration of my previous remarks regarding the thematic critics' tendency to equate statistical frequency with significance.

THE APPEARANCE of thematic criticism in academic journals is of course not surprising, since most of the critics I have so far discussed teach literature at the university level. To the extent that such journals disseminate the thematic method among an audience of teachers and students of literature, however, it is evident that they exercise an influence potentially much greater than their relatively small circulations might lead us to expect. In the case of the quarterly *Canadian Literature*, since 1959 the major forum for those professionally involved with the subject, we may reasonably posit that we are dealing with a publication in which the presence or absence of the thematic method will be of particular significance.

Canadian Literature's founder and, until 1976, editor, George Woodcock, has emphasized its "informed eclecticism" and freedom from "the canons of a critical orthodoxy," and thus we might expect to find within it the most heterogeneous of critical contents. But one finds, on the contrary, a surprising uniformity of approach to the work of criticism, much of which reflects the dominance of the thematic method. Examples are most readily available in *The Canadian Novel in the Twentieth Century*, a selection of essays from *Canadian Literature* (with one exception) edited by Woodcock. Several of these exhibit the thematic method at its most banal.

Jeannette Urbas's essay on Ethel Wilson, "The Perquisites of Love," is typical of the kind of empty results achieved by many thematic critics. Urbas concludes that Wilson's fiction displays the themes of ". . . love, the complexity of human relationships and the subtlety of truth." A moment's reflection should suffice to point out that this is only marginally

more profound than the observation that it is also written in sentences and paragraphs. Such notions are implicit in our conception of what quality fiction — fiction worthy of critical attention — should be like, and presenting them as “themes” is about as insightful as presenting sodium and chloride as themes of salt. It is in fact difficult to think of any worthwhile imaginative writing not characterized by concern with “. . . love, the complexity of human relationships and the subtlety of truth.” To assume that it is somehow useful to treat these as themes is to mock the practice of literary criticism.

The same objection applies to Peter Stevens’s essay on Mavis Gallant, where we are told that “the stress of relation-

**Is there anything other than
hyperbole in describing
‘the changing state of women’
in *The Doctor’s Wife* as
‘the great question of the
decade, maybe of the century’?**

ships within families” distinguishes her work, and to George Bowering’s observation that “The danger and sadness of corrupting youthful optimism” is a theme prevalent in Margaret Laurence’s fiction, and to A.T. Elder’s conclusion that Robert Stead’s “themes are usually critical of society and consistently serious.” The key to comprehending the banality of such statements is to try to imagine their opposites: to attempt to think of serious fiction that does *not* deal with stressful family relationships, corrupted youthful optimism, and socially critical and consistently serious themes.

AMONG MORE “POPULAR” journals, *Saturday Night’s* notices of literary books provide many examples of the presence and pitfalls of thematic analysis. Again we must ask if it is at all helpful to be told such things as “Morley Callaghan. . . is delighted to show how men behave badly in a social world of their own creation,” as we try to think of serious fiction that does not broach this theme, or if a contemporary novel can be considered noteworthy because “It suggests that there is a vacuum where once was society, and that violence becomes increasingly ordinary where there is no anchoring community,” or if there is anything other than hyperbole in describing “the changing state of women” (identified as a theme of Brian Moore’s *The Doctor’s Wife*) as “the great question of the decade, maybe of the century.”

At this middlebrow level of thematic influence there is a noticeable shift to demanding that literature present “relevant” themes, or even a more pointed “message.” A book is often praised for the sociological importance of its themes: it may be “worth reading . . . for the various kinds of Canadian experience it touches on,” or because the writer’s “themes touch the lives of many of us,” and are “the stuff of which more and more lives are being made.” Conversely, a book may be criticized because it “doesn’t even allude to Canada today,” or because it is a “moral fable” whose assumptions are not borne out by “History.” Although the demand for “relevance” is probably a carry-over from the socio-political activism of the 1960s, and is certainly not an intrinsic component of the thematic approach, it does seem to be quite compatible with the kind of criticism that concerns itself with hunting for themes rather than attempting more sophisticated forms of literary judgement.

A similar set of attitudes and practices can be found in the reviews published in *Books in Canada*. Our by now familiar

companion, banality, plays its usual prominent part. Observations such as “All of MacLeod’s stories hark to the past, and on several a return to old roots is a central theme” no longer have much power to shock us, and a comparison of two novels concluding that they are alike in containing “violence (emotional and physical), passion, illness and/or death” almost seems meaningful until we apply the usual test of asking what sort of literature does *not* include these elements. One reviewer imparts thematic significance by telling us that a new book isn’t “just another novel about a loser . . . its deepest meanings are ultimately political,” and then tempers his general approbation by chiding it for not being “a shattering breakthrough into Canada’s sense of its past and present trouble.” Another reviewer manages to criticize a book for being “thematically uneven.” Since the book in question is a collection of poems dealing with more than one subject, as collections of poems will, this is as downright silly a case of misapplied thematics as can be imagined. It is, however, approached by a fellow striver for significance who uses the phrase “Thematically it’s about” where “It’s about” would do equally well. Here we note the temptation to assume that every book that is about something has a Theme, an assumption that ensures employment for the thematic critic until such time as writers produce books that aren’t about anything at all.

IF THE PRECEDING comments have established the ubiquity of the thematic approach throughout all kinds of writing about Canadian literature, they have not been intended as proof of its complete dominance of all criticism and reviewing. There are a number of non-academic reviewers who either disagree or are unfamiliar with thematic criticism, and there are a few academics, such as A.J.M. Smith, who have actively opposed its influence in their milieu. If the activities of other varieties of critics have been ignored, this has been because of my convictions regarding the dangers of the thematic approach.

Why use such a melodramatic word as “dangers?” As we have seen, the thematic approach is based on certain theories of Northrop Frye that encourages the user to treat literature as just about anything other than literature. The “sub-literary” aspect of Frye’s work treats Canadian literature as a collection of various kinds of information about the country, often historical or sociological, and when most crudely applied leads to the demands for “relevance” and “message.” Its “meta-literary” counterpart asserts that there are certain distinguishing themes running through the fabric of Canadian literature, and here we noticed (aside from a lack of agreement as to what these themes are) tendencies toward banality and the elevation of thematic content to near-divine status.

With this kind of criticism dominating our literary scene, we are in real danger of losing any conception of qualitative standards. Taking the “sub-literary” road leads to the indiscriminate lumping together of works of all degrees of literary skill: it emphasizes content rather than form and encourages critics to ascribe merit to books that deal with significant Canadian subjects regardless of their other characteristics. The sub-literary aspects of the thematic approach tends to favour the creation and consumption of sub-literature.

The “meta-literary” emphasis upon the identification of themes is at least potentially more valid; obviously the discovery of thematic unities in national literatures would be an important addition to our knowledge about them. As we have seen, however, the actual practice of thematic criticism is characterized by results that are typically arbitrary and banal, and these qualities are, if anything, accentuated in the transition from academic to popular criticism. Whatever the theoretical niceties of the thematic method, its practical application has produced a body of critical comment that can often only be described as embarrassing. □

Mademoiselle Blood

Anne Hébert re-explores the link
between passion and death in an eerie tale
of vampirism in the Paris Métro

By AUDREY THOMAS

Héloïse, by Anne Hébert, translated from the French by Sheila Fischman, Stoddart, 101 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7737 2006 5).

*The world is in order
The dead below
The living above*

THIS IS THE epigraph to Anne Hébert's novel *Héloïse*, published in Paris in 1980 and recently translated by Sheila Fischman. It is also the opening stanza to one of Hébert's poems, "A Kind of Feast," which goes on to say:

*The dead come to me
The world is in order
The dead below*

*The dead are boring
The living are killing*

And the dead do indeed come to us in this novel; they are "let loose among us. Eyes made over, voices restored, skeletons assembled anew. They mix with the unsuspecting crowd."

One of the places where they do this is in the Paris Métro, which, if one stops to think about it, is a place where the living do go "below" and live, however temporarily, under the ground. The Métro serves an important function in this novel. It is where the action really begins, and it is also where it ends, in a scene at once erotic and blasphemous, as Héloïse, successful at last in her "seduction" of Bernard, "lays the young man across her knees. A savage pieta, she wraps her arms around him."

Héloïse is no ordinary *femme fatale*; she's the Real Thing, a vampire and a revenant, as well as a tall, pale, beautiful woman with "night-dark hair." She needs to drink the blood of men in order to stay "alive." (This novel made me want to know more about the history of vampirism. It is implied here that Héloïse only drinks men's blood — except when she is desperate and climbs over the fence at the zoo in the Jardin des Plantes — and her friend Bottereau only drinks the blood of women. It is necessary that this be the case in this

book, but I wonder if the original vampires fed on the blood of the opposite sex?)

I do not think this novel will come as a surprise to anyone who read *The Torrent*, Hébert's collection of novella and short stories, or her novels, *The Silent Rooms* and *Kamouraska*. Sex and death, or passion and death, have always been linked together in her works, and she has often explored the theme of "mastery." Hébert's characters, if they give in to their strange passions, often suffer death of one kind or another. The image of the vampire is a brilliant "objective correlative" for the passionate possession of one human being by another. (While reading this book I kept thinking of the wonderful eroticism of Herzog's remake of *Nosferatu*. I also kept going back to that strange unfinished poem by Coleridge, "Christabel.")

Until Héloïse and her sidekick Bottereau (he "smells of mud") appear on the scene, Bernard seems like a nice if rather boring young man who has given up "his poetry and all sorts of daydreams to study law." He is about to marry his "cheerful and uncomplicated" blue-eyed lover, a young ballet student named Christine. They are thoroughly modern and "dressed like twin brothers. Jeans and pullovers. The girl's hips as narrow as the boy's."

But even at their engagement celebration there are hints that Bernard is weak and dependent, even though he sees his body as "free now, after being so long held back by the thousand invisible stitches sewn into his very skin by his mother, when he was a little boy and slept in a small bed beside his mother's large one." A few paragraphs on he sees his mother — who has been dead for two years — at the end of the table, "tapping her thimble, asking to speak." Christine's hand on his arm banishes Mother and Bernard thinks, "She [Christine] is life," and "I've been saved."

It is important, therefore, that it is only after Christine gets off at her Métro

stop that Héloïse appears in the same car as Bernard, who had been looking "downcast and pensive . . . like an abandoned child." Once he has seen Héloïse, his love for his fiancée drops away, and he finds both her and the modern world crude and vulgar and almost impossible to bear. Christine doesn't seem to have enough power to save Bernard, but I think this is because of the nature of Bernard and not because "death" is more powerful than "life."

In the hands of an artist less skilled than Anne Hébert this could have been a very silly book. Bottereau is hard to take sometimes. ("But your fiancée's blood is young and bounteous." At the thought of Christine, Bottereau greedily licked his lips.) But when he says how "simple" it all is for him ("I rape and I kill") we feel his awful amorality. He is procurer and "dealer" and psychopath and very, very believable.

The way Hébert uses present-day Paris, with its crowded Métros, its underground musicians, its girls in long skirts and T-shirts saying "I'm feeling free," its noise and pollution as a background for this tale of enchantment and death is really wonderful. One of the most striking examples of this occurs about two-thirds of the way through the book. Héloïse has just seduced Bernard and slit his throat, leaving him for dead on the floor of the strange apartment Bottereau has succeeded in renting to the newly married couple. (Needless to say, Christine, who is life-affirming, doesn't like this place, which seems haunted and is full of a kind of 1900s Art Nouveau voluptuousness.) At this point the narrator shows us Héloïse, her red dress wrinkled, sitting on the edge of the fountain at Place Saint-Michel, "where young people on drugs sleep, livid, emaciated," decanting Bernard's blood "from her syringe into small glass flasks." She's just another druggie, and "the world we live in receives, with the same air of weary unconcern, any peculiarity or perverse pleasure." So Bernard isn't the only one who's "half

in love with easeful Death."

There are a lot of references in the book that would probably have more significance — or would be more quickly recognizable as significant — to someone really familiar with Paris. I've only been there once, but I did remember that the subway stop at the very end of the novel ("Through the mist, one can read the name of the station, Père-Lachaise") is the name of the most fashionable cemetery in Paris. Gertrude Stein is buried there, Victor Hugo, Proust, Balzac, Sarah Bernhardt, Oscar Wilde, and a host of others. It's a regular village of the famous dead. And in this cemetery there stands a monument to Abelard and Héloïse.

It's no good trying to see this novel as

a simple allegory, but that little bit of information is interesting, as is the fact that Abelard's passion for Héloïse got him emasculated (something we all seem to know, even if we've never read a word he wrote). St. Bernard of Clairvaux thought Abelard's influence (as a philosopher and teacher) was dangerous and secured his condemnation (or the condemnation of his teachings) at the Council of Sens. *That* Bernard was a mystic.

The Paris Métro started its first line in 1900, and there are several references to that year. Héloïse and Bottereau wear costumes from that era, and Bottereau drives a 1900 car. Even the strange carving over the door of the apartment building — "the head of a woman, her hair undone" — reminds one of Beard-

ley's drawings and may, in fact, be part of the decoration on the Porte Dauphine Metro entrance. We are told that the mysterious villa is "not far from the Bois de Boulogne," and the apartment reminds one of a disused railway station. In other words, I think Hébert is both deadly serious and having a lot of fun. French readers, particularly Parisians, probably picked up on a lot more of the fun than I did.

But in the end that really doesn't matter. *Héloïse* is full of Hébert's usual superb writing, striking imagery, and careful observation of human (and inhuman) nature. And, like most of her work, it is not a book that I would like to read on a dark night, in a big house, all alone. □

FEATURE REVIEW

The hand that holds the pen

Women writers alone are preserving a moral vision in contemporary literature, as two books from Margaret Atwood attest

By JOHN HOFSESS

Second Words: Selected Critical Prose, by Margaret Atwood, House of Anansi, 444 pages, \$22.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88784 095 7).

The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English, edited by Margaret Atwood, Oxford, 477 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 19 540396 7).

The future — if there is one — is female.

— Sally Miller Gearhart.

FOR A DECADE NOW the most important contemporary writers have been women. The group I have in mind is large, unique in history, and of such diversity that they have little in common except the literary skill and the moral outrage to make us think — not like them but for ourselves. There are no counterparts written by men to Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, Kate Millet's *The Basement: Meditations on a Human Sacrifice*, Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, or the sly subversive works of Susan Sontag, Audrey Thomas, Bertha Harris, Tillie Olsen, Sharon Pollock, and many others. The unifying char-

acteristic of these writers is that each, in her own way, has developed a social conscience and a critical intelligence; each has chosen to write in what might be called "the middle ground" of literature, somewhere between the pedantic arcana of academe and the mindless pulp of pop fiction. They are serious writers in search of as large an audience as possible, without oversimplifying or pandering. They are not content to be cult writers, or to have no *political* effect. They write to change the world — which is largely a man's world — even if the change, in actuality, is as small as reinforcing in a reader the courage not to be silent in the face of known injustices.

The modern era also has its share of gifted male writers, but even the best seem unable to transcend the paltry compulsions of ego and penis; it's as if most male writers of the late 20th century are no longer capable of imagining and desiring a better world, for both sexes, and all races, and are content with perfecting a *style* for their despair and acceptance of viciousness. Given two writers of roughly equal skills — say,

Irving Layton and Margaret Atwood — Atwood emerges as the more important figure because she has the more significant moral and political vision (leading to a future, if there is one). Layton and his kind (or Norman Mailer and his kind in the United States) are merely querulous and pugnacious attention-getters who have nothing to give that leads to the building of a new social consensus or community.

