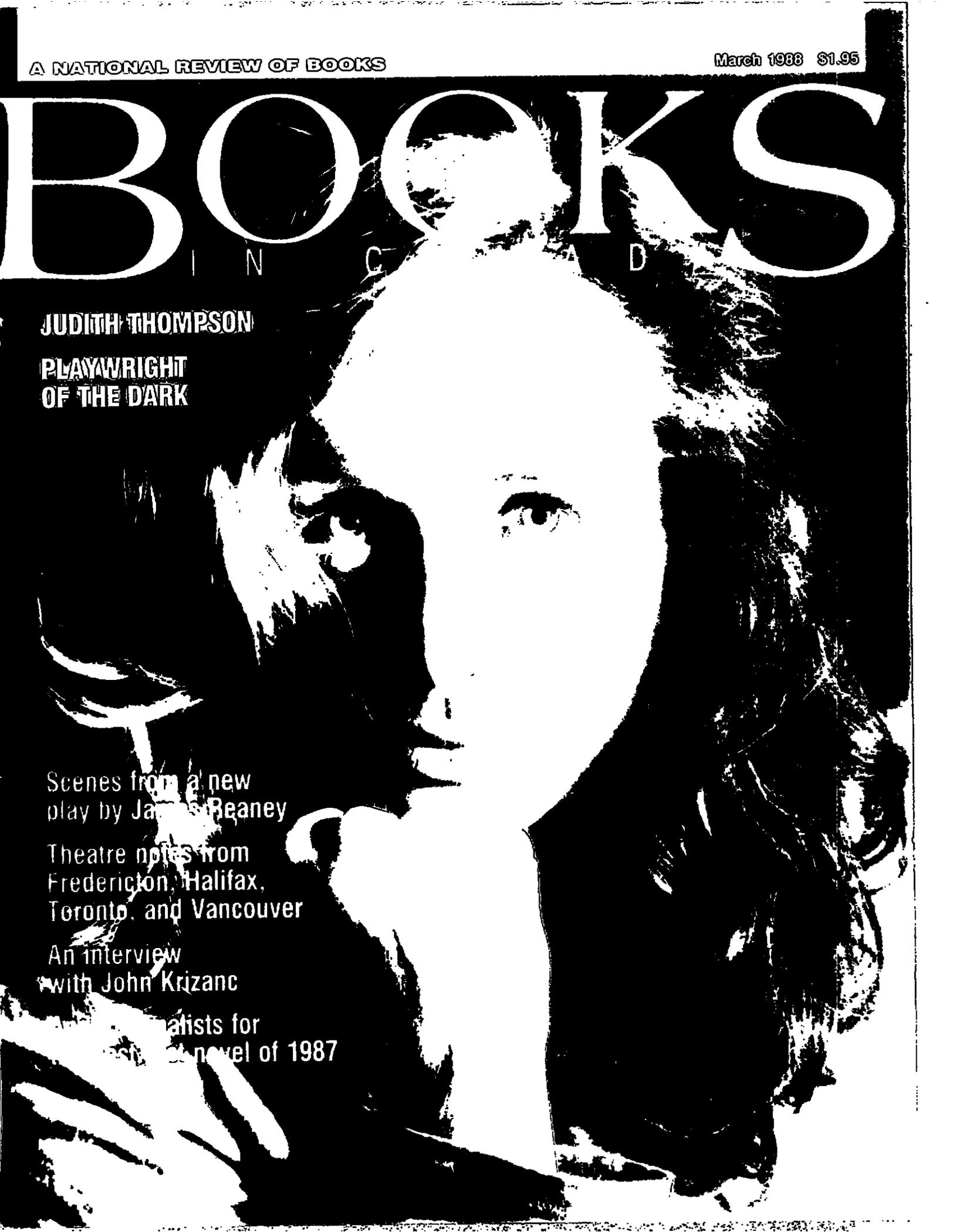


A NATIONAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

March 1988 \$1.95

# BOOKS



JUDITH THOMPSON

PLAYWRIGHT  
OF THE DARK

Scenes from a new  
play by James Beaney

Theatre notes from  
Fredericton, Halifax,  
Toronto, and Vancouver

An interview  
with John Krizanc

and dramatists for  
the best novel of 1987

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL ORENGIERI

# The return of the firebrand

Something profound was afoot in Canada in 1837. Something moved thousands of ordinary peaceable people to **propose** going out and **sticking** bayonets in their neighbours

**D**ECEMBER 7, 1987. One hundred and fifty years after the Yonge Street events for which Peter Mathews the rebel was executed, his great-great-great-grandson is hanging about the lobby of Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto. Seats for a one-night-only, original-cast revival of *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* are as scarce as land grants, and the Descendant is waitlisted

along with *Books in Canada's* field man and an anxious mob, its numbers already being inflated by rumour. As ticket holders fill the theatre and claims to special entitlement press in upon the besieged box office, standbys murmur about jobbery and favouritism. But this time deference to authority and the spirit of compromise prevail. Benches and stools are being hauled inside, and at last the Descendant and most of the rest are allowed to crowd in behind a packed house. "Canadians, do you love freedom?" cries Eric Peterson as William Lyon Mackenzie "I know you do"

Miles Potter, one of the original cast members reprising a role tonight (the others are David Fox, Clare Coulter, Terry Tweed, and Peterson), once recalled that when *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* first opened in Toronto in 1974, shocked laughter greeted the announcement of a scene "at the corner of Bay and Adelaide" — imagine a real play being set there! By helping to destroy that attitude, *1837* — created by writer Rick Salutin and the Theatre Passe Muraille company — became a key text in a theatrical revolution. What provokes laughter tonight is Paul Thompson's idea that before saying a few prefatory words he needs to identify himself as the original director of the play. Appropriately, the revival has brought the new establishment of the Toronto acting community out en masse.

The historical community is much more thinly represented. The Mackenzie of the play, Che Guevara in a frock coat, has always been hard pressed by the historians. Historical followers of S. F. Wise have sketched out the presence of a broadly based conservative coalition in Upper Canada, undermining Mackenzie's (and the play's) concept of a brutish, incestuous Family Compact. Under close historical analysis, the moderate reformers the play dismisses as liberal

wimps have demanded new respect. And Mackenzie himself? Reading the record, one finds it hard not to despair over his quixotic leadership and his gift for disregarding hard realities. The fad should not be flinched: the rebellion was a disaster and probably set back the cause of good government in these colonies.

And yet, and yet. William Kilbourn, whose 30-year-old Mackenzie biography *The Firebrand* remains the freshest book on the subject, urges us to see Mackenzie, warts and all, "a gargoyle on the edifice of responsible government," as one of

the Parliamentary free trade committee.

Something profound was afoot in Canada in 1837. Something moved thousands of ordinarily peaceable people to propose going out and sticking bayonets into their neighbours. In comfortably bland Ontario, that still demands attention. No historical study has ever captured it better than *1837: The Farmers' Revolt*.

THIS ONE-NIGHT revival has allowed the actors no rehearsal. They make it a reading, text in hand, and they abandon

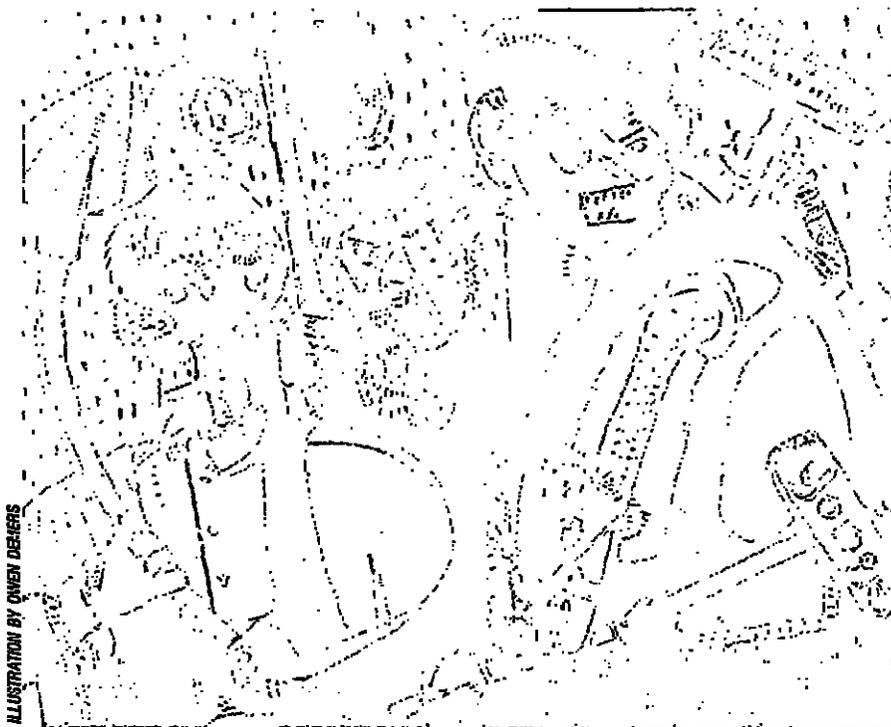


ILLUSTRATION BY OWEN DEBESSE

those invaluable radical-conservatives, inevitably marginalized, who are ever warning Canadians against the bland, powerful compromisers personified in his grandson Mackenzie King (Canadian writing having come so far that even King has had his own play, *Rexy*, by Allan Stratton). In Ontario's national myth, Mackenzie lives as an all-purpose scourge of the powerful. Even though he intended his rebellion to bring American-style freedoms to Upper Canada, no one saw an irony when Peterson-as-Mackenzie went earlier on the day of this performance to confront the Tory placemen on

some of the best bits of theatre — notably the human tableau that forms the "head" of Bond Head. Yet their readings instantly revive the frustrated, hopeful men and women of 1837 and the bitter unfairnesses that goaded them. The funny, vivid, moving scenes evoke, as playwright Rick Salutin said before the performance, Canadians who care deeply about the important things. "I have a lot of sympathy for old Peter Mathews," the Descendant remarked, out in the lobby. "It's hard to take a stand on something when it goes against the trend."

— CHRISTOPHER MOORE

# Back on track

**HORROR STORIES** don't usually have happy endings. This one just might, though it starts unpromisingly.

The middle '80s in theatre in British Columbia were years of disillusion and retrenchment as the province's performing arts community reeled under the double impact of a broad-based economic recession and Expo 86. Never particularly adventurous in their theatre-going, the bulk of Vancouver's audiences became positively conservative, demanding guaranteed entertainment return on their entertainment spending. The biggest box-office success of the decade — perhaps of all time in Vancouver's entertainment history — was *Cats*.

By the middle of the decade, original theatre in Vancouver was in the doldrums, and a significant segment of the creative, performing and directing community had headed or was heading east — wakening what was left even further. And by the time Expo 86 was unleashed on the city, the principal emphasis in establishment theatre in the city was on survival, rather than innovation and experiment.

Expo's own performance programme and world festival was saturation-marketed, like snap powder and soft drinks, and did sellout box-office business everything from *Forty-second Street* to unknown and even avant-garde presentations like the State Theatre of Heidelberg's Sylvia Plath dance-drama, and the Toho Theatre of Japan's mesmerizing *Medea*. But in the season that followed the closing of Expo in October, 1986, hopes that this remarkable demonstration of receptivity meant a new openness to theatrical experiment on the part of the city's audiences were largely dashed. The audience seemed spoiled by the rich Expo diet and unwilling to return to the less exotic local produce; or maybe they were just all partied out.

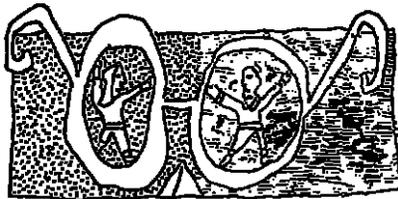
However, it seems that after these several years of ducking and cowering, the Vancouver theatre scene is ready to stand up for itself with some confidence again — and to begin, once more, to take risks. This is good news for writers.