These thoughts spring more from contemplating *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* by Margaret Atwood than from *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, which she has edited — the first being a collection of Atwood's reviews, essays, and public speeches (including a previously unpublished "mini-memoir" of Northrop Frye) from 1960 to the present, the second being her updating of a classic text of Canadian poetry originally edited by A.J.M. Smith in 1960. Yet even in the *New Oxford*, heavily weighted in favour of male poets for the simple reason that there have been more of them since 1628, the year the anthology begins, my suggestion that creative vitality has been

best possessed and utilized by those writers who were and are the most alienated by the dominant culture — namely women — meets with ample evidence in the poetry of Susan Musgrave, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Pat Lowther, Jay Macpherson, Phyllis Webb, Sharon Thesen, and the poems of Atwood herself (selected by William Toye). Only one or two male poets — Dennis Lee's "Civil Elegies," Pier Giorgio Di Cicco in "The Head Is a Paltry Matter" and "Male Rage Poem" — seem able to combine verbal skills with social awareness to produce poetry that matters (beyond the male self and its crumbling institutions).

The two volumes complement one another — indeed much of *Second Words* can be viewed as a critical appendix to the *New Oxford* — in that 14 of the 50 articles deal with poets and poetry that Atwood has chosen for the anthology, beginning with an essay on Margaret Avison (published in *Acta Victoriana*, the literary magazine of Victoria College, University of Toronto, in 1961, when Atwood was a student) to a review of Jay Macpherson's *Poems Twice Told for Books in Canada* (April, 1932). Atwood states in her introduction: "... when covering once more the ground that [A.J.M. Smith] covered before me I found, time after time, that he had chosen what I myself would have chosen." For most readers of the *New Oxford* the test of its worth will not be so much whether Atwood has discerning scholarly taste (or prophetic judgement in the case of young poets like Roo Borson and Christopher Dewdney) but simply whether the volume is an enjoyable and interesting anthology to read.

Just as, in everyday life, Atwood doesn't suffer fools gladly, so here she gives poetic bores short shrift (Robin Skelton gets his lifetime output boiled down to three entries, while Michael Ondaatje gets eight full pages; George Jonas has two poems "bronzed like baby boots," as Atwood portrays inclusion in the *New Oxford*, while Jay Macpherson is represented by 12). She describes Canadian poetry in the introduction as "spiky, tough, flexible, various, and vital," and her selection indeed possesses those qualities.

Second Words is Atwood's first non-fiction work since *Survival*, and while it will not have the startling impact that *Survival* had (a case of stating the obvious, according to Atwood, but saying it at a propitious time), it is an invaluable guide to understanding Atwood's choice of themes, her basic principles, and the development of her work (and world view) over the last two decades. A spirit of generosity permeates the book; she has never been one of those critics

who built a reputation by tearing others down. She generally reviews those books that she considers herself to be "the right reader" for; only on two occasions — "Mathews and Misrepresentation," in which she defends herself against an attack on *Survival* by Robin Mathews, and a review of Timothy Findley's *The Wars* in which she says she was motivated by an "unfair" review in the *Globe and Mail*: "Choosing [Donald Jack] to review *The Wars* is like choosing Red Buttons to review *Hamlet*" — does Atwood engage in verbal combat. Most of her reviews are "appreciations" (Audrey Thomas's *Blown Figures*, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*) of lesser-known authors (at least in Canada) whom Atwood hopes to popularize through endorsement. While the observations in the reviews are generally perceptive, it is the public speeches, gathered here for the first time, that make more amusing and provocative reading: an address on witches given at Radcliffe, "An End to Audience?" given at Dalhousie, "Canadian-American Relations: Surveying the Eighties" given at Harvard, an address on Amnesty International given in Toronto, and a delightful, tongue-in-cheek speech called "Writing the Male Character" delivered at Waterloo University.

In these Atwood most clearly displays her qualities of decency, fair-play, moderation, a compassionate concern for the future of mankind, and a determination to stand up and be counted. For example, from the Amnesty speech:

We in this country should use our privileged position not as a shelter from the world's realities but as a platform from which to speak. Many are denied their voices; we are not. A voice is a gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech if possible. Powerlessness and silence go together. . . .

Or this, Atwood on Atwood:

I have always seen Canadian nationalism and the concern for women's rights as part of a larger, non-exclusive picture. We sometimes forgot, in our obsession with colonialism and imperialism, that Canada itself has been guilty of these stances towards others, both inside the country and outside it; and our concern about sexism, men's mistreatment of women, can blind us to the fact that men can be just as disgusting, and statistically more so, towards other men, and that women as members of certain national groups, although relatively powerless members, are not exempt from the temptation to profit at the expense of others.

It is Atwood's strength that she pitches her tent in the middle of the crossfire between extremists (male and female) and demands of both sides that they be

more reasonable. She does not indulge in petty feuds or polemical positions, but saves her time, and moral courage, for acts of deeper meaning, living out her social criticisms.

The period we are living in is like no other in history; the line between ultimate absurdity (nuclear war) and reality gets thinner all the time. It is necessary for both writers and readers to seek, or create, a meeting ground between art and politics. "Social realism" need not be the bleating, didactic creature that its Dandyesque enemies claim. *Second Words* traces the development of one of the most important "political artists" writing today; one whose future work promises to be even more challenging and dangerous. □

REVIEW

In the mood

By I.M. OWEN

The Swell Season: A Text on the Most Important Things in Life, by Josef Skvorecky, translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 238 pages, \$15.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88619 038 X).

ONE OF THE FOUR quotations Josef Skvorecky has chosen as epigraphs for *The Swell Season* is from another Czechoslovakian artist in exile, Milos Forman: "They always expect your newest work to be new in every way. It's impossible. You spend your whole life saying the same thing over and over again in different ways." In the person of his alter ego Danny Smiricky, Skvorecky comes perilously close to saying the same thing over and over again in the same way. But he does it well enough to get away with it.

He has chosen to tell Danny's story — of a youth in Czechoslovakia under Nazi occupation — backwards. First came *The Cowards*, a fairly long novel set in the confused May days of 1945, when Danny was 20 or 21. This was published in 1958. In 1967 the novella *The Bass Saxophone* appeared in Czech (the English translation came out in Toronto in 1977). Here Danny is 18. Finally, *The Swell Season* (published in Czech in

1975) is about Danny at much the same age or a shade younger.

In the six chapters of *The Swell Season*, each one nearly a self-contained short story, we get variations on a single theme: Danny's burning and regularly frustrated desire to seduce one of the enchanting girls around him. In the small provincial town where he lives this becomes well known, and his friends are able to count 23 girls he has tried, though we see him at work on only six of them. To each he is prepared to swear eternal love at any given moment. But it's clear that all this expresses is no more than an adolescent itch: his only real devotion is to jazz (more precisely, swing) and the all-male band in which he plays the saxophone.

Though these charming comedies of provincial high-school life are set in the Nazi Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the shadows don't impinge very much. Lexa, one of the boys in the band, has a father in a concentration camp, and two of the three priests in the parish have also disappeared; and at the very end Lexa gets word that his father has been shot. Except at this moment, the young people are able to treat the Nazis as something of a joke. Jazz, of course, is frowned on as Judeo-Negroid music, but in practice it isn't banned. Dancing to it is, however; so they hold their dances on Saturday afternoons at a village "about five kilometres up in the hills, where the power of the Reich was less in evidence." One of the high comic points comes when the boys, who are staging a very jazzy revue in the school, succeed in persuading Regierungskommissar Horst Hermann Kühl that the Charleston is a Czech folk-dance.

This was the first book of Skvorecky's I had read. For all its charm, it seemed rather slight in view of his reputation. So I got hold of the other two books about Danny. *The Cowards*, which is in Penguin Modern Classics, is surprisingly similar in tone and atmosphere, but gains weight from its satirical picture of the town worthies, who have survived comfortably under the Protectorate, suddenly in May, 1945, demonstrating first their fervent Czech nationalism and then, when the Russian troops arrive, their affectionate admiration for their Bolshevik brothers.

But then I read *The Bass Saxophone*, and all became clear. This little novella is a great and powerful work. It's no more solemn than the others, but its comedy is wilder and fiercer, and full of marvelously grotesque symbolism. Have you ever considered what a bass saxophone would be like? It has a bell "as large around as a washbasin," and its voice is "an acoustical alloy of some non-existent bass cello and bass oboe, but

more explosive, a nerve-shattering bellow, the voice of a melancholy gorilla."

In recommending *The Swell Season*, then, I'm advising you to read the trilogy. In this way *The Swell Season* takes its place as an agreeable prologue, and *The Bass Saxophone* is the pivot on which the whole work turns. The passionate love of jazz it voices becomes an eloquent though apolitical affirmation of freedom, which hurls defiance at the Regierungskommissar and all his kind. This affirmation spreads out and tinges the other two books with far stronger colours than they would have by themselves.

Though Skvorecky is a professor of English at the University of Toronto, he wisely continues to write in his native language. How often I've wished that Joseph Conrad had followed this sensible course. Each of these three books has a different translator, all good; but Paul Wilson, who did *The Swell Season*, is probably the best. Both his narrative prose and his dialogue are entirely natural.

Any Canadian literary imperialist who tries to claim Skvorecky as one of our own may be discouraged by another of the epigraphs to *The Swell Season*, this one from Evelyn Waugh: "To have been born into a world of beauty, to die amid ugliness, is the common fate of all us exiles." Personally, as a Toronto loyalist, I assume that this means that Skvorecky plans to retire to — where Regina, maybe? □

REVIEW

Tidal bore

By ALBERTO MANGUEL

Head of the Harbour, by Mark Gordon, Groundhog Press, 502 pages, \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 9690127 1 3).

I HAVEN'T READ *The Kanner Aliyah*, the first of what threatens to be a five-volume saga on the life of one Martin Kanner, hero of this self-confessed fictional autobiography by Halifax-born Mark Gordon. But I've read the second volume, *Head of the Harbour*. I will not be rushing out to get the first.

In *Head of the Harbour* the 22-year-old Martin Kanner is back in Halifax after a three-year stay in Israel. He enters university and after a while falls in love with a psychologist, Joan Brighton, who cannot make up her mind between Martin and a man called Hugh. Some 422 pages later, Martin gets the girl, marries her, and takes her to live in an old farmhouse at the "head of the harbour" (hence the title of the book), where Martin discovers that there must be more to life than this, packs his bags, and leaves for Montreal. There the book ends.

The term "autobiographical fiction" implies that the author has used elements of his own life to build up a plot; that is all very well, but the plot should be able to stand in its own right, simply as a story. It must be interesting in itself; it must be able to create its own world and set of references; it must be (as Ezra Pound demanded of literature) "news that stays news." *Head of the Harbour* is none of these things. The story is threadbare: nothing happens.

The hero arrives in Halifax with mixed feelings about everything; with mixed feelings he leaves. Characters flit through the pages like photos flicked through in a family album — but we are not related to Mr. Kanner/Gordon, and the faces he shows mean nothing to us. They are not an integral part of the story; it is not essential for the reader to know who Martin's grandparents are, or whether his landlady keeps the heating too low, or whether his geology teacher is gay, or what his friends think about the fact that Martin is a Jew. All these characters seem superfluous: they just fill page after page; they never develop, never trigger off anything, never make themselves appealing or intriguing or mysterious or vital.

One of the dangers of autobiographical writing is to confuse the facts of life with the facts of fiction. What is important for a real-life person — his thoughts, the people he knows, his sexual proclivities — is not necessarily important for the fictional hero. For all we know there may be a Jewish boy called Duddy Kravitz; what is certain, if there is, is that the fact is of no importance. A good, solid character doesn't need to be propped up by a real-life double.

I also find the author's prose somewhat shaky. He is too insistent on describing sensations, on spreading out images that do not help us, as readers, to deepen our feeling of the story. On the very first page, for instance, he explains that a pilot tries to lower a plane "not on its fragile belly, but plumply, on its three sets of wheels"; he then tells us that fog is "that damp evanescent stuff."

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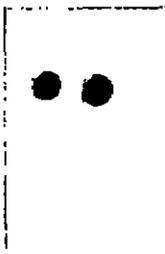
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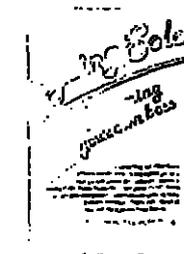
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His dialogue is poor. It's probably true to life, but it doesn't work as fiction. Says one of Martin's girlfriends: "You've lived in Montreal, Toronto, Israel, you know what it's like in the big world." And later on: "Martin, do you believe in love? I know it's a silly question."

Certain themes appear again and again: what it's like being Jewish, being Canadian, being a budding writer. But unfortunately none of these is developed. They are brought out at random, fingered, labelled, and put away till a few pages later.

Halfway through the book Gordon says of Martin: "He still felt the urge and need to put words down on paper. How could he let the years slip past without a record?" The straightforward answer, of course, is "Easily." Not everything is worth recording and, even if it were, certainly not everything is worth publishing. □

REVIEW

In a minor key

By RUPERT SCHIEDER

Mantissa, by John Fowles, Collins, 192 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 00 222628 6).

THE PUBLISHERS' expectations for John Fowles's newest book are obviously great. Their advance publicity material, although it begins slightly guardedly by calling it a "disarming new work," ends: "Those who wish to discover what goes on in the mind of John Fowles . . . will find this eloquent cloth-bound edition of Fowles's new 'novel' [my quotes] *Mantissa* the perfect vehicle." Expensive, full-page advertisements in the *New York Times Book Review* and the *New Yorker* for this new work by "a modern master" (available also in a Deluxe Edition for \$75), quote *Time*: "In his fifth 'novel' [my quotes] author John Fowles again performs . . . narrative legerdemain"; *Playboy*: "The sex scenes make it totally accessible" — one wonders what the alternatives would be; and *John Barkham Reviews*: "a novelist's novel." The publishers' assumption that the work will be successful, financially at least, seems justified; it is already a

Book-of-the-Month Club Alternate. It might be pointed out, however, that Fowles's success has been due to his novels and the films made from the first three.

Of the 13 books published since *The Collector* appeared in 1963 only four have been "novels," and even those four have progressively, in order of publication, moved away from that specific form of fiction. From *The Collector*, an excellent, spare novel, Fowles in *The Magus* (1965) and *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) turned to the resources of the romance and other prose fiction forms that suited his changing purposes, writing longer and longer works that became more and more discursive. *Daniel Martin* (1977), is a garrulous, self-indulgent, and formally quite amorphous work. The other nine books have ranged through a variety of forms: *The Aristos* (1964), "a self-portrait in ideas"; *Poems* (1973), "an autobiographical footnote"; *The Ebony Tower* (1974), a collection of five narratives — two of them, for me, the finest things that he has written; *Cinderella* (1974), a translation; texts for three books with photographs — *Shipwreck* (1974), *Trees and Islands* (1979), an exploration of the island metaphor in English, and *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (1980) — and now this new fiction.

Some readers, recalling the 625 pages of *Daniel Martin*, will be relieved at the 196 pages of *Mantissa*. Others, looking for the accomplished story-telling Fowles of *The Collector* and parts of *The Ebony Tower* may be put off by the enigmatic title, and the prefatory quotations from Descartes, Marivaux, and Lempriere. Others who cherished this "learned" approach in *The Magus*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *Daniel Martin* may be enthusiastic.

What have we in *Mantissa*? Setting: after the amnesiac haze clears — it will return twice — a windowless room, with grey padded walls, a bed, table, chair, and cuckoo clock. The "Central." In Europe? A hospital? In the mind of the protagonist? Cast: Miles Green (a name pregnant with suggestions). Actor? Politician? Novelist? Some five others: Claire (his wife?), Dr. A. Delfie (Delphi?), Nurse Cory (Kore?), a nursing "Sister," a hermaphroditic rock-star who is metamorphosed to Erato, sometimes muse of love poetry and fiction. All the same or aspects of the same figure? Plot: discussion, recrimination, a rape, seemingly therapeutic, of the protagonist, some sharp kicks, and some legerdemain. Ending: the return of the initial haze, and silence, except for the final single cry of the cuckoo.

It is not profitable to consider this fifth fiction in terms of Fowles's earlier

four. Always an experimenter, he seems to have shifted from the novel and the romance to the anatomy, with elements of the confession, vehicles more receptive to the discussion and analysis of the writer's interests and ideas.

The colloquium, characteristic of the anatomy, is here moved from the country house or bohemian café of such masters of this form as Peacock and Aldous Huxley to a locale more suited to our decades, a mental hospital dominated by a neurologist, or, of course, the mind of the protagonist/novelist. Ideas, represented by mouthpieces with names obvious enough to border on the allegorical, occupy the staged dialogues of the four parts. The topics of the discussions are familiar enough: being, identity, freedom, the relationship between the artist and the muse. The lengthy dialogue on the novel as a form fits neatly into Northrop Frye's identification of the "Menippean Satire," with its "intellectual fancy," "maddened pedantry," "overwhelming" its "targets with an avalanche of their own jargon." As Miles says: "Serious modern fiction has only one subject, the difficulty of writing serious modern fiction. . . . Our one priority now is mode of discourse, function of discourse, status of discourse." The conversation touches on absurdism, multiple endings, the novel as "reflexive" rather than "reflective," modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, deconstructionalism, hermeneutics, diégesis, etc., with an impressive flurry of name-dropping.

For some readers this tongue-in-cheek material, combined with anachronistic references, novelistic voyeurism, low burlesque, hits at reviewers and the statutory "boring bed scenes," will be quite entertaining. I quite enjoyed the book, but then I have an avid interest in novelists on the novel that makes me put up with a great deal of chatter, even when it is neither new nor original. Besides, Fowles has neatly undercut criticism of trifling and levity by his footnote, albeit delayed until nine pages from the end, explaining the title: "An addition of comparatively small importance, especially to a literary effort or discourse" (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Other readers, however, may be quite irritated by the games, the references to Fowles's own books, the self-conscious coyness and cuteness. They may not, as Collins's publicity suggests, find all this "disarming," but just another example of Fowles's increasing self-indulgence. There may be those who may not, to quote Collins again, "wish to discover what goes on in the mind of John Fowles" or Miles Green. The anatomy has never been a form that attracts or

satisfies a large reading public. Perhaps the Book-of-the-Month Club was wise to offer *Mantissa* not as a "Choice" but as an "Alternate." □

REVIEW

Past imperfect

By **BARBARA NOVAK**

Going Through the Motions, by Katherine Govier, McClelland & Stewart, 252 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 3416 4).

KATHERINE GOVIER has chosen an apt title for this novel about 30-year-old Joan Sincere, a trained ballet dancer turned stripper who is determined to live life by her own rules. As the narrator

points out, however, her rules prove far more rigid than any she has left behind. During the novel's three-month time frame Joan confronts her past (*without* benefit of therapy) and frees herself from the forces that have spiralled her into a self-destructive, life-denying pattern of existence.

The action of the novel begins when Joan, while performing at a Toronto strip joint, is angered by a customer who invades her stage. She delivers him a swift high kick to the chin, which results in her arrest on a charge of assault.

This confrontation sets off a ripple of subsequent confrontations in which her past collides with her present. With classic resistance she prefers to recall passively her past, using her intellect to bury her emotions. Naturally, she loses her temper when a fortune-teller dwells on her past. "I know my past," Joan reminded herself. "I'm not going to fall for his telling me what I already know."

But the fact is Joan doesn't know. "You know what you need?" the fortune teller asks. "You need a therapist. Go see a psychiatrist, a woman. Tell her you want to learn how to have a relationship so that you don't have to be either the queen or the slave."

It's good advice, which Joan immedi-

ately rejects. But her father's sudden death and a brutal confrontation with a former lover from England cause her finally to break with the demons of the past. Then she can start to trust others again, reassured by the new knowledge that one man isn't all men.

Psychologically, the novel is sound, and the plot is strong and well developed. But structurally the novel has weaknesses. Essentially, it is Joan's story, and as such it concentrates too much on daily events and insights into the life and character of David, her current lover. The novel would have been better served had the point of view remained exclusively with Joan, if we had perceived David through her growing awareness.

The narrator, particularly for a psychological novel, is too knowing, frequently interjecting comments that would be better left unsaid. During an early exchange between Joan and David, the narrator comments on a remark of David's by pointing out, "That's how dumb he was. He couldn't believe she was truly interested in what he'd been saying." Joan could have said that. Joan's friend might have said it. The reader might have thought it, or even David, at some later point, might have

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thought it. But it's certainly not the type of intrusion readers appreciate from a narrator.

The novel's diction is also problematic, especially in the case of Joan. Granted, she's a complex character — a stripper who listens to classical music, who pops vitamins rather than tranquilizers, who is fascinated by the metaphorical implications of the paramoecium. And granted, as the fortune-teller warns her, she is out of focus. But still, it is unlikely that her diction, both in dialogue and in thought, should be stylistically so inconsistent. Similarly, the imagery, though moving and powerful, is not always consistent with the character whose feelings it is intended to convey.

Govier has the talent and the vision to be a fine novelist, but she needs to sharpen her technique in order to master control over her material. □

REVIEW

Current events

By **TERENCE M. GREEN**

Mindkiller, by Spider Robinson, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 278 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 03 059018 3).

Stargate, by Pauline Gedge, Macmillan, 341 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9727 4).

THE TWO NOVELS at hand, both written by Canadian residents in their mid-30s, serve as interesting guides to the parameters and potential of the science fiction and fantasy genres. One is distinctly science fiction; the other unquestionably fantasy. Neither, unfortunately, fully utilizes the potential of its genre.

Spider Robinson is a Canadian landed immigrant living in Halifax. He has been prominent in the SF genre for years, and has garnered some of the field's most popular awards. *Mindkiller*, set in both Halifax and New York, appears to be Robinson's attempt to bridge the gap between genre SF and The Mainstream Thriller With Touches of the Fantastic (à la *The Andromeda Strain*, *The Boys From Brazil*, some Lawrence Sanders novels, etc.). It will be, I'm sure,

vigorously marketed within and without the genre. (It is billed on the dust jacket as "A Novel of the Near Future," a subtle distinction from science fiction; such are the games publishers must play when it is deemed desirable to transcend genre.)

In this novel structure is nearly everything. It is written in chapters that alternate between Halifax, 1994-95, and New York City, 1999. The Halifax chapters tell the story, in the third person, of Norman Kent, a 30-year-old English professor whose wife has left him, whose sister mysteriously disappears, and who is a prime suicidal candidate. The New York chapters are told in the first person by Joe, a virtuoso cat burglar, who stumbles into the high-rise apartment of Karen, another suicidal prospect; Karen is engaged in "wire-heading" at the time — she is plugged into the house current through a surgically implanted jack in the crown of her skull. This is, Robinson offers us, an extrapolation of the tendency of some people to seek thrills at all costs; the science behind it is based on the experiments by Olds and Milner at McGill in the 1950s. They started the whole thing by poking electrodes into rat brains and making the unwary rodents so blissfully happy that they neglected to eat.

Joe saves Karen's life by unplugging her.

The New York sequences focus on their peculiar relationship and its development. The Halifax chapters alternate with their story, and both tales ultimately blend into one. Without this structural technique, Robinson wouldn't have much to work with, since only the mystery of what they have in common propels the reader forward.

Robinson has the stuff for a good science fictional thriller here, but the novel doesn't quite make it. Mind control and mindwiping have been fodder for spy thrillers for the past 40 years, perhaps reaching a peak in *The Manchurian Candidate*. And the social and technical background that could produce "wireheading" in so short a time isn't really made very credible.

What Robinson starts off with and what he ends up with are quite different things. Beginning with characters with problems and complex lives, he ends up with a James Bond set of caricatures and situations: the figure who can "control the world" and who lives mysteriously in isolation (Dr. No? Captain Nemo?), and the loner and his gal who confront and either overthrow him or join in his conspiracy. If one more character had coincidentally made an appearance in the final chapter, we might have had comedy.

On the plus side, there are some fun

and interesting things: the extrapolation of our violent and computerized world is always intriguing; the Maritimes locales should be special fun for residents; and for veteran SF readers there are even two in-jokes. One is a reference to zero-G dancing: "Why hasn't anyone thought of it before?" (Robinson wrote a novel about it a few years back.) The other is a mention of the incumbent president, who has "no idea that he is owned and operated by a mathematician from Butler, Missouri" — a throwaway reference to Robinson's muse, Robert Heinlein, who hails from Butler, Missouri.)

But what we end up with is pretty much kiddy-stuff ("We will prevail!" is the second last sentence.) What promised to be — and might have been — heavyweight speculative fiction dwindles to a lightweight confection.

SF posits a background that purports to be an extrapolation of something we know and to which we can relate. *Stargate* is another kettle of fantastic fish entirely. Pauline Gedge, the dust jacket informs us, was born in New Zealand, lived for a while in England, and is now resident in Edgerton, Alta. Her previous two books were "historical novels"; the present one is her first entry into the fantasy genre.

If Robinson's intentions were to write a fun, futuristic thriller, Gedge has tried to write something mystic and serious. It is as though she wanted to write an alternative to the Eden myth. The degree to which she succeeds is the degree to which one can tolerate the ponderous story and the lack of real human motivation in any of the characters.

The novel takes place "in the earliest years of the history of the universe," when the "sun-lords have fallen, succumbing to the lure of forbidden knowledge," and the "Gates" connecting their worlds to the rest of the cosmos are sealed off. The blurb elaborates: "Their innocence lost, civilization hopelessly corrupted, the immortal sun people are condemned to languish with their subjects in an eternity of solitude. . . ." (Sound familiar?) There are four worlds, an aquatic planet, a cliff-dwelling, winged race, names like Danar, Ixel, Shol, Ghaku, things called corions, and creatures "whose lungs recognize both air and water."

But what is the point of the fantasy? If it is to be parable (or even allegory) — a natural thought with terms like World-maker, Unmaker, Gate, Lawmaker, the Time-forest, Messenger, Trader, and The Book as mainstays of the narrative — it should be considerably shorter. Even Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, plodding as it is, remains mercifully short.

If fantasy is to create a world of its own, and exist by a set of fantastic laws of its own (as in Tolkien's world), then we must *still* be interested in the characters and their lives. Exotic settings and terminology are not nearly enough. There is no emotional involvement between reader and characters. There is no human passion — no tension. The very things that enlivened Gedge's previous fiction are curiously absent here. The writing itself has a certain elegance and stateliness to it, but the story and incidents do not hold a reader on any significant intellectual or emotional level.

Robinson's SF, light as it is, has flashes of tension, involvement, and is somewhat fun. Gedge's fantasy left me cold, wondering why it had been written and who would be reading it. □

REVIEW

Dog acts and lonely souls

By ERLING
FRIIS-BAASTAD

Famous Players, by Greg Hollingshead, Coach House Press, 152 pages, \$7.50 paper (ISBN 0 88910 231 7).

MY FIRST ATTEMPT to read a story by Greg Hollingshead reminded me of those few unfortunate gatherings I've attended where otherwise intelligent people smoke too much dope and end up trying to astound one another with the nuances of nothing. I generally flee those affairs, but did pursue *Famous Players*, and am glad I did. This collection is made up of uniformly well-crafted sentences applied to jokes and insights of every possible worth. Some are marvellous, and some are so silly that I suspect the author has slipped them in just to make us realize that his art doesn't come too easily. Master magicians, I am told, make mistakes at judicious intervals for just that reason.

"Life with the Prime Minister," the opening story, set me off on the sour footing. It is droll for too long, and it isn't until the final paragraph that Hollingshead gives even a vague hint that there may be some warmth and humani-

ty in ensuing stories. "The Prime Minister has been to see me on a number of occasions. He plumps my pillow and talks, when he's not joking with the nurses, about his new life: I can't express how much I appreciate his good will."

That, of course, isn't much to recommend this volume, but it does improve, if gradually at first. The second story, "Tuktoyaktuk," is a lot less snobbish, and is at least closer to being funny. What are we to make of a man whose typist is a dog with a finger muzzle? The man has been out of work for years and finally lands a job teaching geology at the famous TUK-U. He knows nothing about geology, but TUK-U is simply a direction in which he must suffer in order to find himself. With the help of a mysterious beautiful librarian, he discovers that he is really Eccles Larousse, the country's foremost authority on E.J. Pratt, and that he has been suffering from amnesia since being hit by a bus four years earlier. A punch in the head from a huge man wearing rubber feet may or may not have had something to do with his sudden insight. Eventually Larousse and his typist return to the East and his old post. There is no forgiveness for an author who puts rubber paws on a dog for "the paws that refreshes" by way of a finale.

Just when I was tempted to take out a contract on Hollingshead, he delivered "IGA Days," which combines some genuine humour with enough well-handled sadness to create a masterpiece of the bittersweet. A young man thinks back on a sexual idyll he shared with two women in a flat above a grocery store. By the end of the story it is obvious that Hollingshead understands some of the most intricate manoeuvres of the human heart.

"Last Days" is an example of Hollingshead at his best. It is the imaginative first-person story of a young tubercular giant who leaves Ireland and passes through several freak shows and galleons of gin on his way to London. There he hopes to be stripped of his flesh by a famous surgeon and exalted into a display skeleton. No wish is too grandiose in this best of all possible 18th-century worlds. "My soul is a ghou's darling now," he says, and sits in London as an impressive exhibit to this day unless he was destroyed in the Blitz. He can't quite remember.

Hollingshead is brilliant on loneliness. His most moving characters are those who are thrown back on their own emotional resources after having experienced a burst of fulfilment. Maybe the only joy they've known is a life-size puppet, as in "Red Muffins," but even that carries a penalty.

The one story in this collection that puts a female in the leading role is "My Jogger." An aging beauty picks up a wasted bum who is wearing the remnants of a jogging suit. She cleans him up, buys him new clothes and provides him with love and security. She asks only the most rudimentary love in return. This story is a perfect take-off on a fantasy most people must have had at least once: "What would happen if this lost character were cleaned up and given a second chance?" Hollingshead's scenario is probably the most original of a huge lot.