One reason for the renewed optimism is the arrival of Guy Sprung as artistic director at the Vancouver Playhouse — on loan for a season from Toronto. While eyebrows have risen among the staid over what some see as a sellout of artistic principle, Sprung has created excitement and brought people back into the theatre . . . setting attendance and season-subscription records and clearing the way for the return next season, as Playhouse director, of Larry Lillo, a former shining light of the city's alter-

native scene, a staunch believer in the importance of hometown creativity and (as artistic director of Theatre London) one of the most regretted losses of the talent drain of the mid-'80s.

Meanwhile, we have seen the remarkable emergence of the Vancouver Fringe Festival. Established in 1985, it is rapidly proving its value as a testing-ground and discovery centre for experimental work by a whole cadre of new, predominantly young Vancouver writers. Already this season, two of the best Fringe shows, Jay Brazeau's *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* and Wyckham Porteous's *Joe's Cafe*, have been picked up by Arts Club Theatre director Bill Miller, who likes to surprise his mainly middle-of-the-road audiences with an occasional excursion into the blatantly unusual.

Adding even further to the cause for celebration by theatre writers in Vancouver is the fresh face and attitude being adopted by the New Play Centre, long regarded as the prime play-nursery on the



West Coast, but economically badly battered in recent years. This season, director Pamela Hawthorn has mounted the NPC's first full series of full-length plays by local writers.

It would be wrong to suggest that every vestige of creative talent moved away from Vancouver theatre during the middle 1980s. A solid core of writers stuck it out among them Dennis Foon, whose Green Thumb Theatre for children has always been a champion of made-in-Canada writing. John Lazarus, a writer of prodigious output, and Michael Mercer, whose *Goodnight Disgrace*, commissioned by, Leon Pownall for Nanaimo's Shakespeare Plus festival, was one of the finest pieces of writing to emerge on the West coast in years.

And along with the consolidation of this established core we are seeing the emergence of a new generation of young writers . . . at precisely the time that the city is at last finding itself ready to welcome new writing again. Better late than never, but it is sadly ironic, as Mercer says, that this should be happening when the theatre community is mourning the death of George Ryga, a man fiercely committed to the idea of a Canadian, even a regional theatre.

It is probably too soon to hang out flags and do handstands. New writing in Vancouver is still going to have a tough

time of it. But with Lillo, the Fringe and the NPC all showing evidence of a intelligent commitment, there's hope that genuine vitality will return to the West Coast writing scene. — MAX WYMAN

# Waiting in the wings

**ACTING JOBS** were scarce in New Brunswick in 1981, and Marshall Button, who had worked with Theatre London in Ontario and with the Theatre New Brunswick Young Company, took a job waiting on tables at a Fredericton hotel. "I thought I should be honest," he says. "I admitted I was an actor." Soon after that, the manager asked whether he might like to form a dinner theatre. Button found three friends who were interested, and Comedy Asylum was born.

They started with well-known plays, but soon went on to original material. The most successful of their comedy evenings featured a character written by Marshall Button, based on the pulp-and-paper workers he had known when he was a student working summers at the mill. "Lucien" was an immediate hit with audiences in Fredericton. A one-man show, also called *Lucien* and directed by Ted Johns, was soon in the works. Not long after after that, the man in the hard hat was speaking directly to New Brunswickers:

*T'est smart, toi. You go to school, you get your trade. You don't lose dat. Let me tell you my frien', dey can take away everything else, but dey're not going to take your trade. Ben, day can take your car, your house, all your machine, your wife, your kid, dey can even take your goddam skidoo. But dey're not going to take your trade. No. You keep dat. For life . . . calice . . .*

*Les Canadiens de Montreal. now dere was an équipe! Beliveau, Tremblay, Cournoyer, Richard, Jacques Plante, Jacques Strappe — da flyin' Frenchmen, hostiel Now, who dey got? Green. Walter. Smit'. Sound like a bunch of goddam mill superintendents. Pretty soon dey won't wear skater no more. Jus' go out in dere work boots and smash each o'er to a bloody pulp. You tink dat seal hunt was bad. you jus' watch "Hockey Fight in Canada" — you don't see dat Brigitte Bardot come over here cuddle Mats Naslund. Now dere's an endanger specie.*

After the New Brunswick tour, Button took the show to Vancouver, then back across the country, winding up at TNB as part of the mainstage season. *Lucien* speaks for English- and French-speaking Canadians alike. As he says,

*One ting I'm proud about, my life: je suis bilingue. Not too many people can say*

dat. Lotta guy I work wit', lotta English fella, too scare to practise. Dey tink people laugh at dere accent. Believe it or not, I didn't always talk the way I do now. I use to have an accent. No. You're not going to get anywhere witout *les deux langues officielles*. Why da hell you tink Trudeau hung aroun' so long? Me, I never care for da man, but you gotta admire him jus' da same. *Quand il parle francais, là* — jus' like he's from France, ou Shippegan. You hear him talk English, could be he's from Sout' Africa, some place like dat . . .

Lucien's creator was born in the town of Dalhousie, right on the northeastern tip of the province. He was "turned on to theatre" by a high school teacher. His family found it hard to believe that he might really intend to try earning his living as an actor-and Button himself half seriously thought "you had to be from Toronto" — but two weeks after graduating from a drama course at Bishop's University in Lennoxville, Que., he was offered a part in *Equus* at Theatre London, and he soon afterwards went back to Fredericton to work with the TNB.

The young actor's career thus had an auspicious beginning — but it was not until *Lucien* that he found a way to bring his own New Brunswick background, and his knowledge of the people, into the theatre.

Lucien is "too English to be from Quebec and too French to be from Nova Scotia," says Button. At one of the northern stops of the New Brunswick tour, one man in the audience was laughing too loudly for the woman sitting ahead of him. She turned and shushed him. "Don't tell me to be quiet, lady," he rejoined in a voice the whole theatre could hear. "I'm laughing at myself up there."

— ANNE INGRAM

## Storm warning

THE FIRST major Canadian play about AIDS originated in a Halifax bowling alley. One summer evening in 1984, Kent Stetson joined a gay bowling party. He discovered that one of his companions, who looked familiar, came from the same town in Prince Edward Island. "I had probably taught him swimming in O'Leary," Stetson muses. Three months later, the young man was dead. One of the earliest AIDS deaths in Nova Scotia, it was, for Stetson, "the first cold band on the shoulder."

The experience inspired him to write *Warm Wind in China*, which premiered January 15 in a production by Halifax's Neptune Theatre. Two days later a black-tie audience, including the lieutenant governor and the leader of the provincial NDP, attended a benefit performance for the Metro Area Committee on AIDS. The play's pro-gay sentiments and explicitness

— including a simulated oral rape — attracted media attention both locally and nationally, but Halifax audiences, who last year were shocked by four-letter words in Sharon Pollock's *Doc*, responded positively. This time, no one walked out.

Stetson wanted a main-stage production, but artistic director Richard Ouzounian got cold feet after *Doc*. Rather than alter the script, Stetson settled for the smaller Sir James Dunn stage at the Dalhousie Arts Centre.

Stetson blames the Conservative provincial government's "user-pay" policy for "diminishing" local theatre. "The subscribers by and large want to be entertained; they don't want to be challenged. They want to hear stuff second-hand, so they've got nice second-band plays."

Ironically, the play's connection with AIDS has been a ticket to respectability. Few plays dealing positively with gay reality have garnered such establishment support. Despite the disappointment of a second-stage venue, Stetson may have succeeded in legitimizing gay theatre in Halifax.

It's a challenging play to stage. Act 1 takes place on a local gay beach, complete with a ton of real sand. Slater, the one with AIDS, chooses this location to break the news to his lover, a devil-may-care jock named Davis. Slater tricks Davis into letting himself be bound hand and foot, then buries him up to the neck with the tide coming in.

"The bondage/burial seemed to me a good metaphor for what people were facing—this tide of disease that started to now through us," says Stetson. "Slater's reaction is a terrible reaction. what he does to Davis is an awful thing, but awful things are happening to people. This play is about, brutality and emotional desertion and reconciliation. Slater has stared into the Pit. He has to take Davis and turn his fad into that pit and say, Listen, pal, this is what we have to deal with."

Timothy Webber played Slater in Halifax, and in a workshop production at the Montreal Playwrights Workshop, and he says, "It's an actor's dream. I've never had lines like these before. The emotional honesty of the roles is so strong that the role formed itself."

Some gays found the portrayals unconvincing, calling each other by their last names, having difficulty dealing with emotions, the lovers exhibit an exaggerated masculinity that contradicts popular notions of gay male behaviour. Stetson calls it "the *Mandate* look." "I wanted them both rigid, so they could flower. You know who they are? They're those guys at Rumours, a Halifax gay bar, who are so stiff and tight, who stand around the walls and don't accept

## FIRST IN FICTION

First launched in 1987, our fiction list will continue to bring you the very best in Canadian writing: novels like *Fire Eyes* by D. E. Bailey — short-listed for the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award.



D. E. Bailey, author: FIRE EYES

### What the critics said:

- "A dynamite read . . . a new writer of the very best." *Andreas Schmeder*
- "... a taut psychological thriller with literary overtones, a very contemporary romance." *The Globe and Mail*
- "... a strong powerful first work." *Calgary Herald*.

## S P R I N G T I T L E S

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Malcolm Lowry. \$10.95



DOUGLAS & MCINTYRE

themselves for who they are."

In Act 2, it is Slater who is immobilized, by the progression of the disease. Davis has to enlighten Slater's parents about their son's disease and his sexuality. They try to shut Davis out and take custody of Slater's son. The conflict reflects real experiences of people with AIDS, including Stetson's friend. The surviving lover had to contend with 11 family members who tried to eject him from his lover's hospital room. "They wanted him out of there," Stetson remembers. "He had no natural place, in their minds." Three years later, the lover and family are still fighting about life insurance.

"In many ways it was and still is two separate plays," he says, with "a unifying oversoul." Although the first act is stylized, the second is "utterly naturalistic." Stetson expected the play to bridge two communities: the gay and the heterosexual. "The really nice surprise was that it also bridged two generations. It got a lot of people from my parents' generation: almost half the audience. Of course, their children are at stake."

The play has given Stetson an "opportunity to speak to a lot of issues. It's in many ways a wonderful gift." Writing it involved "a development of a gay political consciousness, which I missed altogether here in the '70s. I really was a closeted artist, as opposed to a closeted gay man. This play opened up a sense of connection with the fullness of my own humanity as much as my own sexuality. I'm surprised how political it is."

This first production was a kind of test run. A production by Rising Tide Theatre will open in St. John's in early March. The script will then go back to Eric Steiner, who directed the Neptune production. (No stranger to the theatre of AIDS. Steiner directed *The Normal Heart* for Theatre Calgary.) Stetson, muttering a reminder to himself to call June Callwood, talks about a cross-country tour to be produced by Neptune: "About six cities with an AIDS benefit tied to every opening night." Bill Glassco of Toronto's CentreStage has offered space. Ronald Guèvremont has almost completed the first draft of a French translation. There are a couple of possibilities for a Montreal fall production, talk of a CBC-TV production, and nibbles in London and New York.

In the meantime, Stetson is working on a new three-act play, *Queen of the Cadillac*, and negotiating sales of short film scripts: two to CBC-TV's "Family Pictures" series and one to CBC locally. He agrees that *Warm Wind in Chino* was a breakthrough. "It's the most important thing I've done, and reached the broadest audience. It's a definite opening out."

— ROBIN METCALFE

## Radio days

ONE OF THE GREAT PLEASURES of the literate but lazy is the opportunity to absorb stories without effort: to be read to without having to scan a page, and to be performed for without even opening your eyes. Just lie back and words are spoken in your ear and images appear behind your eyelids.

The CBC is a good source of this sort of pleasure. It talks to us, reads to us, and commissions plays for series such as "Sextet," in which six major Canadian women writers have each produced an hour-long drama. The current season has already run its course once on "Stereo Theatre," and is to be repeated on the programme "Sunday Matinee" starting in July.