Though *Famous Players* is a wildly uneven collection, the successful stories outnumber the failures. That makes this a worthwhile book; I look forward to a season when some tough editor gathers up Hollingshead's stories, throws out the self-indulgent slapstick and presents something on the order of *The Best Of Greg Hollingshead*. That will be an event. □

REVIEW

Half a loaf

By MAVOR MOORE

Signing On: The Birth of Radio in Canada, by Bill McNeil and Morris Wolfe, Doubleday, illustrated, 303 pages, \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0 385 17742 9) and \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0 385 18379 8).

THIS IS A NOSTALGIC, colourful, floppy, sloppy, teddy bear of a book. Its 125 interviews with radio pioneers and 400 accompanying illustrations swung me giddily from delight to objection to boredom. In a sentence, like most oral-pictorial histories it dispenses faulty memories along with telling anecdotes, and tedious minutiae along with significant detail.

I have the feeling that editors McNeil and Wolfe, both of whom know their way around broadcasting, early became snarled in an intractable framework for the bounteous material emerging from their research. On the one hand geographical, on another chronological, on a third thematic — and so on, like Siva — the book's schemata ends up more akin

to a game of fish than an outline of history. And one of the penalties of this random (if frequently entertaining) approach is the omission of much with a claim on our attention and the inclusion of a good deal of dross.

Geographically, for example, Ontario and Quebec are lumped together; or rather Quebec is lumped with Ontario, for there are only three Quebec contributors to 17 from Ontario, and indeed they are the only three francophones appearing in the entire text, which purports to give us the story of public broadcasting, *inter alia*, from the CNR's early network to the arrival of CBC television. *Tabernac'*

The editors quite rightly correct the oversight of earlier historians who have generally failed to give due place to private broadcasters, and it is pleasant for an old salt like me to meet co-workers I have known little or nothing of. I judge it will be equally engaging for anyone with the slightest interest in our past, and most informative for the growing number of young people who wish to discover it. We are, a half-century later, in the year of the Applebaum-Hébert report. But precisely for those reasons I wish the editors had assembled *Signing On* with a sharper eye for mistakes, both their contributors' and their own.

Names are misspelt. Esse Ljungh (perhaps the second most important of our then radio directors) appears throughout as Llung. The distinguished Canadian actress Catherine Proctor becomes Katherine, surely an error in transcription from Jane Mallett's tape, since she knew Proctor well. And so on. Then there are the failures of research: a photograph of the old *Court of Opinions* show includes "an unidentified guest," who is clearly the well-known dancer Willy Blok Hanson. A caption for *Citizen's Forum* fails to mention the program's most notable achievement: that it had the largest organized listening audience in the world. Many of the interesting facsimiles of old newspaper columns and promotional material go undated: one is left to guess or infer from context. And the index omits many persons and subjects mentioned in the narrative. Sloppy.

Nonetheless, in their carefree way McNeil and Wolfe have given us a vivid picture of the way things were. Their samples come from wide and varied sources, covering performers, producers, directors, technicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, publicists, and (their words) "ordinary listeners." And while the material is wildly uneven — some comes from autobiographies or essays, some from verbal ramblings — there is enough anecdotal richness, gussied up with quaint visuals to offset

the essentially unvisual subject, to justify this half-a-loaf sort of publication.

My favourite anecdote comes from Harry Boyle, talking about radio in the early '20s:

Shortly after that there was a priest in Stratford who was making radios. They were beautiful things of rosewood with four legs that stood on the floor. Father bought one and it worked just fine except that you had to be perfectly still in the room when you got it going. If you disturbed it at all, it would stop. Then you'd have to send for the priest and he'd come and fiddle around.

That's clearly what Applebaum and Hébert should have done in 1982: send for that priest. □

REVIEW

Bangbelly and brewis

By JEFF MILLER

Dictionary of Newfoundland English, edited by G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, University of Toronto Press, 625 pages, \$45.00 cloth (ISBN 0 8020 5570 2).

"EVERY OTHER AUTHOR," wrote Dr. Johnson in the preface to his famous dictionary, "may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach. . . ." Such was the task of James Murray, the chief editor of the estimable *Oxford English Dictionary*, that, although he spent 36 years on the project, he never did "live to see zymotic," as his friends put it in wishing him editorial longevity. The remarkable public quarrel between Nabokov and Edmund Wilson was at many stages a pitting of *Webster's International* against the *OED*: "When told I am a bad poet," wrote Nabokov, "I smile. But when told I am a poor scholar, I reach for my heaviest dictionary." Upon receiving an abridgement of Johnson's dictionary as a "graduation" gift at Mrs. Pinkerton's academy, Thackeray's Becky Sharp flings it contemptuously out a carriage window, remarking, "So much for the *Dixonary*; and, thank God, I'm out of Chiswick."

Oh yes, 'tis a parlous life for lexicographers. "Harmless drudges," Johnson called them. But one is nonetheless queasy when such fellows are set loose on "I'se the B'y." What was it that Hogg's mother said to Walter Scott about ballad collecting? "They were made for singing an' no for readin', but ye hae broken the charm now an' they'll never be sung mair." One feels a certain nostalgia, anyway, for simpler times, on first learning that Canada's pre-eminent scholarly press has brought out a \$45.00 lexicon — "on historical principles," no less (after the manner of the *OED*) — of what is essentially a pre-literate argot.

Nevertheless, the result is often lively. The historical approach gives the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English (DNE)* flesh and bones, for its meat lies in the usage examples. The definition of *lonesome*, for instance, "Apprehensive, fearful, because alone," tells us much less than does a poignant usage having to do with a drowning:

His mother made him take the stuff what belonged to the boat and bring it up on the stable loft, because she was lonesome, see, to have it in the house.

By itself, the definition suggests ignorance or solecism, but given a typical context, the word throbs, taking on its own integrity.

The *DNE* makes clear that behind it are a people who bargain daily against the deaf and blind vagaries of the sea, geography, and the elements. There is, for example, an entire sub-glossary for ice and ice conditions, my own favourites running to *slob*, a "slushy densely packed mass of ice fragments" (hence, *slobby*), *ballicatter*, not only narrow bands or fringes of ice, but also "frozen moisture around the nose and mouth," and the lethal and beautiful *glitter* — ice deposited by freezing rain (usually, it seems, at sea).

It seems that many days are *grum* (a Humpty-Dumptyism for "overcast") in *fish-and-fog-land* ("jocular name for Newfoundland"), where *north* is down and *south* is up, and the food is basic, hearty, and vividly colloquialized: one dines on heavy meat puddings like *figgy duff* and *bangbelly*; *brewis* (hardtack soaked overnight in water and served with pork or cod — we note in passing that one can *have a head like a brewis-bag*); stiff libations like *callibogus*, *spruce beer*, that is ("made from the boughs and buds of the black spruce"), mixed with other liquor, and molasses (recipe included).

A *sunker* can be either a submerged (and therefore dangerous) rock, or "a dumpling in a bowl of soup." With *scrunchings*, "bits of animal fat or fish liver, esp. after its oil has been rendered out," one is reminded of a kosher

cousin, both onomatopoeically and denotatively, the Yiddish *gribbenehs* (the bits left over after rendering chicken fat). After a *groaning* ("childbirth") one serves — what else? — *groaning cake*. And a spot of Red Rose without more makes, naturally, a *bare-legged cup of tea*.

Diverting as all of this is, the *DNE* is not likely to win new proponents for the seal hunt. If anything, it dutifully contributes a dark irony to the debate. It makes clear, on the one hand, that Newfoundlanders have catalogued the appearance, development, and biology of the animal in minutely appreciative detail; but on the other hand, each of the numerous sealing entries wafts gore. Under the inspired *bedlamer* (to take an

example that, I emphasize, is *not* atypical), which signifies one feeling his oats, be he seal or human, one finds this annotation from 1867:

Young Labrador seals, which set up a dismal cry when they cannot escape their pursuers — and go madly after each other in the sea.

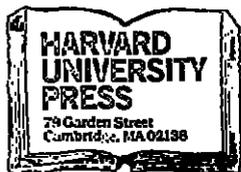
Indeed, it appears that all popular zoology in Newfoundland is informed primarily by the exigencies of commerce.

While the *DNE* is expensive, it is beautifully bound and jacketed. In typesetting it, always an Herculean task with dictionaries, *U of T* has nicely managed not to cross our eyes while giving us portability. Nonetheless, it must be said that logophiles, although mindful of Dr. Johnson's plaint, might have appre-

ciated at least an educated guess as to how *blow the roast* came to be "betray." And why on earth does one go out in his yard and discharge a shotgun as a Christmas pudding is lifted from its pot (*blow the pudding*)? How *synagogue* ever got to be "a sealer's bunk or berth" is likewise curious, although *glory fit* is clear enough ("live-ly show of religious enthusiasm"), and the annotations under *Wesleyan* give it the unmistakable ring of a sometimes fightin' word:

A Wesleyan kettle . . . like the old, Wesleyan churchmen, heats up quickly and cools off rather quickly. . . . He can't dance, he has a Wesleyan leg (said of one who drags one foot in square-dancing. . . .)

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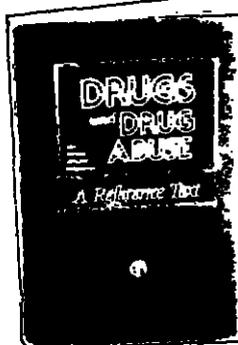
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Finally, how on earth did an entry for *bridge*, which Prof. Story gave us in an essay in 1965 as "a porch," inflate into the scarcely recognizable "small, uncovered platform at the door of a house to which the steps lead . . .?"

Oh well. Academicized or not, the *DNE* is by any account a wonderful addition to *Canadians*. And we may be grateful that nothing in it approaches the inflationary likes of old Dr. Johnson on *cough*:

A convulsion of the lungs, vellicated by some sharp serosity. It is pronounced *coff*. □

REVIEW

Better red

By GEORGE GALT

Radical Tories: The Conservative Tradition in Canada, by Charles Taylor, House of Anansi, 231 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88784 096 5).

IF WE NO longer know what Canadian Liberals believe, we do know who they are. They are the people appointed to federal boards and commissions, who run crown corporations, control the Senate, and sit in the federal cabinet. Most of us remember no other power elite in Ottawa. Diefenbaker's short-lived government had the political savvy of an evangelical picnic. Joe Clark ran out of gas while he was starting his engine. Ottawa Liberals may be arrogant and opportunistic, but they are seldom ridiculous.

Diefenbaker and Clark, as Charles Taylor ably demonstrates in his elegant little book, are not the most illuminating recent exemplars of Canadian conservatism. Tory thought has lost the currency it once enjoyed in Canada because it has been outmanoeuvred and (through years of effective patronage) outbid by the cunning of Mackenzie King and Pierre Trudeau. Taylor resurrects the Tory tradition, in his view as much a philosophical as a political legacy. He rescues it from the maladroit clutches of its incumbent custodians, and recasts it as an intellectually credible alternative to *Trudeau Liberalism* and *NDP socialism*.

Wearing his conservative bias on his sleeve, Taylor shapes this investigation

as a personal odyssey in search of political roots. Not a bad literary device, the questing persona, but I wish he hadn't tried so hard to pass himself off as a political airhead agog at all the great thinkers he interviews. "My head was reeling. Neither my mind nor my emotions could take any more," he remarks after a discussion with the historian W.L. Morton, who may never before have been accused of climbing vertiginous intellectual heights. Taylor, an accomplished writer and astute observer, didn't need this disingenuous mask to pull us along with him. His lively prose does that easily.

Having turned us away from our British roots, and more generally away from an identification with the past, the Grits have pushed us toward the North American future, continentalism, material progress, and a bland statism. Taylor argues, after his mentor George Grant, that the North American future inevitably promises the steamroller of American technology, that undiscerning purveyor of deadly sameness. True Tories, by contrast, defy the U.S. steamroller and uphold the Canadian particularity. They take pride in regional differentiation, promote individualism and civil liberties, and side with organic change over compulsive technocratic history making. They are not against progress, but oppose progress for its own sake.

Beginning with three early Tory thinkers — Stephen Leacock and the minor literati B.K. Sandwell and W.A. Deacon — Taylor charts the evolution of post-Confederation conservatism. The dream of Canada as a leading force within the British empire (Leacock forecast 100 million of us by the year 2000) gave way to the less grandiose conviction



that we should at least defend our cultural integrity against American encroachment. That kind of rearguard mentality may have seemed unprogressive, stuffy, and parochial 50 years ago. Today many think it offers our last chance as a sovereign state.

Radical Tories includes interviews with three conservative scholars — Donald Creighton, W.L. Morton, and George Grant — as well as two Tory politicians, Robert Stanfield and David Crombie. Taylor also visited with Al Purdy and Eugene Forsey, neither of whom have the slightest claim as contributors to our intellectual tradition of conservatism. Still, I won't gainsay the wisdom of those two choices. Purdy's profound sense of the past and far-reaching grasp of the land do seem to overlap with the conservative viewpoint (though in another important way, as a poet, Purdy is a restless convention breaker and history maker, a slippery fish out of school, a radical herring among these red Tories). A constitutional expert who has survived so long that his memory has become a national data bank, Forsey too is bound to the past, but he is really more a faded socialist than a pink conservative. Forsey's career lacks an essential ingredient of Canadian Toryism: strong misgivings about the U.S.

Creighton rages against Americans, against Grits, and against French Canadians, not to mention blacks, illustrating the maxim that good writers are often repugnant people. George Grant's difficult anti-technology stance is admirably elucidated by Taylor, as is Morton's compassionate pluralism, Stanfield's thoughtful pragmatism, and Crombie's buoyant optimism.

The author views his rediscovered Toryism as radical because it includes a strong allegiance to social justice and an equally strong contempt for the reactionary solutions of neo-conservatism. His book offers hope precisely because it identifies the traditional ideology of the Conservative Party, lost for so long in the Liberal dark. (Taylor oddly contradicts himself when he defines the Tories as "the party of tradition, not the party of ideology.") Hope, yes; regardless of party allegiance, no one can seriously believe our national politics will regain moral vigour and intelligence until the Conservatives know who they are and what their traditional position is.

We are left with some troubling questions. How many Tories in Ottawa represent this tradition, or even know about it? How many Progressive Conservatives, for example, are conservationists, protecting the land against the defacements of profiteering technology? How many Tory MPs would defend our architectural heritage against the free-enterprise raiders who want to demolish it for a fast buck? The answers to these questions would probably disturb anyone who cares. Send this book to your local Tory MP, and hope it's not too late for them, and us. □

The little red machine

By DAN FRANCIS

The Little Band: The Clashes Between the Communists and the Political and Legal Establishment in Canada, 1929-1932, by Lita-Rose Betcherman, Deneau Publishers, 247 pages, \$21.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88379 071 6).

NOT SO VERY long ago Canadians prided themselves on having missed the 20th century. Elsewhere terror and mass murder were the hallmarks of the age, but here at home we smugly believed in our own moderation and good intentions. Peace, order, and good government pretty well summed it up.

Recently, however, our heads have come out of the sand, and Canadians have had to face up to their own spotty record on human rights. Starting with the Acadians and coming all the way up to the present, the ruling elites of this country have been as repressive and intolerant as they needed to be to keep power in their own hands. Relative to the world at large our sins have been minor, but that hasn't made the victims feel any better.

Lita-Rose Betcherman, a labour arbitrator and human rights activist, seems to have made a specialty of our intolerance. Her first book, *The Swastika and the Maple Leaf*, describes Fascist movements in Canada in the 1930s. This time she presents the case of the Communist Party of Canada, "the little band" of ideologues and idealists the authorities systematically harassed, beat up, jailed, and drove from the country in the early years of the Depression.