Obviously drama has some different conventions and requirements from the fiction of short stories and novels, depending as it does not only on the grace and eloquence of the written word, but



also on the skills of actors and all the others involved in a collaborative art. Nevertheless, there is common ground: atmosphere, character, structure, tension, intention are required.

The "Sextet" works offered by playwright Judith Thompson, novelist and short-story writer Audrey Thomas, playwright Colleen Murphy, poet, novelist, short story titer and dramatist Anne Cameron, playwright Carol Bolt and poet and novelist Paulette Jiles stand somewhat unevenly on those grounds. It's interesting that the best of the productions, Audrey Thomas's *Change of Heart*, comes from a writer whose main attention has been given to the printed, not the performed, word.

Fertility is a recurring theme in several of these plays, most bizarrely in Judith Thompson's *Tornado*, in which a "infertile social worker attempts to dupe a naïve welfare mother out of her baby in an effort to save her own marriage. This is the least successful of the productions, for reasons both in and out of the playwright's control. It's partly sabotaged by Jennifer Dale, playing Mandy the social worker with a voice as shrill as a

drill, hardly appealing in a radio play, but a more basic problem is in the drama itself. While Rose, the eloquent, pregnant, epileptic welfare mother who wants "to have as many children as I can so I can love them the right way" is a fully developed character, the others aren't. There are no contexts for Mandy or her husband, Bill, or his mistress, Jane. We have no way of knowing, or much caring, why Bill swings from one woman to the other apparently on the basis of who will give him a child, or why Mandy swings from a nasty outburst against motherhood to a mad craving for it. Too much plot and not enough character bring the piece perilously close to melodrama.

Fertility also has a role in Colleen Murphy's *Mongoloids*. On the eve of his fifth birthday, a fearful Nelson listens as his parents, Mikey and Lou, spend an evening with friends and later, alone, quarrel and make love. Nelson's plaintive, lonely voice runs through the play like music, as his parents fight over the pregnant Lou's wish for an abortion. "I don't have a voice . . . you don't hear," she tells Mikey. "I keep disappearing." She says of Nelson that "I love him," but when he was born, "part of me hoped he'd stop breathing."

It's a frightening fight for a child to overbear, and the play holds its tension until the conclusion, which feels too enigmatic and incomplete to be satisfying.

Unsatisfying ambiguity also mars the ending of Carol Bolt's *Yellow Ribbons*, an otherwise absorbing thriller about a missing 12-year-old girl. The thread here is child abuse, the truth and lies of it, and the responses of adults. Friends inform the detective investigating the girl's disappearance that she has told them her father abused her. At the same time, the detective's partner faces accusations of abuse from his own family, his second wife has memories of being abused by her father, and the detective himself temporarily loses his own child in a mall. Therapists disagree over whether child abuse is real or fantasy, with the disappeared girl's mother coming down on the side of fantasy and her husband. She says she sometimes hopes her daughter is dead, because that would prove his innocence. "Whatever else he did, he wouldn't have killed her."

The play may sound like a one-note tune, but it's realistic, suspenseful, and absorbing until it hits a flat ending.

Anne Cameron's *The Ultimate Truth* features Margaret, another survivor of paternal abuse, who runs away, goes to work for a woman who runs a fishing boat, creates a new identity for herself, takes off travelling to Toronto, and gets caught up in a variety of consciousness-raising and other therapeutic groups until she's "going to one meeting a night" with

people with names like Cloud, Stream, Hawk, Eagle, and Dolphin.

It's also about Alice, "ho. marries an old-fashioned young man who decides "It's not natural for a woman to "ant a job instead of a baby." When she eventually leaves him, she gets involved in antipollution. anti-American protest groups and finds herself in a commune where the women do all the work and wait "hand and foot on the men," who keep busy smoking up and discussing life. When Alice leaves, she too goes to work for the fishing-boat woman and meets Margaret, "ho has returned from ha travels. As the story becomes more fantastic, the three "omen unofficially adopt an abandoned girl, "ho promptly gets a government grant to harvest slugs, selling them to yuppies and the nouveau riche as "escargettes." The play's satirical targets run from brutal or selfish men to the totalitarian group-think resorted to by some forms of therapies and causes. It's entertaining, and the only real quibble is that it's tough to satirize things most of us already know are funny.

Paulette Jiles's *My Grandmother's Quilt*, set in Missouri, is a treat. When Lula Belle and her mother come down with brain fever, the mother dies and Lula Belle's mind is altered in a number of ways; one effect of the illness is that she reads everything backward. She can read quilt patterns, though, and she embarks on a quilt made of other people's clothes, which will contain and tell all their stories. As she and her sister are shifted from relative to relative in their father's absence, she quilts a jilted girl who poured coal oil over herself and set herself ablaze, a black man lynched because of a liaison with a white woman, and a Frenchman dead in a salt spring, "pickled like a ham." As her father tells her tales, Lula Belle thinks that "Driving past all these stories was like running a stick along a picket fence in your mind." Jiles's command of language and her cast of eccentric make this play a pleasure.

If Jiles is a treat, Audrey Thomas is a triumph. When Ruth's trucker husband, Jerry, dies after playing chicken on the highway, she gives permission for his heart to be used for a transplant. Ruth is young, energetic, and funny, but her grief catches up to her and she decides to travel to Vancouver to meet the heart recipient. He turns out to be a "puny" vegetarian professor, and since her Jerry was a "real meat-and-potatoes man" with a fondness for country and western music, Ruth's efforts to keep her dead husband happy lean towards trying to get the professor to eat a good steak while she hums country songs to him. She wonders if the heart "skipped a beat" when it heard her voice.

Thomas captures Ruth's voice, her

adventurousness, her sense of fun, her love and also something of the confusing dilemmas of identity people may feel in the face of transplant surgery. The play is just tight. Make a point of lying back, closing your eyes and hearing it.

— JOAN BARFOOT

## A guy from the neighbourhood

WHEN ARTHUR MILLER came to read at Massey Hall last December, it "as an occasion that hummed with resonance. First, there was the setting. Now that Massey Hall has been replaced by Roy Thomson Hall as the city's major cultural venue, its historic echoes seem only to have increased and multiplied. The urbane and ubiquitous Greg Gatenby, introducing Miller, recalled how that pillar of the British Empire, Rudyard Kipling, had read there in 1907, as had Thomas Mann in 1938. Some of Canada's best writers, such as Morley Callaghan and Margaret Atwood, had come to hear Miller read: there was a decided feeling of history in the air.

Despite cultural conservatives' warnings about the death of literature, the evening with Miller "as strong evidence that, in Toronto at least, it "as in anything but a sickly state. Harbourfront, General Publishing, and Labatt's had cooperated in sponsoring the event; the brewery's entrance into the cultural field was an encouraging sign, although the irony of a giant of free enterprise supporting the appearance of a man nearly martyred in the 1950s as a "subversive" by the House Un-American Activities Committee "as not lost on any connoisseur of social paradox who happened to be present.

The hall "as three-quarters full of enthusiastic admirers. One could choose to interpret this in a number of ways: perhaps literary readings had retrieved the stature that they had enjoyed in the 19th century, in the days of Dickens and Wilde; or perhaps the promiscuous adoration of celebrity had grown to the point that it embraced even elderly playwrights. But had the audience at Massey Hall come to see the author of *Death of a Salesman* or the husband of Marilyn Monroe?

Miller appeared from the wings and walked slowly to centre stage to read from his memoirs, *Timebends*, in a gravelly voice still touched by his native Brooklyn. The world-famous writer looked like an unadorned guy from the neighbourhood, a retired physician, say, who's treated at least three generations of families, and who's still delivering babies at two in the

morning. This homey note "as emphasized by the first selections Miller read, recalling his childhood in the 1920s. Reminiscences of sensitive, lively Mama, tough-broad Aunt Stella, Gussie, Ozzie, and all the other neighbourhood characters managed to evoke potent images of nostalgic Americana that ought to have been scored by George Gershwin. It didn't matter that Miller's recollections were in a well-worn vein: his rough-hewn vaudeville delivery, accentuated by the kind of timing and pacing that only half a century on Broadway can effect, made them seem fresh and authentic, simultaneously the stuff of star-spangled myth and the product of raw experience.

The connection between these two dimensions of Miller's America was made clear in his account of his tough-guy Uncle Hymie, whose supremely cocky street-corner manner Miller was later to see captured in the movies by George Raft and Frank Sinatra, and in literature by Norman Mailer. From there Miller jumped into a recollection of his heyday in the forties and fifties. His tales of Dashiell Hammett, Lillian Hellman and Senator McCarthy are all located in the political and cultural core of that time. Through all the anecdotes, however, there ran an obsessive thread: his marriage to Marilyn Monroe.

As the evening "Ore on, one "as increasingly moved and impressed. For a playwright, Miller writes surprisingly eloquent prose: his insight into his life and times was as penetrating as it "as dignified and unassuming. There "as little grandstanding, little of the martyr complex that has so often afflicted other of McCarthy's victims, just a plain-spoken account that in no way lacked glamorous appeal. There "as none of Hammett and Hellman's aristocratic pretension (despite their levelling convictions), no sense of the conventional memoirist's debilitating vice of self-justification. The overall impression "as of that much underrated quality, decency.

Although Miller's performance "as low-key and almost offhand, his reading had an impressive cumulative power, and was, in the end, a triumph. Here "as a man who had ridden out some of the worst storms of America's 20th century and had not only endured but had done so with dignity. In the end, though, the image that remained in the mind "as his recollection of Monroe entirely at home, despite her waif's nature, in the midst of an adoring British crowd during Miller's 1950s exile. The movies and the masses had come together in some mysterious conjunction with Monroe in a decade that has a special fascination for a slower time. It's just possible that Arthur Miller has become its best witness.

— NORMAN SNIDER

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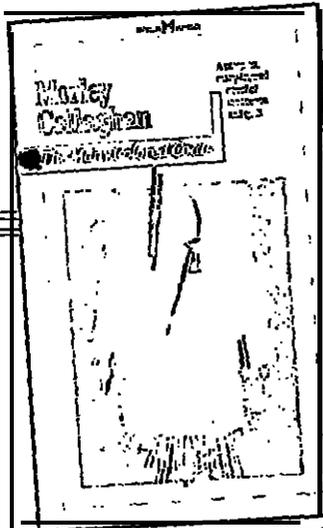
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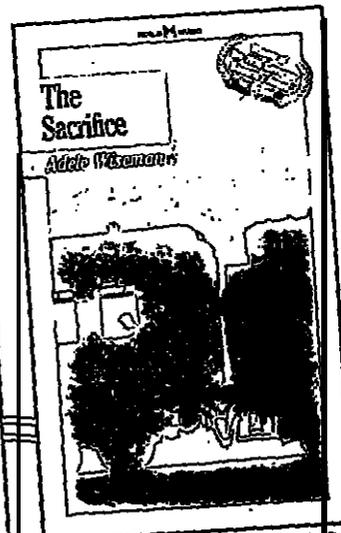
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## ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

### Swan song

Wherein **Blackburn** bows out of *Books in Canada*, and asks all of us to write nitpicking letters to the publishers of permissive dictionaries

By **Bob Blackburn**

**I**T SEEMED a good idea at the time, and maybe it was.

The time was a summer afternoon in 1980. The idea was Doug Marshall's. He was then the editor of this magazine, and he conceived and named this column.

I thought it might be fun and something worth doing. Since it no longer is much fun and no longer seems worth doing. I will be doing it no longer. I have said what I had

to say, and repeated some of it, and it's time to shut up and sit down.

It was fun, and maybe someone somewhere took heed and stopped dangling his modifiers.

I think things are getting worse at an accelerating rate. Mom and more of those who ply the writing trade have realized that it is not necessary to do it well in order to have money and good sex. Errors are appearing in *The New Yorker*.

U.S. network television turns 40 this year, and can celebrate four decades of trashing the language. Television has long prided itself on being North America's most influential medium, and it certainly has done much more than has the print medium to hasten the day when not one of us will understand what anyone else is saying and we will have to hit each other to make our meaning clear.

The greatest reward I have had for writing this column is a drawer full of letters from people who care. I don't get as much mail as does David Letterman, perhaps, but mine is better. It has come from Australia and New Zealand and the United Kingdom and the United States, and, most encouragingly, from every part of my own country, including the farthest reaches of Vancouver Island and Newfoundland and places I had not known to exist. Every letter has been read carefully, appreciated greatly, perhaps acted upon, and saved — but, and I beseech your forgiveness, not answered.

I hope that those of you who have written to me will write to others. Write to the prime minister and tell him you are nervous about your fate being controlled by certain people who cannot express themselves clearly in either of the official languages. Write the president of the CBC and ask why the people's network relies on one part-time employee to ride

herd on all of the writers and speakers who should be providing a model of English usage (and, if you are bilingual, please write to me and tell me if things are better or worse with the French language — I have never been able to find that out). Write to McClelland and Stewart and ask them how they could possibly publish a hook by a major author and miss an egregious solecism on the first page. Write candidates for election to boards of education and ask them why you should vote for them when they can't spell.

Keep checking to see if Barbara Frum has learned how to pronounce *consortium*. Refuse to buy any product whose TV commercials use *plus as a conjunction*. Change channels whenever you hear a football commentator say a team is in a *third-down situation*. Do not take the advice of any theatrical critic who uses transitive verbs without an object. Laugh at anyone who tells you his name is *Mister something*. When someone who's blathering incoherently at you says, "Y'know what I mean?," say you don't. When badly written junk-mail warrants it, use the postpaid return envelope to tell the sender you don't care to do business with people who can't say what they mean. Sue the manufacturers of products whose labels carry imprecise directions or warnings. Question teachers who write semi-illiterate comments on your kids' report cards. Never submit your writing to an editor who would put a comma between *Baja* and *California*. Do not let either William Safire or Random House persuade you to accept the popular misuse of *hopefully*, and be wary of anyone who knows there is a distinction between *convince* and *persuade* but always gets it backward. Write nitpicking letters to the publishers of permissive dictionaries, and do not eat in newly-established restaurants whose menus say that they are *Famous for fine foods*. And scream. I'm hoarse. My thanks to the staff and readers of this magazine, and to Doug Marshall. □

The April issue of *Books in Canada* will include the first in a new series of *English-usage columns*, *The Written Word*, by I.M. Owen.

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# In contact with the dark

Judith Thompson's plays are composed of "collected images," and her mind is "a screen door swinging between conscious and unconscious"

By Nigel Hunt

**J**UDITH THOMPSON seems embarrassed — sorry to disappoint anyone with dull personal details that cannot hope to compete with the intensity and eccentricity of what she writes for the stage. She apologizes, "This is going to bore everybody to death." Then her writer's imagination jumps into gear and she smiles, having thought of a better story than the mere mundane truth. Her eyes narrow, she brushes back her long brown hair and leans forward slightly. "I should make something up. I was a clown in a circus. . ."

For a new playwright, Judith Thompson is very well known. Her work has won her great attention and respect over a professional career of only eight years. Born in Montreal in 1954, she graduated from Queen's University in Kingston in 1976. She then went to the National Theatre School to train for an acting career. In mask class, the students were asked to come up with monologues for their characters. "I really ignited there," says Thompson. Improvisation class excited her, too. She quickly tamed the stimulation of these acting exercises into

the foundation of her first play: "I started turning a monologue into a scene and a scene into another scene. And I thought, 'Well, we should have some guys eater. We should have a little conflict.' And then, it turned into *The Crackwalker*."

*The Crackwalker* is a frighteningly realistic look at the underbelly of our society. It relates the painful and pathetic life of a retarded woman, Theresa, and her friends, all of whom try and fail to fit into a life-style that lies forever beyond their grasp. While the play communicates a strong sense of their sordid desolation, it also never fails to evoke their warmth and humour. If Theresa's life "sucking off queers down the Lido for five bucks," is depressing and her utter failure to mother her retarded baby repellent, we still feel for Thompson's characters' painful need to love, and their inability to do so — a recurring theme in all Thompson's plays. A drunk vomits on a man's shoes. Theresa enters with her dead baby in a shopping bag. Sandy tells Theresa, "I get off on cornbeef on rye, arsewipe, why d'ya think I need the fuckin' money." Alan cracks an egg over his head in frustration from losing his job, confessing, "Did you ever start thinkin' somethin', and it's like, ugly. . .? And ya can't beat it out of your head?" Joe and Theresa are both compulsively unfaithful to their spouses. Theresa fantasizes that "I look like the Virgin and she hardly pretty. . . Hey, beebie, if I lookin' like her and she holdin' beebie Jesus like I holdin' you, you mus' look like Jesus!" Thompson does not betray the reality of her characters by imposing change on their lives. At the play's end, we leave them as we found them. The change the playwright wishes to effect is in her audience, not in her characters.

Thompson's first play brought her public recognition, but she insists that its reputation as an instant hit is simply a myth. *The Crackwalker* was a finalist in both the Clifford B. Lee playwrights' competition and the National Repertory Theatre Play Awards in 1980; the play opened that November at Theatre Passe Muraille in a production directed by Clarke Rogers. The initial reviews were not favourable. As Thompson recalls, shaking her head, "Gina Mallet hated it." The play was picked up by the Centaur Theatre in Montreal two years later, and it was then that *The Crackwalker* found an audience and critical acclaim; the *Gazette* called the play an "exquisite provocation." Audiences flocked to see it, and *The Crackwalker* returned to Toronto where, as Thompson puts it, the critics "all rode on the bandwagon and wrote god reviews." The *Globe and Mail's* Ray Conlogue praised Thompson's "remorseless honesty," and, despite the play's "gutter language," even the *Toronto Sun's* usually reserved Bob Pennington conceded, "Rarely can a standing ovation in our alternative theatre have been more thoroughly deserved."

Thompson's second play, *White Biting Dog*, premiered at Tarragon Theatre in 1984 and won that year's Governor General's Award for drama; it has since been produced in Chicago and Vancouver, among other places. Winning this award was important for Thompson. It compensated for some of the nasty reviews that the play had received: "It's like a child that's been mistreated — you feel vindicated," the playwright says. Her latest play, *I Am Yours*, was also produced at the

Judith Thompson



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL OREISEY

Tarragon Theatre and was chosen as a runner-up in the 1987 Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Awards in January. Thompson has also written several scripts for CBC radio, t&v, and film.

*I Am Yours* tells the story of a woman named Dee, who wreaks havoc in the lives of two men to whom she is attracted. Her ex-husband, Mack, is repeatedly ordered first to stay and then to go, as Dee fights with "the animal" inside her that blocks her ability to love. The second, Toilane, is the uneducated superintendent of her apartment building, who becomes obsessed with her. Dee has an affair with him, then rejects him, although she is pregnant with his child. He wants her to give the baby to him when it is born, but she would rather give it to a stranger. In the end, the baby is kidnapped by Toilane and his mother, Peas. Dee's sister, Mercy, suffers from the same kind of selfishness as Dee, but lacks her talent for bewitching men. Audiences have found *I Am Yours* stunning, overwhelming. Thompson feels that it has "a stronger narrative" than her other plays, but adds, "I wrote the plot in a day."

GIVEN nils SPEED of craft, and her audience's steady appetite for what she has to say, why have we seen only three Judith Thompson plays in eight years? The playwright explains: "The whole of *I Am Yours* is composed of collected images. . . . It takes me years to collect images. I'm like Pippi Longstocking. I see something in the subway. I hear about a friend's grandmother. A lot of people—this terrifies me—assume that my

The wall is torn down to reveal an enormous beehive—a hidden, intensely active insect society operating just below the surface of the characters' lives, never quite encroaching, but always there

plays are confessional, autobiographical somehow. I would never be so dreary as to bore the public with my own life or problems."

While she is busy collecting, ready to "steal my stories from anywhere," the subject of Thompson's next play is slowly forming somewhere deep within her unconscious. The images she acquires are "all covering, decoration — packaging — for the substance." That substance is an ineffable kind of thing that I'm pursuing; that I know is inside me." But the secret sense of the play is never explicit for Thompson while she is writing; in fact, she admits that it does not really become clear for her until it is formulated "by journalists or friends or actors. . . . When I read the theatre press release, I know it's about obsession."

One of the strongest images in *I Am Yours* is the noise behind the wall of Mack's bookstore. The bookstore workers are bothered by a mysterious hum from one side of the room. When all the usual possibilities have been examined, and the hum persists, the wall is torn down to reveal an enormous beehive — a hidden, intensely active insect society operating just below the surface of the characters' lives, never quite encroaching, but always there. This rich metaphor found its way into *I Am Yours* because a friend of Thompson's had heard of such a beehive, discovered behind a judge's chamber wall. Thompson used the image "without really understanding what it meant to the play?" She is, she says with pride and gratitude, not nearly as smart as her unconscious: "I feel really lucky that all these things connect."

Thompson hazards that, perhaps, her mind works in these mysterious ways because of her epilepsy. Although she has experienced only one seizure in the past 15 years, Thompson

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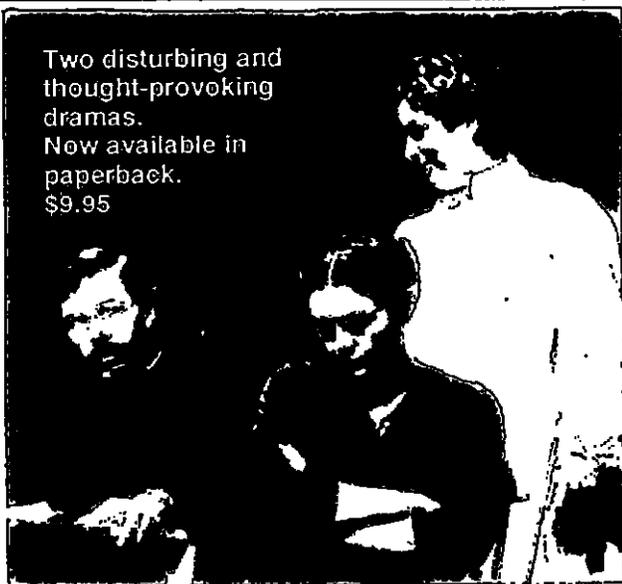
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wonders if **this** may be the **explanation** for the strong link she feels to her unconscious. "You have to be **in** contact with the dark," she says; she calls her **condition** "a mixed blessing." She describes **herself and the way she thinks** with the metaphor of a "screen door **swinging** between the unconscious and **conscious mind**," and **candidly** agrees that she is not, perhaps,

Thompson exercises a creator's vision so **complete** it can strike an actor as authoriirian. She has been barred fmm dressing moms **after** opening night — many actors do not appreciate getting notes **from** the playwright, night **after** night, about what they should do to finally get it **right**

**entirely stable: a screen door is not a particularly solid partition.**

Clare Coulter, who gave memorable performances in both of Thompson's last two plays, **agrees** with the playwright's assessment of her own creative powers. For Coulter, the plays are "surreal because they deal with the **subconscious** before the conscious has had a chance to order it **safely**." The power of Thompson's writing, Coulter adds, end her experience of playing Pony in *White Biting Dog*, "made me feel I should examine the way I approach my life." Thompson agrees that **this** is the effect she wants her art to have: "When it works best, it's cathartic. **People feel completely** released; they're **shaking**. That's the best reaction. the one I like best. When people say, 'Oh, I was quite impressed,' I want to **punch** them in the face."