The story of the CPC begins in a barn outside Guelph, Ont., in 1921, but Betcherman picks it up in 1928 with the arrival in Toronto of a new police chief, General Denis Draper. An anti-communist zealot, Draper created his own "Red Squad" of police goons to intimidate the party. One of the creepier minor characters in Canadian history has to be Detective Sergeant Bill Nursey, a cross between the Friendly Giant and Attila the Hun, for whom drawing blood was as natural as breathing.

Meetings were broken up, halls closed, party members beaten and arrested on the thinnest pretexts. In one

instance, arrests were made on the incredible charge of speaking a foreign language. As Betcherman shows in her meticulous descriptions of the court cases arising from these events, even the most willing judge could not always uphold the commie-bashers. It was, after all, not illegal to speak Yiddish in Toronto, even if Chief Draper wished it so. Nevertheless, the police were given a pretty free hand.

With the coming of the Depression the possibilities of rabid anti-communism were recognized by mayors and police officials across the country. In Vancouver a protest march of unemployed was broken up by mounted policemen swinging lead-tipped whips. In Winnipeg a Communist alderman was expelled from city council. During the federal election campaign of 1930 Communist candidates were harassed and beaten. Finally, foreign-born party members simply began to disappear, spirited away at night and deported without proper hearings.

But as the Depression deepened and unemployment increased, even more Draconian measures were believed necessary to rid the country of its red menace. At a meeting in the office of the minister of justice in Ottawa in February, 1931, law officers from across the country plotted against the CPC. It was decided to use the Ontario attorney-general as a stalking horse. Provided with all the secret information the RCMP had on the party, he was pressured to take action under the provisions of the infamous Section 98 of the Criminal Code. After several months putting his case together, the attorney-general orchestrated a police raid on party headquarters in Toronto. Boxes of records and documents were seized and party leaders were arrested.

Betcherman follows the trial of party chief Tim Buck and his colleagues in some detail. The government's intention was to prove that the CPC was illegal under the terms of Section 98; that is, that it advocated force to bring about political or economic change. On the face of it this appeared a difficult case to make, since there was no evidence that any of the "little band" had organized any acts of violence. Regardless, the courts found against the Reds, and Buck and seven others were sent to jail. The party was effectively outlawed.

Betcherman's interest in these events is as a civil libertarian, not a fellow traveller. The Communists are the victims of her story, not the heroes. She has little patience for their doctrinal disputes ("hours of scatter-brained blah," as one party dissident put it), their servility to the Moscow line, or their opportunism in exploiting working people.

Indeed, the question that occurs to a reader of her able history is: why did such an ineffective, fractious group of radicals evoke such a violent response from the authorities? By any measurable standard they were hardly worth the effort. Membership in the party was small. In elections Communist candidates usually lost their deposits. When the party called a general strike in Winnipeg in 1930 only 37 people downed tools. This obviously was not the makings of a revolution.

Betcherman indicates a reason for the excessive response to the Red menace. Only a decade had passed since 35,000 workers had participated in the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919 and thousands more had gone out in sympathy all over the country. The 1919 strike was still believed to have been a revolutionary conspiracy by Bolshevik labour leaders. Political authorities and the business elite in the 1930s feared a repeat of these events if the CPC was allowed to become a voice for the tens of thousands of unemployed milling in the streets of Canadian cities. As Betcherman explains, the "little band" was convicted as much for what it might do as for anything it did.

The Little Band is an absorbing book that sounds a timely warning. In times of political and economic crisis, the authorities will act ruthlessly, with little regard for civil rights, to silence dissident points of view. It happened in 1919 when radical labour leaders were jailed. It happened in 1931 when the CPC was suppressed. It happened in October, 1970, when separatists in Quebec were interned. And it will probably happen again. □

IN BRIEF

That Old Gang of Mine, by Scott Young, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 231 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88902 705 6). Only three months before a winter Olympics in Moscow the Canadian Olympic hockey team is killed in an airplane crash. Even as the funeral arrangements are being handled by the minister for sport and recreation, Myra Cope — appropriate name — her assistant, Peter Gordon, formulates a plan to recruit the members of his old high-school hockey team, which *did* win its league championship, to make up the replacement side.

Takes your breath away, doesn't it? An old high-school side up against the Russians in Moscow — that is if they get

to the finals, having knocked off the Czechs and the Finns on the way. Well, these are our boys, so Young can be excused for a little audacity, and he does pull it off with remarkable skill.

Of course all the old team members are found. Some are still playing hockey; some are and were very good, some just good. Most are in terrible shape, one an alcoholic. All agree immediately to leave wives and girlfriends, of course, to answer their country's call. After all, in Canada this is war. They are whipped into shape by coach Farley Fitzgerald, recently fired by Boston for punching out a star forward. Naturally they learn to hate him, to win games to prove him wrong. All part of the master plan.

Yes, Young pulls it off, by means of a clever, foolproof combination of sports-columnist narrative and characterization, national lore, and good old-fashioned sports suspense. And sex? Well, yes, in a way, which is a shame because this is essentially a hockey book for kids and the odd bedroom scene can't disguise the fact.

Young succeeds, and that's the wonder of it. One *does* read on, if only in amazement. But, then, isn't that the wonder of hockey in Canada? No matter how poor the play, how repetitive the games, we'll turn up and watch — or at least buy all the tickets. Teams in Atlanta and Denver may have problems, but not here. Hockey is our fix, from an early age — and Young wouldn't have it any other way. — SIMON RUDELL

REVIEW

Cold comforts

By JOHN GODDARD

Georgia: An Arctic Diary, by Georgia Hurtig, 192 pages, \$14.95 cloth (ISBN 0 83830 225 8).

Inuit: The North in Transition, by Ulli Steltzer, Douglas & McIntyre, illustrated, 216 pages, \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88894 359 8).

EVEN AN OLD hand like Georgia finds herself waxing romantic sometimes in assessing her Inuit friends, as she confesses near the end of her book,

Georgia: An Arctic Diary. A geologist from Yellowknife has arrived in Igloodik, an Inuit settlement of 750 people on a small island off the northeast extremity of the North American mainland. He instructs Inuit hunters on how to stake mineral claims, and is adamant they take maps along to mark the finds. Georgia is silently furious. "These people have maps in their heads," she says under her breath. Then she catches herself. "I realized I was thinking of Inuit as noble savages instead of normal human beings with faults and virtues. What I was considering to be inborn superiority is the result of training."

Normal human beings with faults and virtues are what she describes everywhere else in the book, written in the form of a one-year diary but actually an amalgam of 12 years of daily events in Igloodik and Repulse Bay, a settlement 350 kilometres south at the base of Melville Peninsula. Georgia is a 54-year-old, American-born woman who moved from California to Alaska in 1964, then to Repulse Bay in 1970 to take up odd jobs and eventually Canadian citizenship, dropping her surname years after surnames were imposed on the Inuit. She began writing as a hobby, then in 1979 started selling short, exquisite articles on life around her to the *Globe and Mail*. Her columns still appear regularly in the Saturday edition.

Her neighbours are a sophisticated people who charter planes with the ease of a Montrealer hailing a cab, and who contemplate marketing polar-bear gall bladders to the Far East, where they are valued as a love potion. Sex, alcohol, cold, toilets, tooth decay, and the pastel landscape are all covered, all in the general context of the Inuit's struggle to reconcile traditional ways with the invading culture from the south.

Traditional tastes are still a part of local culture: "Sara enjoyed a raw [seal] eye, eating the carefully peeled-off membranes first, then sucking out the juices through a neat slice at the bottom of the eyeball." Yet with the return of the sun after the dark winter, the school principal plays the Beatles song, "Here Comes the Sun," over the public address system. One day, Georgia watches a snowmobile race in which one contestant rounds a marker "shouting commands to his ski-doo as if it were his team of dogs."

The fault of the book is its fragmentation and occasional repetitiveness. There is no narrative line to unite the vignettes and pull the reader along. Georgia vents annoyance with white newcomers who, unattuned to the Inuit way, ask too many questions. But she is acculturated to the point of asking herself too few. The reader yearns for a more cohesive,

judgemental viewpoint.

Looking at the cover of *Inuit: The North in Transition*, with a fur-clad Inuk poised with his gun at the floe edge, one is reminded of Georgia's bitter remark on itinerant photographers: "For each photographer that leaves, the next plane brings at least one replacement. . . . Several Inuit keep caribou clothing at the ready and make a good living posing for photographers and taking them to the floe edge by dog team."

Ulli Steltzer took the cover photo at Igloodik, her first stop in a year of travel across the Canadian Arctic. But a look at the rest of the collection shows Steltzer to be unlike other photographers. She is Georgia's kindred spirit — at once an optimist and a realist. There are no pictures of black eyes from drunken fights, and no vague romanticism.

Steltzer, born in Frankfurt, Germany, emigrated to the United States in 1953, and settled in Vancouver in 1972. She has the eye of a good photojournalist; her photos are vigorous and varied — entirely in black and white. Excellent captions, and excerpts from interviews on almost all aspects of Inuit life, add individuality and detail to her portrait of a little-understood people living a unique life in the 20th century. □

REVIEW

War is heck

By PETER JENSEN

Ticket to Hell Via Dieppe: From a Prisoner's Wartime Log, 1942-1945, by A. Robert Prouse, Van Nostrand Reinhold (Fleet), illustrated, 190 pages, \$14.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7706 0009 3).

THE SECOND WORLD WAR is a long time ago now. The major histories have been written, the most thrilling tales set down. Yet each year new stories about the war hit the book stores. No longer are they simply accounts of derring-do or rehashings of pivotal battles. There's a new interest in the texture of that conflict reflected, for example, in the popular CBC-TV series *Home Fires*.

Ticket to Hell is in that line. It's based on the wartime diaries of a Canadian soldier taken prisoner at Dieppe. Itching to see action, like so many who had

joined up in the winter of 1939-40, Robert Prouse had jumped at the chance to go along on a "little manoeuvre." Due to go to officers' training school the following week, he was assured by his commander that he would be back in England before breakfast the next morning. As Prouse ruefully notes, that promise proved unhappily hollow.

Almost from the moment he was taken prisoner, Prouse kept a daily record of events and the people he met. He managed to retain these jottings in spite of hurried moves from one camp to



another and despite the intermittent ransacking of prisoners' bunkhouses by the guards and Gestapo.

Prouse has the ability to tell a story straight. Before the war, he was a private detective. In that line, he probably picked up the habit of writing simple, declarative sentences. The style may not be literary but he does convey specific images and concrete detail.

In many respects, the detail has an almost sociological bent to it. Certainly, *Ticket to Hell* is the sort of book you would want to read if you were doing research. Along with his secreted diaries, Prouse came back with numerous photographs, drawings, and other camp memorabilia that more accurately illustrate POW life than such Second World War classics as *The Wooden Horse* or *The Colditz Story*. These are replete with British pluck and high adventure, but they skip over the distasteful minutiae, the small joys and sexual longing, and the tedium. Such books are set in camps reserved for officers whose duty it was to escape and who were not required to work. Prouse was a corporal at capture, and NCOs and other ranks, while not duty-bound to try to escape, had to work. If they refused they were liable to get a rifle butt in the head as encouragement. Or a one-way trip to the salt mines.

Prouse does not paint himself the hero. He is a man who can laugh at himself. Take one of his escapes. He and a friend had been assigned to work-duty outside the camp in a nearby plywood factory. Watched over by a single guard,

they seized the opportunity during the night shift and slipped away. The night was moonless. They planned to hop the slow-moving freight that passed their camp nightly, but the freight sped by and they were forced to make for the marshalling yards.

The clouds were heavy with rain that night and the mass of it soon drenched them. Reaching the marshalling yards in the light of morning, they were warned of approaching Germans by Yugoslav "slave" workers. Jumping into a coal-car to avoid capture, they were disgusted to find themselves standing waste-deep in slabs of animal fat. They remained holed up in this slimy shelter until the train moved off and out of town.

Sodden and greasy, they considered surrendering, but when they had dried off atop a box-car in the warming noon-day sun, their spirits lifted. After all, they were free. However, as the train rounded a long curving bend in the track, they spotted the engineer looking back along the train. Hastily they scurried into the hay-lined seclusion of the box-car.

The train slowed, then stopped. The box-car doors were slid back by a signalman who spoke directly to Prouse. Not understanding much more than camp German, he nodded and replied "Ja." The signalman beamed and promptly shut the doors. Immediately, Prouse's friend burst out laughing. "You've just admitted we are the escaping prisoners," he said. His was the better German, for soldiers were the next to open the doors.

This light tone and believable detail are the book's strengths. Through them, you come to care for Prouse. He's a likable guy, resolute and resourceful. You are with him when he pinches eggs from a tavern-keeper or savours the sweet taste of smuggled cigarettes while in the "cooler," a confinement imposed in part for painting up Christmas dolls as graveyard Hitlers.

Yet *Ticket to Hell* has its flaws. There are too many "I's in the telling, and the "hellish" aspects of the camps don't come through clearly. Life may have been squalid and brutal, often harsh, sometimes short, but overall there's a curious flatness to the book. Prouse's story has its individual moments, but from the first you know things will turn out all right. We did win the war. Consequently, the dramatic tension is inevitably found in the personal, in the human understanding that he was able to inject into his daily distillations of POW life. In this regard, the declarative sentence isn't up to the task.

These are small points in the end. *Ticket to Hell* is a respectable effort honestly told and, at bottom, Prouse's story is an apposite counterpoint to the soft textural weave of *Home Fires*. □

REVIEW

Just disserts

By M.B. THOMPSON

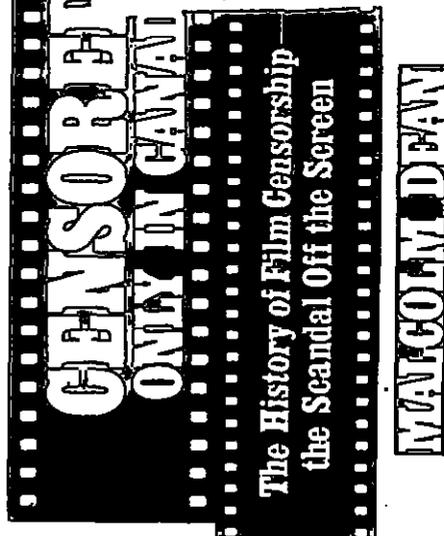
The Spirit of Solitude: Conventions and Continuities in Late Romance, by Jay Macpherson, Yale University Press, 349 pages, \$24.50 cloth (ISBN 0 300 02632 3).

AN ODD PRODUCTION all round, this. Most of it is 20 or 30 years old, being Macpherson's U of T dissertation begun under Northrop Frye and finished under Milton Wilson in the 1950s and early '60s. It is erudite, disorganized, brilliant, silly, helpful, useless, and thoroughly idiosyncratic.

The scholarship when solid and, indeed, dazzling usually serves ends opaque to a reader, pellucid no doubt to Jay Macpherson. Readers of her marvellous poems will discern roots, correspon-

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dences, elucidations, hints, raw (and cooled) material of every kind, and this is perhaps the best way to view *The Spirit of Solitude*.