THOMPSON'S PLAYS do have the **kinds** of moments she describes, when the audience is **swept** away by the beauty or the emotion of the scene. For me, the most powerful moment in all of Thompson's plays comes near the end of *White Biting Dog*. Pony, who is dead — she has just hanged herself — appears at the movie house in Kirkland Lake where her father works es a projectionist so that she can warn him of the tragic news he is about to receive. She wants to explain her action to him, "in person." Staring into the beam of light from the projector, as the movie continues to run, Pony reassures her father about death:

It's quits nice, if you just give in to it. You know the feeling when you're falling asleep and ya jump awake 'cause you dreamt you slipped on a stair? Well, it's like if you stayed in the slip-if you dove tight down into it and held your breath until you came out the other end. I'm in the holding your breath part right now, so I'm not sure what's on the other end, but I feel like I'm so big I'd barely fit into Kirk Community Centre. . . .

Bill Glassco, who directed *White Biting Dog*, locates the appeal of Thompson's writing in the way it brings back the sensations of **lost childhood**. Glassco praises her imagination: "It connects me to a way I **experienced** the world in my own imagination when I was a **child**. The names — Lomia, Cape Race, Glidden, Toilane, Crease — they are like the names of people I invented as a child, who had complete **biographies** and were absolutely real to me. They say dangerous and **shocking** and **silly** things that for me express the unleashed anarchy of a **child's mind**. In the theatre this **language** is at **once disturbing** (because it connects with raw, **primitive**, forbidden emotions) and **liberating** (hence positive). This is how I believe her plays weave their spell."

Thompson develops her poetic **revelations** and embodies them in vividly eccentric characters, always with a precise view to how the script must be **realized** on stage. She **exercises** a creator's vision so complete that it can strike an actor as authoritarian.

The published version of *White Biting Dog*, for instance, carries this warning:

Because of the extreme and deliberate musicality of this play, any attempts to go against the textual rhythms, such as the breaking up of an unbroken sentence, or the taking of a pause where none is written in are **DISASTROUS**. The effect is like being in a small plane and suddenly turning off the ignition. . . .

Thompson vigorously defends this demanding attitude as her prerogative: "In a first production the mandate **must** be to fulfil the playwright's vision. I think that's **really** important because it'll probably never be fulfilled again. When I write a play I know the characters as well as I know my own mother or father. If I wrote lines that my father would say, and you said, 'Well, I see him with a pipe,' I'd have to say, 'No, actually he doesn't smoke a pipe; he **chain-smokes** cigarettes.' I'd just have to. . . . It's all inside you . . . as if it's a reincarnation."

Thompson "got into a lot of trouble over **this last production**" because of the strictness of her **specifications**. "Actors feel a bit straitjacketed sometimes," she acknowledges. "They're used to dead playwrights. With them, they have to make a lot of it up; they have to do a lot of guesswork. You know, Richard III is actually gay, or something like that. . . . Who knows what Shakespeare thought?" For her **perfectionism**, Thompson has been barred from **dressing** rooms after opening night — many actors do not **appreciate getting notes** from the playwright, night after night, about what they should do to finally get it right.

Bill Glassco, directing *White Biting Dog*, had to deal with Thompson's demand that a director walk a fine line with her plays end found himself caught **between** the writer and the performers: "The actors must feel a **part** of the creative process, as opposed to feeling they are **simply** the playwright's tools; As I recall, I encouraged Judith to explain and expound on the meaning of any **given** moment, but **discouraged** her from **telling** the actors or **showing** them how to **realize** it. Her understanding is invaluable to the &or, her **excluding** them from the **creative process**, destructive. . . . It is never easy. It is often **exhausting**, but because her plays are what they am, the **challenge** for a **director** is extraordinary, end I wouldn't have **missed** it."

Not all theatre people, however, are troubled by the determined Thompson **approach**: Clare Coulter has worked on new plays and **classics** alike, and she muses, "Sometimes it would be nice to phone up Chekhov and ask about **Nina**."

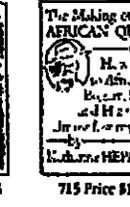
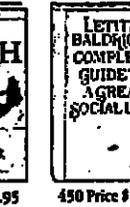
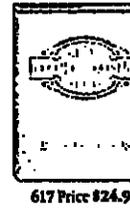
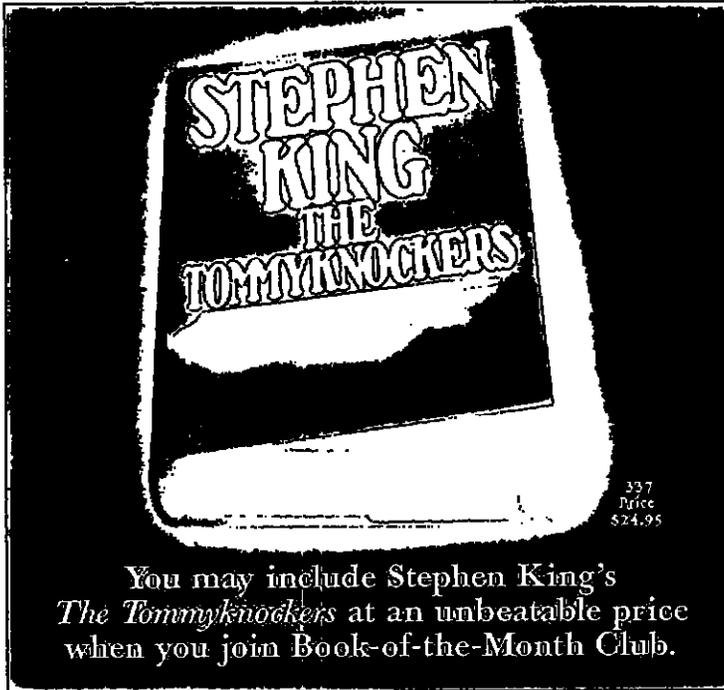
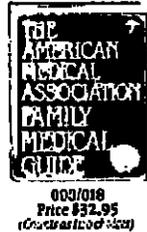
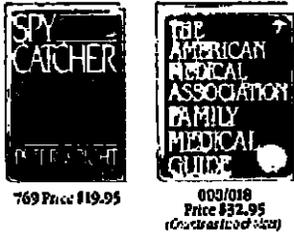
Thompson will probably cut out the middleman altogether, with her next stage play, by directing it herself. Thompson did diit the New York production of *The Crackwalker* and was pleased with the **results**: "I understand my work better than anybody else. I also understand **stagecraft** pretty well, **except** I have to learn to do **this fakey** stuff, and say, 'Oh you were so **brilliant** there.'"

What that next play will be about, however, and when it will be written **remain** a mystery to Thompson. For now, she's collecting images for a feature **film** she's writing, and preparing for the birth of her second **child**, due in April. Writing while pregnant is **difficult** for Thompson; pregnancy, for her, **fulfils** certain needs that have **otherwise** motivated her writing. "It's like-if you have a **full** meal, why would you have anything else?"

But Thompson **continues** to write, and other possible **connections** between biology and writing occur to her. She never knows when an idea for a new script will attack the **unconscious**, invading ha life: "I think it begins the same way a disease begins. One day a **virus** just toddles on into your body and stark to reproduce itself in the **nucleus** of your cells." □



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# The House by the Churchyard: a play with music

"Four monsters, miles high, four giants picked us up out of a dark place where we had been rude and jostled about bumpety bump. ... Hear the scraping of those four little pens. There, yes, someone writing us"

By James Reaney

**ACT ONE SCENE 1:**

*Church bells ring a late hour as a clergyman father returns to his parsonage. Greeting his lop at the door are a family servant, Tabitha, and his sister-in-law, Miss Branwell. The father comes with a box in his arms filled with toys for the children.*

**FATHER** Did the children stay up for me?  
**SERVANT** No. Mr. Brontë. It's long past their bedtime. They wanted to stay up, but nothing doing.  
**AUNT** Their bedtime is seven o'clock, brother, and you should not have brought them toys. for they are still in mourning for their sisters, as well as their departed mother.  
**FATHER** But tomorrow their year of mourning will be over. I shall leave the box here for them, first thing they see when they rise at break of day. Any dinner left for me, Tabitha?  
**AUNT** Those that are late for dinner, brother, must expect an empty plate.  
**SERVANT** Ah, gorn wi'ye, miss. Plenty of leftovers. Why, there's his plate warming on the fender in the back there.

*Exeunt*

*The toy-box has been placed over the trapdoor. We watch a whole night pass: flickering shadows from an expiring fire, moonlight on floor, cloud shadows as a storm passes over. Church bells and a clock. Wind and rain, rustling branches. Rooks. A cart passes by. A bell rings for matins. Children laughing. Three girls, one boy (with red hair) rush into the room and open the box.*

**CHILDREN** Toy soldiers. They each select a soldier, name him.

**CHARLOTTE** The Duke of Wellington.

*And upstage left appears a blond Wellington figure, handsome, Tory Anglo-Irish, as indeed are the children and their father. As Emperor of the Glasstown Confederacy, he and his son Arthur will form the main opposition to the Napoleon figure Branwell develops out of his toy soldier, a Napoleon who becomes Pigtail, then, as the saga of Angria grows in the*

*children's minds, changes into Percy Northangerland, rebellious, Byronic opponent of the Emperor and his son, dark, constantly in a turmoil.*

**ANNE** He resembles John Wesley.  
**EMILY** Sir Walter Scott is mine.  
**BRANWELL** Bonaparte. Napoleon Bonaparte.

*These characters appear upstage: Bonaparte, Wesley (as the Puritanical, Cromwellian adviser Warner Howard Warner), Scott as the Duke of Fidenza. But it is the young Promethean Napoleon we concentrate on.*

*Lean, orclike, a rebel with long block heir, he becomes Branwell's alter ego and eventually destroys his creator. The odd combination of wit, even campiness, with terror and real genius appears in the Abel Gance film, Napoleon. a work the Brontës would much have appreciated. What develops between*



ILLUSTRATION BY GREG CHAGIN

*Wellington's son Arthur, Zamorna, and Napoleon-Percy-Northangerland is a low-hate relationship: Arthur is a stronger Edgar Linton, Perry an aristocratic Heathcliff.*

*With a burst of music, the cast of the entire story pours out from beneath the stage. The children name them and begin to create fictional architecture with them, until servant and aunt enter to drag them off to breakfast. When these latter grown-ups enter, the toy soldier characters all crumple flat on the floor.*

*What the aforesaid burst of music develops into is a ballet with children naming and plot-shaping on the side.*

**BRANWELL** Dark Bonaparte becomes — **Pigtail**. Then Percy Northangerland.

**CHARLOTTE** Fair Wellington becomes the Emperor of the Twelve Soldiers who settle in Africa. His son, Arthur Zamorna.

**ANNE** Quashia Quamina, whose father originally owned those lands of Africa our toy soldiers settled upon.

**EMILY** Maria, ill-fated, and Mary, her daughter equally ill-fated.

**BRANWELL** Edward and Wii Percy, sons of Percy Northangerland who said "to kill them."

**CHARLOTTE** Lady Zenobia Ellrington, bluestocking, a strong wrestler, and a smasher of lo&lug-glasses.

**ANNE** Charlotte's favourite, Mina Laury, gamekeeper's daughter. Ran away with Arthur Zamorna. *Guitar.*

**EMILY** Louisa Vernon and her daughter, Caroline. Courtesans at the court who delight in drawing up lists of those to be executed.-

**BRANWELL** And now for the stealthy valet and bailiff — **Sdeath**, alias Mr. Robert Icing -the scarecrow who controls them all . . . with his . . . pen . . . nnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnknife.

*Servant enters beating a tin dish with a tin spoon*

**SERVANT** Breakfast porridge. Leave your dratted toys and receive some food into your bellies. You canna ate toy soldiers!

**AUNT** *With scissors* Nor play while still in mourning.

**CHILDREN** We're not in mourning. The year of black was over since our sisters and mother died — yesterday.

**AUNT** Then off with these mourning bands.

*Snipping sounds. As she snips the children free, they are banged into the kitchen with a saucepan hit from the servant.*

**SERVANT** Hurry up before it's cold. Good hot gruel.

**AUNT** Time to play with your toys after breakfast. And after your lessons and your sewing, girls, and your Latin and Greek with your father. Branwell.

*Exeunt with groans*

*Music suggests the waking up of the toy soldiers*

**QUASHIA** Someone is writing me.

**WELLINGTON** I am, my black friend, perfectly happy with the script so far. I and my twelve adventurers. . .

**QUASHIA** Yes, Your Majesty, for you came to my father's lands in Africa, came to Ashanteeland and took those lands away fmm him.

**WELLINGTON** Had to, old chap. Your father wouldn't move off them without a bit of a shove. Had to kill him, even. And our gods abetted us in this. Warner Howard Warner, whoever is writing us — the Genii, you say?

**WARNER** Correct, Your Highness. Four monsters, miles high, four giants picked us up out of a dark place where we had been rudely jostled about bump-sty bump, and they sent us to Africa, helped us defeat

the black hordes of his father's nation. Why, we have been settled here for nigh on 20 years.

**WELLINGTON** And when did they build our capital city for us — Verdopolis, I believe 'tis called? Do you remember how impressed we first were at its magnificence?

*A burst of music as Charlotte's drawing of Glasstown/Verdopolis appears on the omnium gatherum backdrop. The city of stupendous glass towers should suggest a looking-glass theme that runs through the story, for this is the city where all dreams ore fulfilled. We see the actors reflected in the glass towers.*

**SONG** Oh, thou great, thou mighty tower!  
Rising up so solemnly  
O'er all this splendid, glorious city:  
This city of the sea;

Thou seem'st as silently I gaze,  
Like a pillar of the sky:  
So lofty is thy structure grey;  
So massive, and so high!

The dome of Heaven is o'er thee hung  
With its maze of silver stars;  
The earth is round about thee spread  
With its eternal bars.

And such a charming doggerel  
As this was \*ever wrote,  
Not even by the mighty  
And high Sir Walter Scott!

**WELLINGTON** Situated at the mouth of the Gambia River for us twelve and our descendants to live in.

**ALL** Glasstown forever.

**WELLINGTON** Yes, we called it Glasstown.

**BONAPARTE** I, Napoleon Bonaparte, later to be changed into that demon of anarchy, Percy Northangerland, never felt so happy in the Glasstown Confederacy. Quashia, I used to plot with your father, Quamina, to drive Wellington and his English pirates back into the sea. But now, Quashia, come and join my band of outlaw rebels. For I am disguised now as someone else — Quashia?

**QUASHIA** How can I leave the Emperor? He is my foster father. Has he not brought me up and taught me how to read and write?

**BONAPARTE** And I will teach you, how to "sc those arts for your people's freedom.

**SCOTT** I, Sir Walter Scott, was appalled at how much of this was Lifted from my novels.

**WESLEY** I, John Wesley, find the settlers here in Africa most unruly parishioners. On the Sabbath day they bait bulls and bears. During sermon time they instead frequent the alehouses.

**ALL** Hear the scraping Of those four little pens. There, yes, someone writing us. No control have we over our destinies. There. I saw them. Who? The Genii. The Four tall, tall, tall, tall Monsters. Who tyrannize us, control us, boss us. So tall, tall, tall, their heads touch the sky. Hide your eyes. Don't look at them. Ommmmmm they, will pick you out they . . . kill us for their sport.

If you live by the sunny fountain,  
If you live in the streets of a town,  
If you live on the top of a mountain,  
Or if you wear a crown,  
The Genii meddle with you.

Think not that in your graves  
You will be quiet there,  
The Genii will come with spades;  
To dig you up they dare.  
Genii will meddle with you.

Even if in your palaces,  
Among your courtiers there,  
The Genii meddle with you,  
For mischief is their care.  
Genii must meddle with you.

come Britons, then, arise  
And let your swords be bare,  
And with the Geniis' blood,  
Let them be covered fair.  
They shall not meddle with you.

We now hear the creaking of cart wheels. Enter a scarecrow figure, a valet, a jockey: Branwell in disguise, pushing a large handcart.

ALL Sdeath.  
SDEATH Cackling Yaw, that iss my name. B.  
QUASHIA Yes, there's one of them pretends to be one of as.  
BONAPARTE He is a spy — fmm the camp of the Genii. He is most dangerous, and someday I shall have to kill him. Bed hair. I notice that whenever he appears . . . someone dies.  
SDEATH Mesdames et messieurs, I represent the authorial impulse to kill its own creations. I point at you and . . . you die.

To illustrate this he "kills" several actors and singers, comma& them to be carted off in the "cold meat cart."

Next he attacks the orchestra whose sounds grow thinner as a result and more unpredictable. Just as the conductor topples —

WESLEY Nay, Fellowship of the Twelve, all is not fate. Sometimes the monsters who write us, revive us. See — there they are. Let us pray to them for revival. Let us . . .

Now we see huge shadows of the four children on the backdrop with an even huger scolding aunt telling them to tidy up their toys.

ALL They are coming to get us.

But thesilhouette curtain lifts and we see only four quite small children advancing downstage to collect their toys and tell one more story by the fire. Magically, the singers have changed into tiny toy soldiers scattered about the living mom floor.

#### SCENE 2 PIGTAIL

The children sort out their toys

BRANWELL You know, there was once an Englishman came to visit Glasstown, and a strange thing happened to him. He met — he met — Pigtail.

Charlotte. Anne end Emily ore sewing shirts

CHARLOTTE Pigtail is nine feet high. His specialty is kidnaping children, torturing them, or selling them as cheap labour to the cotton mills.

ANNE AND EMILY He is also very French.

In shadow ploy on the omnium gatherum backdrop

PIGTAIL With long queue Sire, you vent chip room to lie down in iv good night's rest?

ANGLAIS Oh yes, please. All the hotels in Glasstown are

full up. I have just travelled miles and miles to land in Africa and . . . no mom, no accommodation.

Now a stylized silhouette walk through bock alleys leads to a room almost filled with a four-poster 'bed that has closed curtains.

ANGLAIS Curious choice of colour for the floor of a bedroom.

PIGTAIL Bed mud colour. Very chic. Very à la mode. Giggles. Tacky in bed? Close curtains. Lullaby softly, softly.

After Pigtail gives a signal, the top port of the four-poster disappears to reveal the Englishman tied to on operating table. A giant cadaverous medic appears.

DR BALDRY Permettez-vous, monsieur, couper en demi?  
PIGTAIL Ees Doctor Badry. Say hello, Anglais, to my medical master who is about to dissect you alive.

ANGLAIS The colour of the floor puzzles me no longer. It's been painted with . . . human blood. Screams and shadow play fades

BRANWELL But then, Charley, just then your Duke of Wellington and his gendarmes knocked on the door and spoiled Pigtail's fen.

GIRLS We trust not yours as well.

BRANWELL Always sewing.

GIRLS Your annual supply of shirts, Branwell. Always scribbling — you can't even sew yourself a handkerchief. let alone a shirt.

Sinister sewing music. Branwell will die first. They will one day provide him with funeral clothes.

BRANWELL No. but I can write with both hands.

CHARLOTTE Tales of vivisection in seedy down-at-heel hotels?

BRANWELL My hem has a club foot.

CHAR- My hem has two club feet.

BRANWELL Listen. I can write PAUSE this.

#### SCENE 3 JUDGEMENT

FOUR CHILDREN In the house by the churchyard I twelve-year-old dream of the court of Glasstown — the Emperor presiding. At his right-hand sits his son, Arthur. At his left, his foster son, Quashia. On such a day es Glasstown's great year brings forth. On such a day.

EMPEROR (WELLINGTON) Two items today on the agenda, gentleman: One pleasant, one the opposite. Pleasant first. May I present my eldest son, Arthur, whom today I raise to principedom. I name him today, the Duke of Zamorna. Applause. That is no empty title I affirm by also giving to him, on certain conditions, a small kingdom to be his own. A mop is brought forward That chunk of land bordered by the Etrei River in its confluence with the Niger. Arthur, this is yours to do with as you wish.

QUASHIA Hey, foster Papa. What about my birthday?

EMPEROR On what day of what year were you born, lad?

QUASHIA Pause I don't know, sire. Laughter Every day is my birthday.

He scowls at the court. □

These are the opening scenes of *The House by the Churchyard*, a play in progress by James Reaney, with music by John Beckwith.

# The critic as artist

The ideal play, to theatre reviewers of the '50s and '60s, was a thing of dour intensity, meant to subvert complacency and afflict the comfortable. But with the departure of Nathan Cohen in 1970 a cloud seemed to lift

By Ronald Bryden

**Canadian Drama and the Critics**, edited by L.W. Conolly, Talonbooks, 319 pages, \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 251 7).

GRADUALLY the tools for a proper understanding of our theatre in Canada, where it came from and where it may be going, are beginning to assemble themselves. Three years ago, three new anthologies of Canadian plays, compiled by Richard Perkyns, Richard Plant and Jerry Wasserman, suddenly made it possible to look at the last 40 years of Canadian drama in aggregate, as a coherent entity. Now Leonard Conolly, until recently chairman of the drama department at the University of Guelph, has brought out a companion volume, expanded from a special issue of *Canadian Drama*, of reviews and comments on the 31 plays the anthologies included. (For good measure, he also throws in reviews of four plays they slighted mysteriously: David French's *Leaving Home*, *Theatre Passe Muraille's Farm Show*, James Reaney's *Sticks and Stones*, the first of his Donnelly's Trilogy, and John Murrell's *Waiting for the Parade*.) It's now possible not only to read the plays, but to ponder their reception: how they struck their contemporaries, what they meant to their time.

Obviously, the volume's greatest usefulness will be to teachers and theatre buffs who use it as a "ancillary to the three anthologies. But on its own, it's interesting for the opportunity it provides to examine what Canadian critics have expected or demanded of the theatre, and by implication of Canadian arts in general, in the four decades since the Second World War. Not that we've had many critics who openly prescribed what kinds of art we should produce — for most of our history, the demand has been simply for something, anything, so long as it could be called art and was Canadian. But from the reception critics have given to the Canadian drama they finally were offered, strong, unacknowledged likes and dislikes, expectations and requirements, can be deduced. Even more interestingly, it's clear that there has been almost a 180-degree turnaround in these requirements and expectations within the period covered by the volume.

In 1950, John Coulter's *Riel* was praised for bringing to light, and demystifying from black-and-white national myth into complex historical fact, an episode from Canada's "darker past." One or two critics complained that, in his desire to show all the ambiguities of the story, Coulter failed to offer a clear image of *Riel*. But on the whole, the play was commended for its efforts to strip legend and partisan prejudice from the harsh, involved historical facts of *Riel's* two rebellions. Clearly, the playwright's function was seen as correcting popular imagination by confronting audiences with painful truths.

This is the underlying tone of most of the criticism of the 1950s and 1960s. Robertson Davies' *At My Heart's Core* (1950) is commended for showing the hardships and cultural deprivations of Ontario's pioneer days. John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1967) is welcomed for its exposure of conditions in Canadian reformatory schools, and its unsparing depiction of their sexual politics. George Ryga's *Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) is hailed for its revelation of the ugly underside of Canadian society seen by the deracinated Indians of our cities, while David Freeman's *Creeps* is commended for the lack of sugar or sentimentality with which it documents the



lives of men disabled by cerebral palsy in a sheltered workshop. The playwrights are judged by the extent to which they subvert complacency, afflict the comfortable, and generally prevent Canadians from consoling themselves with the belief that they inhabit the best of possible countries in the best of possible worlds.

Such goals for drama are certainly praiseworthy, but it's startling how few other goals are implied by the criticisms of the '50s and '60s. One has to reconstruct around both plays and criticisms the untroubled affluence of most of those years, the context of the popular culture of those first decades of television. You would need to leaf through old copies of *Liberty and the Star Weekly*, studying the advertisements filled with children with cheeks like Okanagan apples, blonde young mothers in dainty aprons, Brylcreemed dads in leisure shirts and new convertibles, to begin to comprehend the dour intensity of the theatre these reviews evoke. Clearly it is seen as a serious alternative, for serious people, to the mindless cheerfulness of a society whose notions of entertainment come from Disneyland, *The Music Man* and the Hollywood of Doris Day and Rock Hudson. Yes, it comes over as depressingly one-sided and unbalanced. But what is one to call the society which turned old people into "golden agers" and cemeteries into "gardens of ML"? Balanced?