Certainly it is difficult to take an orthodox academic attitude to the book, and it's likely that Jay Macpherson does not expect one to. She takes care to disclaim any central thread, any thesis at all in fact, content to offer "a loose and ramifying cluster of images and structures" arising from the astonishing wealth of her chosen material. "Late Romance" in the sub-title, she tells us, means "post-Miltonic," her sources are the "subjective mental world of reflection and dream" as well as a vast array of European and North American writers, and her method avowedly a match for her subject matter, "loose and ramifying" too. If all of this reminds us of someone, well, we've had the answer already. The spectre of Frye haunts his disciple's open sesame to the portals of Victoria College, for better and for worse, with its insistent reek of Dr. Casaubon's "Key to All Mythologies" in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

Wondrous as are many of the passages and insights in *The Spirit of Solitude*, one is left, during that après-scholarship cigarette, with the classic query: so what? Good scholarship, they drubbed into me, has a "so what"; the other kind doesn't, which is fair enough in an imperfect world, the kind that Jay Macpherson almost always writes about. The book has all the accoutrements of real scholarship: a preface, two Notes, an "acknowledgements," four tags on the frontispiece page (Aristotle, Bacon, Burton, and Schiller in German), 56 pages of (interesting) notes to 265 of text, a bibliography quaintly termed here a "finding list," and two indices. It's heavy on the German, English, and French, slender on equally usable stuff from, say, the Danish, Russian, or Italian. It would make and no doubt does make sterling lecture notes, and is a fine browser. But dubiously a book.

Few readers, unless of Northropian amplitude, will be equal to *The Spirit of Solitude's* full scope. Rapture, incomprehension, and outrage, however, severally lurk for any given reader, faction, specialist, or lunatic. Much outrage is likely to be elicited from the brief epilogue, "The Swan Neck of the Woods," a little rumination on Canadian Nature as figured in, among others, Pratt, Birney, Patrick Anderson, Reaney, Carman, Lampman, *et al.*, and featuring dismissal of Ernest Thompson



Seton, Roberts, and Grey Owl as "for the most — and worse — part highly romantic and sentimental."

Early on there's a long and cranky (and loose and ramifying) essay on Goethe's *Tasso*, and a shorter one on *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Among those who are also treated at some length or other are Shelley, Nerval, Huysmans, Wilde, George du Maurier, and Bulwer Lytton, but really it would be hard to find a prominent post-Miltonic name unmentioned. Now and again Macpherson operates on the record-sleeve or platitudinous level, as in her appendix on Romantic lieder cycles, the two by Schubert, the *Dichterliebe*, and Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrendes Gesellen*. On Rousseau she's fresh, cogent, and illuminating. And so it will go: *quot lectores tot sententiones*.

The Spirit of Solitude is a book to pillage, not to wade through. It concerns itself, loosely and ramifyingly, with myths of solitude and retribution centred in the various literary presentations of, above all, Narcissus and Cain. Perhaps a more coherent and "orthodox" treatment would have been a greater help to certain constituencies — English majors' term-papers, "scholars" sweating out another PMLA entry in the Greasy Pole Handicap Plate — but for the (very) educated common reader there are pleasures to be found in what we have. □

REVIEW

Fire and ice

By KRISTJANA GUNNARS

the presence of fire, by George Amabile, McClelland & Stewart, 112 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 7710 073 5).

Ideas of Shelter, by George Amabile, Turnstone Press, 100 pages, \$7.00 paper (ISBN 0 88801 054 0).

GEORGE AMABILE'S TWO most recent books of poetry, *Ideas of Shelter* and *the presence of fire*, not only continue where his first three books left off, but also contain many of those previously published poems: most of the poems in *Ideas of Shelter* are new, but almost half of *the presence of fire* is made up of

poems from earlier volumes. Both new collections show Amabile's range and development as a poet. They do not break new ground for the author or show him experimenting in other ways with his craft, but they are marked by a confident polish, thoughtfulness, charm, consistency, and a rare "good sense."

Amabile uses techniques of style that are increasingly hard to get away with. His poems are full of similes, abstract generalizations, and non-specific vocabulary. In the hands of someone less confident this might be disastrous, but Amabile's poems are saved by their wry humour, sharpness, and a witty cynicism about the world and the speaker's place in it. The voice is distinctly ruthless with itself and exposes the narrator's disarming view of the world. While the voice and vocabulary are gentle, the life inside is moulded by violent experiences and visions. In "Machismo" (*the presence of fire*) he writes:

I came here to unearth my feeling for death.

On the first afternoon, drunk in the sun I tumbled alien news to the last page — a casual spread of accident victims

whose lopped arms and noses, dented heads

and wrecked chances lay scattered gaily next to the comics like a dark joke.

This was adult entertainment.

Many of the poems are narrative, and their perspective is largely naturalistic: this could easily render the poems flat, but through some grace or other Amabile gives the telling of a lived life a luminosity that captivates. He does not have to resort to tricks of style, abbreviations, or astounding revelations. It is enough for him to write the poem clearly, plainly, and without affectation. The result shows an artist who is guided by his maturity and illumined by his sensitivity to the violence of life. The calm view he takes of a world not at all comforting is expressed in "Like a Thief in the Night" (*the presence of fire*) in a manner typical of Amabile. The speaker confronts himself and his own life, trying to understand something too large and vast to ever be fathomed fully:

I stand before the green door and fumble for my key

Howls of the dog pack fade as a cold wind blows down from the stars I can hear spray from the fountain splattering on the tiles of the courtyard garden

I've travelled for miles in a borrowed truck

and now I'm stuck on a dark street in this primordial midnight.

The only times Amabile borders on failure are when he fills his poems with

aphorisms, maxims, and pithy generalizations. Many of these are witty and sometimes disgustingly true, but once the humour is worn off the magic of the



*and when you can say
to the small insistent voice
inside you which demands
why are you doing this
because I'm not
doing anything else
you will have stepped
onto the white threshold, freedom
trembling before you like light
on the sea, which has no trails
except for those we leave
dissolving behind us.*

Freedom here is as illusory as "light on the sea." It seems real and beautiful, and in a way it is, but neither solid nor reliable. Like "trails on the sea," his poems are deceptive; you cannot always be sure you have grasped what is there.

Amabile can be both raw and cultured at the same time, and reading these books is both a delight and a relief. There is an underlying humanity in the narrator, who is willing to say it as he sees it, without affectation or posturing (except when he is deliberately entertaining and bawdy), and who is not above compromising himself. He writes with intelligence and wit, and is always thought-provoking. These are the kinds of books we can turn to when we want to be reminded of the gracefulness of our faults. □

poem is diminished. This is true of "Ego Shield Construction Kit" (*Ideas of Shelter*):

*Never take anything
personally. Learn
that every hour is your own.*

*If they come to you in pain
kick them,
if in desperation
give them poison and a fake map.*

*If you feel bad, remember
nothing is your fault.
And when love arrives
at last, be sure
that certain someone is yourself.*

While Amabile's style is to a degree confessional, it is confession with a difference. He gives us the narrator's often disinterested narration of himself, and the "self" he creates is prone to boasting (as in "Part of a Letter" and "Tenderness"). There is a hint of the braggart's affectation in him (as in "Machismo"), which also shows up as a tendency to self-heroism. But all this is performed in character and with a style that keeps the poems entertaining. This is true for "Fable in One Colour" (*Ideas of Shelter*), in which the protagonist runs a red light on purpose, gets stopped by a policeman whom he dares to shoot him — which the cop proceeds to do. Says the narrator: "what could I say?/I let my body fall into the snow." The same kind of black humour is found in "Manolo Martinez" (*the presence of fire*), a poem about a bullfight wherein the drawing of blood is cheered. As the bull succumbs, "Blood swells up from the black hide./ The bull sinks to his knees and the man steps free./We stamp and clap."

The underlying force in both books depends on the narrator's journey through the evil in himself. In "Part of a Letter" (*Ideas of Shelter*) he says:

REVIEW

Anti-heaps and arcana

By CHRISTOPHER
LEVENSON

The T.E. Lawrence Poems, by Gwendolyn MacEwen, Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 70 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88962 173 4) and \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 88962 172 1).

The Green Plain, by John Newlove, Oolichan Books, unpaginated, \$6.00 paper (ISBN 88982 047 3).

Gradations of Grandeur, by Ralph Gustafson, Sono Nis Press, 76 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 919203 08 6).

THE QUEST FOR the Great Canadian Poem — a long poem of course, something to compare with Williams's *Pater-son* or Hart Crane's *The Bridge* — is almost as obsessive as the more publicized hunt for the Great Canadian Novel. Despite Atwood's *Journals of*

Susanna Moodie and Ondaatje's *Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, I don't think we've got there yet, but each year brings new contenders. These latest attempts, all by major Canadian poets, represent three different strategies.

A large part of the art of the long poem lies in creating a context for memorable statement. In this *tour de force* poem-sequence, Gwendolyn MacEwen, in any case one of our least predictable and categorizable poets, has created such a context by assuming the — on the surface unlikely — persona of T.E. Lawrence. Whether by dipping into accumulated knowledge or by researching well into the facts of his life, she writes with authority, dividing her poem into three sections, the first evoking his home background, his siblings and the early fantasies and fanaticisms that helped form him; the second treating the war in the desert, including the tortures and atrocities he encountered; and the third concerned with the aftermath both of the war and of Lawrence's very public part in it, and also with the results of his double fame, as hero and as writer.

The overall impression is of a fascinatingly real voice and behind it an atmosphere that mingles fatalism, cruelty, beauty, and nonchalance in the straightforward chronological sequence that enables the reader fully to participate in such sentiments as "I was happy, and any happiness seemed to be an overdraft/on life," as well as to appreciate the weight behind the penultimate poem, "Notes from the dead land," in which Lawrence's death in a motorcycle accident is retold:

*... I was going back home
on my big bike, and I wasn't doing more
than sixty when this black van,
death camel,
slid back from the left side of
my head and ahead,
two boys on little bikes were
biking along, and
something in my head, some brutal
music
played on and on. I was going too
fast,
I was always going too fast for the
world...*

Even though the actual texture of the language and the verse movement is for the most part unremarkable, even casual, as with the collage technique in painting, it is the careful juxtaposing and interweaving of motifs, images, and viewpoints through the sequence that establishes for the reader the originality and the emotional logic behind a hero who, for all his clear definition, nonetheless remains eccentric and enigmatic.

Newlove's *The Green Plain* is far shorter (its 44 unnumbered pages — that irritating fad of some Canadian pub-

lishers — contain about 93 lines) and far more concentrated. Newlove is speaking in what we have come to recognize as his own voice and in the form of an extended lyric. There are no breaks as such within the poem, although the generous spacing — between one and 10 lines to a page with facing pages left blank — emphasize stages and force one to concentrate on the individual line, even the individual word, rather than on the verse paragraph or the poem as a whole. Fortunately the texture can bear such scrutiny, for Newlove seems more aware perhaps than any other Canadian poet of the aural structure of poetry, less in terms of regular rhythm than of assonance, alliteration, or internal

rhyme. Consider the following:

*Spreading — but now we can go
anywhere and we are afraid
and talk of small farms instead of the
stars and all the places we go
space is distorted.*

Read this aloud and you will see how “spreading-afraid,” “talk-small,” “farms-stars,” “places-space is” chime, and how these echoes, which could be paralleled at many points throughout the poem, starting with the four opening lines, combine with a superb sense of cadence to build up a meticulousness that is part of Newlove’s authority as a poet: we know we can trust him to say no more, and no less, than he means, and there is nothing merely rhetorical.

Which is why one is hard put to discover the “affirmation and celebration” that the blurb proclaims, not least because of the at times savage irony:

*And the land around us green and
happy,
waiting as you wait for a killer
to spring
a full-sized blur
waiting like a tree in southern
Saskatchewan,
remarked on, lonely and famous as
a saint.*

The questions that the poem poses — such as “Is civilization/only lack of room, only/an ant-heap at last?” — preclude easy answers, and although at the end there is indeed a move toward acceptance of “this only world” (he twists adverb into adjective elsewhere, as in “Does this always world flow?” and “in this ever island earth”), his vision of the world “flowing through the climate of intelligence/beautiful confusion looking around” is to say the least ambivalent. But honest. John Newlove writes with all his wits about him.

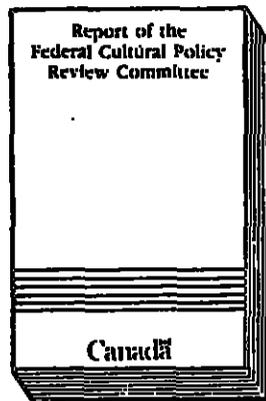
I wish I could be as sure of what lies behind the revised version of Ralph Gustafson’s *Gradations of Grandeur*, first published in 1979 and now reissued: there is a breath of the literary academy unbending. However, when an author himself speaks of the revised version of his poem as being “perfected,” there is little left for the critic to do — except perhaps disagree. A detailed comparison of the two texts is instructive. True, improvements have been made, but they are at least balanced, if not outweighed, by other changes for the worse. If commas have been added, little-known words like “reaving” or “occluded” replaced or omitted, and ambiguities removed (thus the “beaten bronze doors of Novgorod” are now “sculptured”), revision has far too often meant a toning down or a decrease in specificity. “The stink too much” of Auschwitz’s corpses becomes “the load too much,” and the outcome of war, “10,000 dead, a field/ of turnips moved a mile” reappears as “a boundary moved a mile,” while apostrophes that were previously tactilely “squashed like a ripe accordion” are now merely suppressed. In the present version Plato cures not his hiccups but his whereabouts by sneezing.

Nor is syntax always well served. Ignoring such poetic circumlocutions as “she/of the cruse anointing Jesus’ feet,” what is one to make of the following clutter: “mighty solaces inhere, ahead of/beyond disintegration of eyes/ and limbs; marring of the handsome/ Body no disproof of the stuff/of nostrils being ceased”? Or of the presumably whimsical word order of “Of others’ bouillon keep your fingers/out” which

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is allegedly an improvement upon "keep your fingers out of others'/soup" in the earlier version?

One of the recurring problems of the contemporary long poem — and it is closely linked to the issue of creating contexts — is that of establishing as its basic medium a style that is flexible enough to accommodate both lyric intensity and bridge passages of prose-like documentation or narrative. Gustafson's level of style, however, is schizophrenic, lurching within three lines from the sententiously scholarly to the brashly Poundian vulgarity of "Arabia hath yet its glamour and its oil/as Tennyson quoth to Vicky Imp." One need be neither a Victorian nor a monarchist (and I am neither) to feel that such jocularity destroys any sense of decorum or level of language that the poem might otherwise have created.

Similar confusion arises in the area of allusion and cultural reference, especially in a poem that has no locale and no temporal setting. For how much can we assume to be general knowledge in such areas as foreign literature, religion, medicine, politics, European history, or the fine arts? Gustafson perhaps aspires to a Lowellian breadth of vision and reference, but how many of his readers will recognize his allusions to "the Beaubourg's outside plumbing," "De Pachmann dining at Luchow's before a concert," "starstruck Hubble," or "Dame Clara Butt's high C" that "cracked a glass"? And if they don't get the particular point, how much does or should it matter? One man's general knowledge, alas, is another man's arcana, but if the whole question of what knowledge can be assumed in the audience for contemporary poetry is tricky, to ignore it altogether seems perilously like arrogance.