All the same, it's a relief to find the tide of criticism turning, around 1970, toward greater openness to amusement and fantasy in Canadian theatre. A cloud seems to lift with the departure of Nathan Cohen, who took even *Rita Joe* to task for adorning its useful documentation of social injustice with such frivolities as symbolic staging and dream sequences. I was delighted to discover that William Fruet's *Wedding in White*, which in reading seemed to me almost a parody of long-faced Canadian breast-beating and self-loathing, was received by its critics as black comedy, Alberta's answer to Joe Orton. At least, that seems to be what they're saying.

The great change appears to have come with the vogue for collective creations, such as *The Farm Show* and *1837*. Social purpose and desire to be useful are still apparent, but actors realize better than playwrights, perhaps, that the audience which will pay for dramatized sermons is a minority one. Once the critics have tasted entertainment from Canadian stages, there is no going back. Michael Cook is reproved for the harsh austerity

of his pictures of Newfoundland life, & void of "the Newfoundlander's legendary warmth, hospitality, indomitable spirit and capacity for enjoying life..." Similarly, Aviva Ravel's *Dispossessed* is berated for omitting the charm and sentiment (*chutzpah* and *schmaltz*) of Montreal Jewish domesticity. From a theatre of educated indignation on behalf of the downtrodden, we appear to be moving towards a populist drama whose object is not to expose the unromantic facts of history but to weave entertaining national myths such as Alan Stratton's *Rexy* and John Gray's *Billy Bishop Goes to War: Poor Job* Coulter. If he were alive, someone would be asking him for permission to turn *Riel* into a collectively-improvised musical fantasy: *Red River Rag*, perhaps, or *Tim Louis and John A. Show*. □

## REVIEW

### Branching out

By Merit Czarniecki

**Local Boy Makes Good: Three Musicals** by John Gray, Talonbooks, 206 pages, \$11.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 248 7).

EVERY BOOK REVIEW stark with the title, but few begin by reviewing the title. This one does. The three musicals in question — *18 Wheels*, *Rock and Roll*, and *Don Messer's Jubilee* — certainly do prove that John Gray, born in Truro, Nova Scotia, 40-odd years ago, has made his mark in the world of Canadian theatre. But there's a catch. Isn't John Gray's most famous musical *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, and didn't *Billy Bishop* close in New York despite favourable reviews, inscribing its name on the media's honour roll of "Canadian plays that didn't make it on Broadway"? So there's also defiance in that title: it's about time the lingering odour of that "failure" was officially dispelled.

The title doesn't mention the introduction and three prefaces, all written by Gray in his most engaging polemical style. They wrestle with the famous Frye question "Where is here?" not as a foray into cultural nationalism, but through the personal experience of a local boy. He tells us, in *18 Wheels*, that the highway and its truckers are metaphors for the country in which he lives; in *Rock and Roll*, that he and hundreds of thousands of his generation were suckled on American rock music (and that's okay, because it's not the influence but what you do with it that counts); and in *Don Messer's Jubilee*, that the middlemen between the people of his country and the artists who

incarnate and articulate their hearts and minds too often commit cultural suicide in a misguided struggle to appear "popular."

That's what we get — in musical theatre parlance, the "book" without the melodies. A necessary omission but still a loss. Gray's music is occasional in the best sense; his gift for matching word and lyric is unsurpassed. He for one says he's glad the music isn't there — because he wants us to read the words, to grasp the ideas and think. No problem — the words do stand alone, especially in *Rock and Roll*, a dub rap *tour de force*.

But Gray's messages ultimately overwhelm *Don Messer's Jubilee*, where bitterness runs deep. He doesn't mention it, but the closest touring production ever got to Toronto was the outskirts — Markham, to be precise. Nobody in Sophisto City wanted to risk a show about a bunch of Maritime square-dancers axed from CBC-TV two decades ago. Never mind, Toronto's loss was country Canada's gain. But those Toronto producers were probably right in gauging their audience, and that is part of Gray's point. What the CBC killed when it dropped the program "Do" Messer's Jubilee" was not just a show but an audience. By not reading its audiences correctly, the CBC undermined its listeners' confidence in a major cultural institution — and in themselves.

In effect, the CBC told them, "You're wrong to like Don Messer," and TV being what it is; many people, especially in the densely urbane centres, believed it. It's no coincidence that Gray's relationship with the CBC has always been hate-hate at best, even though the Corp. grudgingly showed the brilliant videofilms he helped make out of *Billy Bishop and Rock and Roll* (the video is titled *The King of Friday Night*).

Gray's diversification from the



musicals in this book to screen versions, novels and film scripts is the logical extension of lessons he learned in a decade of writing for the stage. As these plays and prefaces demonstrate, Gray has always been attuned to form and conventions. Whether in a barn watching *The Farm Show* or in a pub listening to the local band, he saw audiences responding to their own forms of story-telling, audiences uncomfortable with the conventions of artifice in art, "an enter-

prise," Gray says, "that in Canada usually means imitating something from someplace else."

But by the same token, there was no reason that those audiences should forever prefer the forms Gray and Paul Thompson and Rick Salutin evolved from such observations, nor do Gray and Salutin now feel restricted to theatrical forms in their communication with audiences. New Canadian theatre reflects the fact that audiences watch more television and film than they did before. That in itself is not bad or deplorable or wonderful — it just is, and protean artists like Gray naturally move with it.

That title again? How about "Local Boy Made Good"? These aren't just three musicals by John Gray. They are three acts in Gray's *Tempest*, a theatrical odyssey that ends, ironically and aptly, with the local boy leaving the stage — and magically reappearing on the TV monitor in the lobby. □

## REVIEW

### A hero for our time

By Paul Wilson

**The Vaněk Plays: Four Authors, One Character**, edited by Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, University of British Columbia, 258 pages, 817.95 paper (ISBN 0 7748 0267 7).

IN 1975, the Czech playwright Václav Havel dashed off a one-act play based on his experiences working in a brewery the year before. He wrote it mainly to entertain his friends, many of whom, like him, had been banned from having their works published or performed in Czechoslovakia and as a result were reduced to reading them to each other and circulating them clandestinely among a small, interested readership in typewritten versions — a form of publishing for which the generic term *samizdat* had been coined in the Soviet Union some years before.

The play — called *Audience* — is, in theatre parlance, a two-hander, consisting of a conversation between Ferdinand Vaněk, a shy but principled dissident writer now working as an unskilled labourer in a brewery, and his boss, a drunken maltster who is trying to persuade Vaněk to write reports on himself to the secret police in exchange for an easier job. Although Vaněk never says very much, his quiet diity seems to goad the maltster into revealing his own misery, the misery of a helpless victim of totalitarian manipulation.

As Havel points out in a" afterword written especially for this present collection, *Audience was a great success, not only among his friends, but also with the general public who had managed to read it in samizdat form. Encouraged by the response, Havel went on to write two more "Vaněk plays," Unveiling* (sometimes translated as *Private View*), in which a well-off couple show Vaněk their newly renovated apartment and suggest to him that he give up his dissident ways and join the comfortable but politically compromised middle class; and *Protest*, in which a prominent writer explains to Vaněk in elaborate detail why he cannot, in good conscience, sign his name to an appeal to release an arrested folk-singer.

Although banned at home, Havel's three one-acters were immensely successful abroad, so much so that he once ruefully wrote to his wife, Olga, from prison (where he spent almost four years from 1979 to 1983) that he was afraid the world would forget his more substantial full-length dramas like *The Memorandum*, *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration*, or *The Beggar's Opera*. But perhaps the most important sign that Havel had hit a significant nerve was the fact that some of Havel's friends took the character over and began writing Vaněk plays of their own.

*The Vaněk Plays* includes Havel's three original one-acters (two of them in lively new translations by the Czech-American novelist Jan Novák); three plays by the prolific Czech novelist and playwright Pavel Kohout, who is now living in Vienna, one by actor and writer Pavel Landovský, also living in Vienna, and finally, one by Jiří Dienstbier, a former Communist foreign correspondent whom the vagaries of Eastern European politics led to share a prison cell with Václav Havel, for the same "crime" (subversion) in the early 1980s.

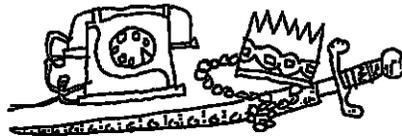
Each of these men has written a Vaněk play (more in Kohout's case) according to his own lights. Kohout has put Vaněk in three situations that reflect Kohout's own experiences and his own penchant, as a writer, to be more interested in the private lives of people who are agents of state power than he is in the nature of that power or of those who, like Vaněk, oppose it. Kohout's Vaněk runs into trouble trying to get a licence for his dog (*Permit*); he is toyed with by police investigators in a wonderful parody of the "liberal" secret police interrogation (*Morass*); and he finds himself a guest on a "Austria" talk show where his fate as a dissident is consistently misunderstood. This last play, *Safari*, is the weakest of the three; they all, however, show a tendency towards superficial comedy — that is, comedy in which the humour is

lathered on from the outside.

Dienstbier's contribution, *Reception*, has Vaněk in prison, where he meets his old friend the maltster, who has also fallen foul of the Jaw and is busy setting up more cosy little schemes inside the prison aimed at getting himself a" early amnesty. Again, Vaněk is tempted to help. Dienstbier's play has witty dialogue and is packed with information about prison life, but it lacks a deeper dramatic tension; there is plenty of conflict between the characters and their prison surroundings, but not enough between (or within) the characters themselves to make it dramatically interesting.

Landovský's play, *Arrest*, is the best of the "secondary" Vaněk plays. It is set in a call of prisoners who are different in enough essential ways to constitute a small universe, into which Vaněk is then thrown". The unfolding power struggle among the prisoners is gripping in human as well as political terms, and the dialogue is infused with pungent, down-to-earth common sense, the kind one fervently hopes will be the eventual downfall of the present regime. Perhaps it's not surprising, after all, because Landovský brings a" actor's perspective to writing, and he knows instinctively what audiences are hungry for; real-clashes of personality, real clashes of ideas, real entertainment. Landovský's play rises superbly to that occasion.

The editor, Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, has also written the definitive study of the contemporary Czech drama — *The Silenced Theatre*, published here by the University of Toronto Press. Her lucid introduction to the Vaněk plays provides a"



excellent context, and she has included statements by the playwrights regarding their intentions. Most important of all, she has worked hard to get good translations, some of which have been staged and some not.

Modern Czech dramatic writing is getting increasing exposure in Europe and the U.S.A. where Havel's work is regularly presented at the Public Theatre in New York. Canada, unfortunately, is lagging behind. Apart from Milan Kundera's play *Jacques and His Master* (which is hardly typical), some CBC versions of Havel's work and a few amateur productions. Canadian theatre-goers — and this obviously includes many theatre professionals as well — have yet to discover the delights and insights of modern Czech drama.

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## REVIEW

# Three out of five

By Carol Bolt

New Works 1, Playwrights Canada, 548 pages, \$16.95 paper (ISBN 0 88754 4517).

PLAYWRIGHTS CANADA'S new release, *New Works One*, contains five first plays by five new writers. It's a large, attractive, well-bound book but a very uneven selection. Why these plays?

It happens that all five writers are from either Manitoba or Alberta, but we're told in the brief preface that geography is incidental. It happens that all five writers are men. Does that mean anything? Probably not.

Are they, as the one-page preface tells us, "strong first plays that merit further production and attention?" For the most part, the answer is yes.

The first three plays are particularly strong. *The Shunning* by Patrick Friesen is a verse drama populated by living, breathing characters whose relationships

are drawn with warmth and love and humour. The author has a real talent for creating real people who are all the more believable because of their flaws. Here, the central character describes his mother:

she brought out a spool of number 10 thread and tied my ankle to a tree with a five-foot length "break that and you get strapping" she knew how to torture a boy, how to make the world small.