Interestingly, some of the more piquant details for Canadian readers have been generalized or omitted in the present edition. Thus "Lévesque at his best, shrug smirk/shrug smirk, Laurin bullying/children" has disappeared, surely not because of their topical and regional quality? The life of this poem is to be found mainly in such details and in the occasional pithy aphorism, such as "piety/is thought clean until you smell/the stake."

All of which is to say that, despite the italic signposts that have been added (e.g. "The universe is up to something," "Watch out, though, talk is cheap," or "Humour is protean, though"), I am aware of no overriding poetic architecture to the poem. Gustafson "writ no language," and what all these details add up to is a poem without style, a pot-pourri of devices and linguistic tricks. Of course from a man of Gustafson's wide

learning and intelligence we get numerous bright lines and well-turned thoughts, and a clear attitude, grimly optimistic, elegantly skeptical, stoically humanist, emerges, but as a poem the

book does not add up: ultimately it is more tedious than exhilarating. Owl-like, Gustafson dispenses his tercets like gnarled pellets of wisdom, constipated Hopkins. □

INTERVIEW

Donald Kingsbury on the allure of SF:
'Deviations can be quite disgusting, but they
can also be quite beautiful'

By ROBERT J. SAWYER

DONALD KINGSBURY was born in San Francisco in 1929, and spent his childhood in such diverse places as New Guinea, New Mexico, and New Hampshire. In 1953 he became a Canadian citizen and now teaches mathematics at McGill University in Montreal. Since 1952 Kingsbury has frequently contributed to *Analog*, the world's best-selling science-fiction magazine, and in 1980 his novella, "The Moon Goddess and the Son," was nominated for a Hugo award, SF's highest honour. His first novel, *Courtship Rite* — a sweeping saga of an energy-poor planet where multiple marriages are the norm and



Donald Kingsbury

cannibalism is a sacred ritual — was recently released by Simon & Schuster simultaneously in hardcover and as a quality paperback, and his second novel, *The Finger Pointed Solward*, is to be published shortly. He talked to Robert J. Sawyer about his life and work:

Books in Canada: Why science fiction?
Donald Kingsbury: Science fiction is a testing ground for new ideas about

society in a world where conventional ideas are beginning to limp. It's immunization against future shock. The science-fiction reader is quicker on the draw than the TV watcher when challenged by a new reality. If I had been confined to writing a novel about group marriage consummated in contemporary North America I would have had to deal with jealousy and the interactions of a hostile society. Without the constraint of being stuck in our culture I could ask: how would the sexes distribute family burdens among many members? How would they get along if they saw an addition to their family as a helpmate rather than a rival? What limitations would such a loyal, close-knit group have?

BIC: It sounds as though the idea appeals to you.

Kingsbury: I've thought about group marriages. That's what I love about science fiction: you can explore the different things that human beings can get involved in. Workable, fine cultures can be enormously different from one another. Most people feel that if you stop being a conservative you start being a pervert. Deviations from societal norms can be quite disgusting, but they can also be quite beautiful.

BIC: How did you discover science fiction?

Kingsbury: When I was 10, I hated reading, found it a drudge and a bore. I figured maybe it's because they were only feeding us kids' books. I wondered what the adults were reading. The book I happened to pull out of the library was *Seven Famous Novels* by H.G. Wells. After reading *The Time Machine* I was hooked.

BIC: How did you get started as a writer?

Kingsbury: When I was 16, back in the days when \$30 a week was a very good

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wage, anything an editor would pay for a story was a lot of money. I wrote a straightforward tale about a 1965 expedition to the Moon. I didn't have them find vegetation on the Moon because I didn't believe in that. I was writing SF, not fantasy. I had them pick up rocks and do all the things they eventually really did. I felt sure someone was going to buy that story and give me a hundred dollars so I could take girls to the movies and be a big shot in high school. I took the story's rejection pretty badly; I cried a lot. But I sat down and wrote another story. I just kept doing that. Twenty-five stories later, I had my first sale.

I took my first crack at writing a book when *Galaxy* magazine announced a contest: \$1,000 for a novel by an amateur. They ended up having an established author, Fred Pohl, write the winning novel under a pseudonym, because the amateur ones they got were terrible. I didn't finish my entry, *The Finger Pointing Solward*, by the deadline. In fact, I'm still polishing the manuscript today, 35 years later.

BiC: How did you learn to write?

Kingsbury: In the early days I always kept a copy of Wells's *Seven Famous Novels* and *The World of Null-A* by a Canadian SF writer, A.E. Van Vogt, on my desk, along with some Westerns. Whenever I was having trouble writing a particular passage, I'd look to see how Wells or Van Vogt handled something similar. The Westerns were very helpful for atmosphere description. Van Vogt had this thing about 800-word scenes: shorter than that, you may not be saying enough; longer, you may be saying too much. I found that a very good guide in trying to pace myself. Van Vogt ended up doing a review of *Courtship Rite* for the dustjacket. I was thrilled. It's great when one of your boyhood heroes pats you on the head.

BiC: Do you adhere to any sort of writing regimen?

Kingsbury: One of the troubles with being a bachelor is that you've got to do everything for yourself. I try to catch up on household affairs, then block out two weeks in which to get as much writing done as I can before dirty dishes and laundry bury me. During those two weeks I'm a grumpy, unsociable slob. I can write very fast once I'm going, but I never really turn out more than 2,000 words a day.

BiC: What effect did living in so many places have on your writing?

Kingsbury: We lived near a gold mine in New Guinea and that was the genesis of Joesai, *Courtship Rite's* protagonist, posing as a goldsmith, panning for gold. A lot of the semi-desert in New Mexico probably came out when I wrote about the planet Geta in *Courtship Rite*. Some-

one wrote me a letter saying, "That doesn't look like an alien environment to me; it seems just like New Mexico." Well, I thought about it and said, "Yeah, you're right." When you write, you take and alter things. I wanted Geta to be a harsh planet, so I took Earth and censored the lush parts that I know. I didn't want to make it uniformly harsh, though. That's often a weakness in SF: they take five square miles of the Earth and make a whole planet out of it. In Frank Herbert's *Dune*, it's all desert; in *Star Wars* they've got planets that are all rain forest or all ice. That doesn't strike me as very reasonable.

BiC: What about Canadian influences on your work?

Kingsbury: I've lived three-fifths of my life in Canada, so it couldn't have helped but influence me. I never really thought of myself as a nationalist, though. When I was young, I read a lot of SF in which the United States was part of some remote history in the story. I grew up with that kind of background literature, feeling I was a citizen of the galaxy. I take the long view: both ancient Rome and the U.S. are parts of my past.

BiC: It's rare in SF for female characters to be handled well, yet you excel at them. Why?

Kingsbury: Partly it's because I understand women. I have two sisters, so there were always a lot of women around the house having hen sessions. To them I was just part of the woodwork. I saw that facet of the world that some men never see. Partly it's because I didn't understand women at all. I got very interested in what their goals were and how to please them. With that kind of empathy, your preconceptions get blown away. It became easy for me to write about women without turning them into cardboard. Stereotypes are just verbalizations of inadequate mental pictures.

BiC: You've been with the SF scene since the 1940s. What changes have you observed?

Kingsbury: The quality of story-telling is steadily improving; it's harder and harder to sell a story that's patchy. One of the things I've noticed in the last few years is the rise of fantasy. Some people thought that was going to kill the SF market, but SF publishers absorbed fantasy; fantasy didn't absorb them. It's always going to be difficult to find people to write hard, technology-oriented SF. You not only need a speculative ability, you also need a writing ability: those two high-level skills have to occur in conjunction. A lot of writers see all the money in the SF field and decide to move in, but if they lack that speculative knack they end up writing fantasy. □

A crude and zany romp on one of hockey's frozen backwaters, and a lyrical excursion along meandering Joycean streams

By **DOUGLAS HILL**

IMAGINE *Slap Shot* grafted onto *The Bad-News Bears* and you've got an idea of Puck: *Is a Four-Letter Word*, by Frank Orr (Methuen, 278 pages, \$18.95 cloth). It's a well-constructed diversion, readable, crammed with hockey stuff, and if you like your humour broad and dirty — if lines like "a bathing suit made from two fried eggs and a cork" crack you up — why then it's funny, too.

Willie Mulligan, former star centre on the Canadiens and ex-vice-president of the NHL Players' Association, has been exiled to an expansion club in Cleveland for his part in a league-wide strike. There he finds a fellow star-victim (lately fallen from the Leafs) and — you guessed it — a bizarre collection of has-beens, kids, imports, and misfits. The team is like one of those melting-pot U.S. Marine platoons from a '50s war movie, only more blatantly sexed; Orr has assembled incompetent management, good guys and bad guys, and one example of every race, colour, creed, and IQ level available to Canadian sport.

The book races along, all short paragraphs and snappy sentences. It would be better if it didn't pause to Get Serious, but occasionally it does. There's also a drippy sentimental streak visible from about the middle of the story on to the end. But some of the crazed hockey scenes are truly



uproarious, wheeze-producing; when Orr strikes the crude zaniness he seems most comfortable with, *Puck* bounces.

Coming for to Carry, by Lorris Elliott (Williams-Wallace, 144 pages, \$8.95 paper), is a tightly woven short novel that affects simplicity by means of an extremely complex narrative technique.

It takes some time to figure out the voices, the tones and rhythms, but the effort pays off and Elliott's scoring seizes the imagination.

It's the account of a young West Indian of African descent, born in Tobago, reared in Trinidad, who comes to Vancouver for his university studies. (None of this geography is explicit; one may infer it, but accuracy here isn't particularly important.) Omoh (anagram *homo*) meets his North American adventures on many levels; his responses are quick, poignant, and neatly avoid the stereotypes of Caribbean/Canadian, black/white, cold/hot confrontation that a reader might anticipate. Yet the terms of Omoh's experience are typical, one assumes, of the dark-skinned "foreign student" in a rainy northern winter: the wrong clothes, substandard housing, university regulations and municipal laws, enforced celibacy and natural lust.

The book's challenge, and its exceeding strength, is its language. Omoh's story is given by a narrator (who sometimes intrudes) in a prose that at first seems rather ill-balanced. Homely dialogue, sometimes in patois, jousts with the hero's thoughts, often grandiloquently thought aloud: "How good," he proclaims, "to lose all sense of time, to quite forget the self and to be absorbed into an existence that means something, though difficult to put in words." Description, too, can seem stilted, forced. But there are subtle layers in the discourse, and the cumulative effect, by midpoint in the book, is something I can only call a lyric sweetness, a melodic patchwork like the morning birdsong from the childhood Omoh recollects and dreams.

However this works, a reader is certainly not unprepared for the Joycean stream that ends the novel (there seem to be many echoes of *Portrait* earlier). The form, here as before, appears to justify itself. Elliott calls his work "a novel in five parts"; in its play of voices it offers the kind of harmonic interweaving we expect from music, recognize from the spoken tale. It's an ambitious book, and successful in what it attempts. □

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tales, in English. 80 pp., pa
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Babes in the wilderness: from the early settlers of Upper Canada to the colonists of outer space

By MARY AINSLIE SMITH



Photo credit: T. Drayton

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FOR READERS OF all ages, the wilderness has long been a dominant factor in our literature — sometimes an enemy, sometimes a refuge, always a challenge and a force shaping the lives of those who encounter it. Working in this long tradition, several recent books for readers in the early and pre-adolescent age range manage to make fresh and creative use of the wilderness and its influence on character and plot.

Jasmin Marie Antoinette Stalke, heroine of *Jasmin*, by Jan Trusse (Groundwood, 196 pages, \$5.95 paper), sees the wilderness as a refuge. It is a place of peace and order compared to the chaos of her home, where her problems are overwhelming. She is the eldest of eight children. Her mother is a fat, happy slob who loves her family but is too bound up in television soap operas to bother much about them once she has given them fancy names. Her father spends his time watching television or drinking in the local beer parlour. Her home in rural Alberta is an old schoolhouse in the middle of a junkyard, with no separate rooms for Jasmin ever to be alone to do her homework or just to think. She must use all her spare time and energy looking after the younger children, especially Leroy, the brother next to her age, who is retarded.

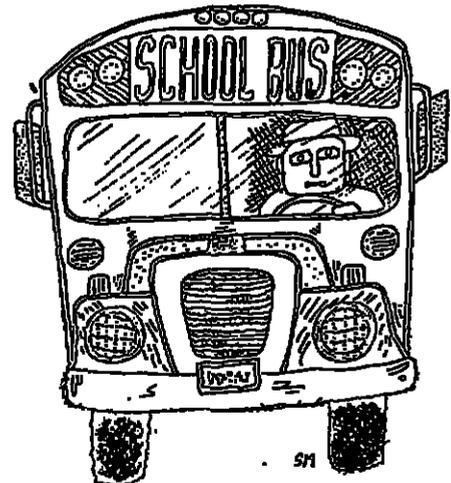
Leroy's unwitting destruction of her science-fair project precipitates the crisis. Faced with the knowledge that she will inevitably fail grade six and that things are never likely to improve at home, Jasmin decides to run away. She has one treasure, an old reader left behind in the schoolhouse by some long-ago student, and in it is her favourite poem, "Meg Merrilies" by John Keats. Jasmin decides that Meg's life alone in the forest, doing just as she pleases, sounds ideal, and so when she runs away she goes as deep into the bush as she can.

For a while it all works out. Jasmin finds food, water, shelter, and wonderful solitude. Her parents, true to form, don't even miss her for almost 24 hours. But Leroy does, and sets out to find her. Eventually the Stalkes discover that they have two children missing. A torrential rainstorm closes roads, takes out tele-

phone lines, and complicates the official search for the children, as well as threatening their lives.

In the end Jasmin is found, of course, and must go home, but not until she has made new friends and learned something about her own self-worth. Her experience in the wilderness nearly destroys her, but she survives with new strength to continue her life. Jasmin is a good heroine. Readers will like her spunk, sympathize with her very real problems and her search for independence, and be delighted when things turn in her favour at the end of the story.

The wilderness plays a more complex part in Brian Doyle's *Up to Low* (Groundwood, 116 pages, \$5.95 paper). The time is 1950, and young Tommy and his father leave Ottawa to go up to Low in the Gatineau Hills to spend some time



on the family farm. The Low area, of course, is no longer true wilderness — it has been a farming settlement for generations. But while the early settlers had established a certain harmony with their surroundings, technology has upset that balance. A power dam has flooded the valley above Low, changing the lives of the farming community, and now the wilderness seems to be reclaiming the area. It is a landscape where descendants of domestic animals run wild, barns and houses fall into decay, and idle men sit out their days on the remnants of their farms.

Tommy's relatives are all caricatures — he has five aunts always busy with prescribed household tasks, five uncles always smoking. To describe most of the novel's many characters as one-dimensional would be generous. There is Crazy Mickey, Tommy's 100-year-old great-grandfather; his father's drunken friend Frank, who keeps driving his new car into trees and buildings; Father Sullivan, the priest who manhandles Frank into church and makes him sign the pledge. Dominating the story is Mean Hughie, Tommy's father's old rival, "the meanest man in the Gatineau." After learning he has cancer, he has disappeared into the bush to die.

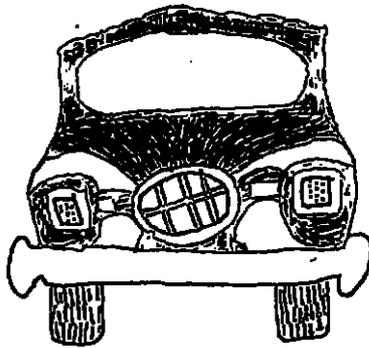
The book is always funny but Doyle's humour is often black, to say the least, and sometimes heavy, of the outhouse and open-coffin variety. However, he describes with great sensitivity Tommy's developing affection for Baby Bridget, Mean Hughie's daughter, who several years earlier lost part of her arm in a farm accident. That description, along with the strong evocation of setting and the plot's quick and certain action make this Doyle's best novel yet.

Tony German also uses the Ottawa area as a setting for his novels for young readers. Tom Penny and the Grand Canal (McClelland & Stewart, 144 pages, \$11.95 cloth, \$7.95 paper) is the third in his series of historical adventures involving the young English immigrant, Tom Penny. It is 1832, and the Canadian wilderness is something to be conquered bit by bit by European enterprise. In this case, the scheme is to construct a grand canal between Georgian Bay and Montreal. Tom's stepfather and friends are promoting the canal, and Tom gets caught up in a series of adventures as villains, wanting to profit from the project, resort to burglary, swindling, and even murder. The action takes place in the triangle formed by Montreal, Kingston, and Ottawa, and we learn something of the drudgery and weariness of 19th-century travel as Tom moves from one place to another. We also learn about the roistering social conditions when a party in honour of the launching of a new steamboat turns into a no-holds-barred brawl.

Tom is the proper hero for an adventure story — brave, strong, and honest — but fortunately he is not perfect. He makes mistakes, several really stupid ones in this story. He sometimes loses fights, although only to older and stronger opponents. And fortune doesn't always turn in his favour; the canal scheme, for instance, fails. German has very happily combined his ability to recreate a historical setting with his talent for presenting an exciting

story. The more of Tom Penny's adventures that come along, the better.

Edmonton's Monica Hughes has a well-deserved reputation as a writer of high-quality science fiction for children. *The Isis Pedlar* (Fleet, 121 pages, \$12.95 cloth) follows *The Keeper of the Isis Light* and *The Guardian of Isis*, and concludes the story of the small group of settlers from the overcrowded Earth who have established a colony on the planet Isis. As this story begins, the colony is several generations old and in the "Primitive Agricultural Phase." The arrival of the pedlar, a smooth-talking, greedy confidence-man from Earth, threatens disaster but eventually shocks the colony onto a path toward enlightenment and freedom. Olwen, the original keeper of the Isis light, has grown old



and died, but her robot, Guardian, is still there to help Moira, the pedlar's daughter, and David, a descendant of the original settlers, restore order to Isis. Readers will enjoy the adventures of yet another generation of Isis inhabitants, but be sorry that this is the last visit to the beautiful little planet.

There are also science-fiction stories in the ninth *Canadian Children's Annual*, edited by Robert F. Nielsen (Potlatch, 152 pages, \$14.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper), as well as a fascinating article in the non-fiction section about the messages scientists on Earth are beaming into the universe in attempts to make contact with other intelligent beings. We also learn about the fighting kites of India, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and attempts to domesticate musk oxen in Alberta. This year the puzzle and game section is in a separate pull-out 24-page booklet and the cover art is *The Brothers* by Alberta artist Len Gibbs. Once again, the *Annual* is colourful, varied, and entertaining.

People of the Longhouse, by Jillian and Robin Ridlington (Douglas & McIntyre, 47 pages, \$10.95 cloth), is part of a series on Canada's native peoples, *How They Lived in Canada*. This book describes the way of life of the Iroquoian people of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River valleys: their

agriculture, hunting, trading, religious and social customs, political structure, and the blood feuds for honour and revenge between nations. Ian Bateson's detailed illustration of costume, weapons, tools, and activities make this an excellent reference book for individual or school libraries.

Gage has released a new series of paperback books for children ages eight to 12. They are light, entertaining reading, pocket-book size and reasonably priced at \$2.95 each. They include:

Kirstine and the Villains, by Elfeida Read, 160 pages. Kirstine gets help from very unexpected sources as she tries to clear her father's name when he is suspected of a theft at his office.

The Ghost of Pirate Walk, by Jerry Williams, 112 pages. Two little boys use a new detective kit to track an unusual thief.

The DNA Dimension, by Carol Matas, 144 pages. Four children find themselves transported from the isolation of a snowbound country house near Winnipeg to a strange new dimension, a world where the dictator seeks power through mind programming and genetic manipulation.

The Mystery of the Ghostly Riders, by Lynn Manuel, 144 pages. The Fern children travel with their parents to Ontario, where they help unravel a mystery involving a young girl's strange disappearance, the Rebellion of 1837, and Ogopogo.

The Other Elizabeth, by Karleen Bradford, 160 pages. Another in what is becoming quite a collection of time-travel books in Canadian historical fiction for children. In this case, Elizabeth, on a visit to Upper Canada Village, is transported back to the time of her great-great-great-grandmother and the Battle of Crysler's Farm. □

THE EDITORS RECOMMEND

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

FICTION

Incognito, by David Young, with photographs by Jim Lang, Coach House Press. Unlike more traditional Canadian prose, which tends to emphasize the transition into maturity, Young's impressionistic novel focuses first on childhood at a distance from the family and then on the "jump" from childhood to Crazy World. The result provides some of the sharpest writing of the year.

NON-FICTION

Jazz in Canada: Fourteen Lives, by Mark Miller, University of Toronto Press. Miller's 14 musicians (of whom Trump Davidson is the only big showbiz name) range from Halifax (Nelson Symons) to Vancouver (P.J. Perry), from conservatory-trained concert musicians (Brian Barley and Wray Downes) to one (Sonny Greenwich) who can't read music, and add up to an admirable introduction to jazz as it is lived in this country.

POETRY

Smoking Mirror, by George Bowering, Long- spoon Press. Lyrical songs of a bliss that is at once sacred and profane, mocking and loving, foolish and wise, from the poet Bowering swears he isn't.

CANWIT NO. 80

REMEMBER THE poor who were always with us? Not any longer. A while ago they became the indigent; more recently, the disadvantaged. And garbage doesn't rot these days — now it's biodegradable. The Ministry of Appropriate Expression (soon to become Goodspeak Canada) is soliciting new, original verbal evasions for the ordinary things in life. We'll pay \$25 for the best list of new euphemisms (or neuphem-

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The Department of Creative Writing, Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Victoria, has two positions available for 1983/1984. One position is a continuing appointment to be made July 1, 1983. The other is a sessional position for the period from 1 September, 1983, to 30 April, 1984. Areas of expertise for the tenure-track position are drama and fiction. Areas of expertise for the sessional position are drama, fiction, and poetry. Teaching experience and substantial professional experience are required as well as the degree of M.A. or M.F.A. For either position, the degree requirement may be waived for exceptional candidates with well-established, national reputations. Apply in writing with detailed curriculum vitae and names of two referees to: W.D. Valgardson, Chairman, Department of Creative Writing, University of Victoria, Box 1700, Victoria, B.C., V8W 2Y2. Closing date for applications is 31 March, 1983.

isms, if you will) received before March 1, and \$25 goes to Marvin Goody of Toronto for the idea. Address: CanWit No. 80, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9.

Results of CanWit No. 78

OUR REQUEST for dustjacket blurbs from famous people prompted a publicist's feast of potted endorsements, including a whopping 33 entries from the winner, David J. Paul of Lucan, Ont. Among his best:

- "Infallibly researched" — Pope John Paul II
- "Addictive" — William Burroughs
- "Leaves you reeling" — Pauline Kael
- "Well-conceived" — Dr. Henry Morgentaler
- "A whale of a tale" — Farley Mowat
- "Well-paced" — Sebastian Coe

Honourable mentions:

- "Captivating" — Harry Houdini
- "Revealing" — Hugh Hefner
- "A real barn-burner" — The RCMP
- "Monumental" — George Washington — Dean Jobb, Halifax
- "Gritty" — Christina McCall-Newman
- "Right on" — Barbara Amiel
- "Wordy" — Noah Webster
- "Super" — Clark Kent — Carolyn Malyon, Willowdale, Ont.
- "A knockout!" — Gerry Cooney — Diane M. Stuart, Vancouver
- "Out in left field" — W.P. Kinsella — David D. Harvey, Ottawa
- "Left me bug-eyed" — Franz Kafka
- "Unutterably funny" — Harpo Marx — K.C. Angus, Kempville, Ont.

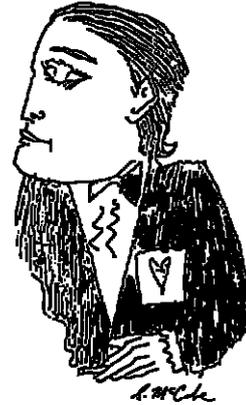
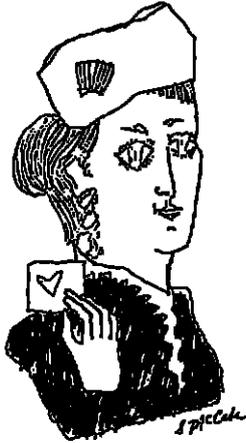
BOOKS RECEIVED

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:

Addiction to Perfection: The Still Unravished Bride, by Marion Woodman, Inner City Books.
Affteen Hairstyles, by Est Sagay, The Book Society of Canada.
After the War, by Jean Bruce, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
Alexis Constant: Catalogues, by Stephen Willis, National Library of Canada.
The Arcile, by Fred Bruemmer, Optimum Publishing.
Artists, Builders and Dreamers: 50 Years of the Banff School, by David and Peggy Leighton, M & S.
At the Edge of the Shield: A History of Smith Township 1848-1980, by Clifford and Elaine Theberge, Smith Township Historical Committee.
Between the Lines, by Eleanor MacLean, Black Rose Books.
The Biggest Deal: Bankers, Politics and the Hostages of Iran, Roy Asseracha, Methuen.
The Birth Control King of the Upper Volta, by Leon Rooke, ECW Press.
Boss White: The Coal Miners of Vancouver Island Remember, by Lyane Bowen, Colichan Books.
The Breadbasket Adventure, by Joe MacInnis, Optimum Publishing.
British Columbia's Own Railroad, by Lorraine Harris, Hancock House.
By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept, by Elizabeth Smart, Deneau.

British Columbia, by Sherman Hines, M & S.
Captain Neal MacDougal & The Naked Goddess, by Milton Acorn, Ragweed Press.
The Celtic Consciousness, edited by Robert O'Driscoll, George Braziller (Firefly Books).
A Chemical Feast, by W. Harding LeRiche, Methuen.
The City Underground, by Suzanne Martel, Groundwood.
The Columbia Is Coming!, by Doris Anderson, Gray's Publishing.
The Complete Book of the Horse, edited by Elwyn Hartley Edwards and Candida Geddes, Hurig.
Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures, by E.D. Blodgett, ECW Press.
Crosscut: Contemporary English Quebec Poetry, edited by Peter Van Toorn and Ken Norris, Véhicule Press.
Dreaming of what might be, by Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, Cambridge University Press (U.S.).
Echoes of a Dream: Creative beginnings for parent and child, by Susan Smith, illustrated by Julian Mulock, Waldorf School Association of London.
Empire of Wood: The MacMillan Blooded Story, by Donald MacKay, Douglas & McIntyre.
European Bronzes in The Royal Ontario Museum, by K. Corey Deeble, ROM.
Every Body's Fitness Book, by Gordon W. Stewart, 3S Publishers.
Everywoman's Almanac 1983, The Women's Press.
The Face of Early Toronto, by Lucy Booth Martyn, The Paget Press.
Flora, with this down, by Nancy Bauer, Fiddlehead.
Flowers of the Wild: Ontario and the Great Lakes Region, Zile Zichmanis and James Hodgins, Oxford.
Forever on the Fringe: Six Studies in the Development of the Manitoulin Island, by W.R. Wightman, U of T Press.
A Guidebook to Ethnic Vancouver, by Anne Petrie, Hancock House.
Handmaiden in Distress: World Trade in the 1980s, by Carlos F. Diaz-Alejandro and Gerald K. Helleiner, North-South Institute.
The Holy Spirit in the New Testament, by David Ewert, Herald Press.
The Insecurity of Art, edited by Ken Norris and Peter Van Toorn, Véhicule Press.
James G. Endicott: Rebel Out of China, by Stephen Endicott, U of T Press.
Journeys in Light, by W.D. Sutton, published by the author.
Junction, by Elizabeth Brewster, Black Moss Press.
Kanata, par Dennis Adair et Janet Rosenstock, traduit par Marie-Claire Courmand, Avon.
Legal-ese, by Claire D. Bernstein, Fleet Books.
Memoirs of Hugh L. Keenleyside, Volume 2: On the Bridge of Time, M & S.
Miracle at Indian River, by Alden Nowlan, Clarke Irwin.
Model Agreements for Visual Artists, by Paul Sanderson, Canadian Artists' Representation Ontario.
Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretive History of the National Film Board of Canada, by D.B. Jones, Deneau.
The News Inside the Canadian Media, edited by Barrie Zwicker and Dick MacDonald, Deneau.
The Nine Lives of a Cowboy, by H. "Dude" Lavington, Sono Nis Press.
1984: A Collection of Political Cartoons, by Bob Bierman, New Star Books.
The Olden Days Coat, by Margaret Laurence, illustrated by Marjell Wood, M & S.
Once Upon A Fun, by Lawrence Chanin, Serendipity Publishers.
Pacific Yachting's Cruising Guide to British Columbia, Volume III, by Bill Woffenstein, Pacific Yachting.
Perfect Fools, by Charlotte Vale Allen, Seal Books.
Pre-Writing in Southeastern Europe, by Shan M.M. Winn, Western Publishers.
Print-Outs, by Claudia Cornwall, Nerve Press.
Rainshadow: Stories for Vancouver Island, edited by Ron Smith and Stephen Guppy, Colichan Books and Sono Nis Press.
Red for Terror, by Richard Crighton, Dodd, Mead (M & S).
Ricordi, by Joyce Meyer, Queenston House.
Selected Poems, by John Robert Colombo, Black Moss Press.
Selected Translations, by John Robert Colombo, Black Moss Press.
Shaping the Urban Landscape, by Gilbert A. Stelter and Alan F.I. Artibise, Carleton University Press.
Snowbirds: The Siberian Chivalries of Henry Schulz, Orca Sound Publishing.
Stanley Knowles: The Man from Winipeg North Centre, by Susan Mann Trofimukoff, Western Producer Prairie Books.
Styx, by Christopher Hyde, Seal Books.
Suffer Little Children, by Sara Cowasjee, NewWest.
A Surflet of Love, by Weldon Hanbury, David Blair.
Sunfield Painter: The Reminiscences of John Davenall Turner, The University of Alberta Press.
The Superhistorians: Makers of Our Past, by John Barker, Scribner's (Wiley).
Terry Ann's Journey Into Life, by Denyse Handler, illustrated by Dara Rowland, Life Cycle Books.
This Stranger Wood, by Allan Brown, Quarry Press.
The Three Brave Snowflakes, by Ella Bowbrow, illustrated by Hans-Joachim Buettnr, Mosaic.
Thursday's Voices, by Susan M. Alhoshi et al., Child Thursday.
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