Michael McKinlay's *Walt and Roy*, which was nominated for this year's Governor General's Award, is a solidly built arid wickedly funny two-hander in which Walt Disney, drawn as a larger-than-life genius, terrorizes and amazes the common man, his brother Roy. This gifted playwright creates unforgettable characters. Walt is mercurial and dangerous. Roy is endearing, and the conflict between them is electric.

Lyle Victor Albert wrote *The Prairie Church of Buster Galloway*. It's an eccentric sort of comedy about (mostly) male bonding and (mostly) rural values. It has a kind of raw dramatic energy, but the way its characters justify and venerate blackmail, theft, and greed is almost frightening. If these characters told the Eastern bastards to freeze to death in the dark, you'd know they meant it. The dialogue is lively: "That hurt. Even

though we were fighting, that hurt."

The other two plays in the volume are much less interesting. *Visiting Hours* by Murray McRae is an old-fashioned sort of play about a family and the events around the mother's final illness. It's an amiable and untaxing piece that wears its heart on its sleeve, sentimental in the nicest way, but finally unambitious, unadventurous, and unfortunately a little unbelievable. (The son is a doctor who became a playwright. His play is conveniently playing in town, although he lives in England. The family leafs through a scrapbook, oblivious to the medical staff with a crash cart who minister to Mom a few feet down the hall.)

*House* by Nick Mitchell is set in "a well-preserved Victorian house in the centre of Winnipeg," but the playwright really wants to explore territory in a landscape most kindly described as Pinteresque. It's a very derivative piece (there are also echoes of Who's *Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), and it's one of those plays in which people "have that drink now." In fact, in the first eight pages of play, Roger pours Angela two drinks and a cup of tea.

These plays were all first produced in the early to mid-eighties, and with the exception of *Walt and Roy*, they have not been produced extensively since, even though both *Buster Galloway* and *House* were filmed for television.

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Playwrights Canada's hope of bringing new work to a wider audience is laudable, but perhaps more thought should have gone into selection of the plays in this anthology. Is something for everyone a good idea if it means everyone pays \$16.95? Although at least three of these plays deserve a much wider readership, they are so unlike one another that they might have been better packaged as single titles. □

## REVIEW

### Laugh tracks

By Martin Townsend

Four New Comedies, Playwrights Canada, 364 pages, \$0.00 paper (ISBN 0 88754 427 4).

*What Happens at the No Nancy Summit*, Molière's *Tartuffe* adapted by Richard Ouzounian, Ms Fit Press, 71 pages, \$7.95 paper QSBN 0 921683 00 6).

WHETHER ONE reads comedies to nourish giddy dreams of theatre or just for the joy of laughing out loud, *Four New Comedies* is sobering reading on the whole. The collection gets off to a bad start with Warren Graves's *Would You Like a Cup of Tea?* This dated one-act play about an unemployed English ex-military man, his ever-loyal Cockney "batman," and the big-breasted "birds" who chase them, win them, and will no doubt domestic them is lost to space and time. It seems to have a lot more to do with London, England, in 1963, the year the author emigrated from there to Edmonton, than with Canada in the 1980s. Aside from its irrelevance, it's vulgar, it's unoriginal, and it leaves the laughter meter, like the heart, completely unmoved.

Suzanne Fiis *Monkeyshines* seems at first as though it might bring much-needed relief. A full-length treatment of the advantages old age has over youth in matters of love, *Monkeyshines* is fairly witty, fast-paced, and cute — a bit too cute. Again the setting is clearly not Canada, though it's clearly not Indiana, as it's alleged to be, either.

The *Late Blumer*, by John Lazarus, has a better handle on the cuteness quotient but is just as reminiscent of TV sitcoms (here "Family Ties" rather than "Golden Girls"). It's about a modem Rip Van Winkle, a hippie whose bad acid trip in the '60s has sent him headlong into the '80s with "a message about the destiny of the world." His friend's teen-age son, the Michael J. Fox character, is sceptical, to say the least. Lazarus does succeed in wiving some good ol' '60s feelings but

ties it all together too neatly, as though the credits were about to roll before the final commercials.

*Four New Comedies* wraps it up with Colleen Curran's *Cake-Walk*, easily the b&t of this lot. By aiming to say less than Finlay and Lazarus do, Curran ends up saying much more: her characters, entrants in a cake-baking contest, are flesh and blood and constitute interesting items in themselves. *Cake-Walk* is funny, moving, and doesn't pull any of the cheap tricks of play-writing too evident elsewhere in this volume.

Richard Ouzounian, author of the introduction to (and apologist for) *Four New Comedies*, is also the man behind *What Happens at the No Nancy Summit*. In this case, there's a man behind "the man behind," because *What Happens* is an adaptation of Molière's *Tartuffe*. It takes some nerve to convert one of the classics of comic theatre to a satire of Brian Mulroney (whom Orgon here resembles) and Ronald Reagan (*Tartuffe*), but Ouzounian has plenty of that. The result is much more amusing than it has any right to be; considering the task, and Ouzounian must be congratulated for making a great old play topical again. Unfortunately, such topicality quickly passes, and *What Happens* must be destined for dusty library shelves in the near future. □

## REVIEW

### Phantom of the opera

By Bert Cowan

*Farther West* and *New World*, by John Murrell, Coach House, 173 pages, \$12.30 paper (ISBN 0 88910 289 9).

Puccini is the key to understanding these plays. Urjo Kareta, in an introduction, makes much more than he needs to — of the extent to which Murrell is influenced by opera. This is almost immediately apparent to a reader of the works, and must be even more so to an audience attending a performance. The music Murrell has provided is not in itself operatic, taking the form in *Farther West* of two songs — one faintly bawdy, the other romantic — but the form of the plays is such that, with just some necessary paring down, they would make quite serviceable opera libretti.

He calls *Farther West* a romance, but it isn't. He calls *New World* a comedy, but it isn't. The first is a tragedy, the saga of a prostitute end madam making her way westward to the Pacific through late

19th-century Canada in search of freedom from rules, laws, and judges. She is relentlessly pursued by an ambiguously motivated Javert-like figure, Constable Seward (maybe a bit of wordplay in that name?). She does encounter a kind of romance along the way, but the dream and the pursuit are the core of the drama. Puccini is not mentioned in the play, but I sensed his presence without knowing that he was going to make a kind of appearance in the second piece, *New World*, which is a fantasy. *Farther West* might well be subtitled "Ten Characters in Search of Puccini" — even though they might be more likely to find Benjamin Britten.

As noted, *New World* is a fantasy, set in the summer of the present year, in California-like weather. In what the



dramatist clearly regards as a fantasy land — southwestern Vancouver Island. Here, people from four backgrounds come together. Bob, in his fifties, is an egocentric photographer, given to taking self-portraits, transplanted from Britain. Larry, his younger brother transplanted to the United States, has found happiness as a producer of rock videos in California. Bet, their sister, doesn't seem to belong anywhere, and she functions as a kind of chorus. Bob's male companion and cook, Jean, is a French Canadian. Larry's wife and stepdaughter, Carla and Linda, are Americans, and Bob has a young English-Canadian apprentice, Peter, who interacts, in ways that are not quite clear, with Linda.

The national undercurrents seem too strong in this very Americanized part of Canada. (Nearby Englishy Victoria is an irrelevance.) The sexual undercurrents are even stronger and more convincing.

Puccini is very much a real presence, through Jean and Carla's adulation of him, and through quotations from his music, mostly from *La Fanciulla del West* (Girl of the Golden West). After much game-playing and posturing by all hands, two peculiar triangles (or trios) take shape: Carla, Jean, and Larry; and Bob, Peter, and Linda, successfully blurring hetero- and homosexual borders.

Although Puccini dominates the fantasy, an even greater magician takes over at the end, on a beach at night, as Bob and Bet, quote from *The Tempest*.

There are things in the writing to quibble about. Murrell really should look up the meaning of "livid," which he applies to a burnt hand; and there are peculiarities of punctuation, which may perhaps be forgiven in writing for the car;

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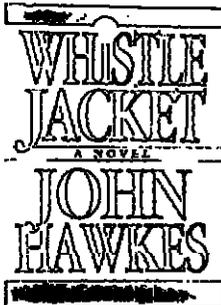


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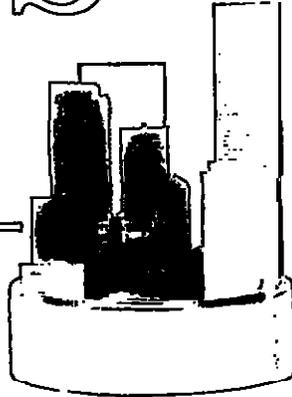
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but two, and even **three** exclamation marks **together**, and a combination of exclamation mark and question mark is surely going a bit far!!!?

For this reader, New *World is the better*

of the two plays. Having missed its first production, he would eagerly attend a revival; but *Farther West* he can do without. It is **overwhelmingly** and bleakly wintry (despite a **summer scene**) and not

**unoperatic for that. But it has none of.** for instance, the aching but **romantic** desolation of the early-morning scene in *La Bohème* when **Mimi learns that** she is dying. It is simply depressing. 0

## FEATURE REVIEW

### Très Canadian

We now have a generation of actors and writers who know what Canadians are really like — how they speak, move, and think

By Paul Wilson

**Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada**, by Alan Filewod, University of Toronto Press, 214 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 8020 6669 0).

ONCE HEARD a Canadian literary pundit tell an American publisher that one of the most popular Canadian plays of the past 25 years was about the Saskatchewan Wheat Board. The remark, delivered at a Toronto cocktail party, caused some merriment, and the American might have been excused for thinking her leg was being polled. At any rate, she did not immediately inquire if the North American rights were still available. She didn't even ask what the name of the play was. But the pundit was not pulling her leg. The play does exist, it's called *Paper Wheat*, and it's one of the six Canadian documentary dramas examined in depth by Alan Filewod in this new study.

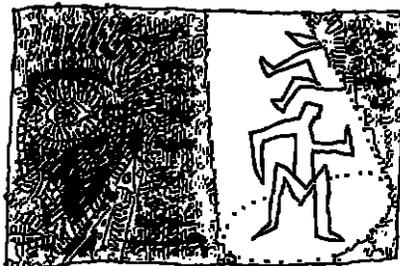
*Paper Wheat* was truly in the Canadian grain. Collectively created by Andy Tahn and Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre Company, using techniques inspired by Paul Thompson's *The Farm Show*, it was unexpectedly successful locally and went on, refined and polished by director Guy Sprung, to become a national bit. After it had passed through Quebec, a reviewer there remarked: "Donc, le show est bien fait, bien pensé mais trop bien huilé. . . . C'est très Canadian, if you know what I mean."

*Collective Encounters* attempts to get to the bottom of what is "très Canadian" about the wave of documentary drama that appeared in Canada, mostly during the 1970s, when a revival of nationalist sentiment combined with a spirit of experimentation to create a new body of C&dim plays that were truly of their place and time.

Filewod begins with the notion — he calls it a cliché, but it is more like an *idée fixe* — that the English Canadian imagination tends naturally towards documentary or non-narrative forms. Although Filewod rejects the notion at

once as mere hypothesis, it is not hard to see why it should have taken root. For years, the expression "documentary" was practically synonymous with the National Film Board. In addition to being our major cultural presence abroad, the NFB provided several pm-television generations of Canadians with their only window on the rest of the country, and it would be surprising if the NFB's largely didactic approach had not left its mark on malleable young imaginations. That approach assumes that the dramatic presentation of information can entertain and have a political impact — political, that is, in the widest sense of the word. Much of Filewod's argument, therefore, circles around how the various theatres handle information as an element of their plays.

Filewod discusses the various traditions, both Canadian and foreign, that



contributed to the development of documentary theatre: the Louis Riel plays of John Coulter, the dramatic agitpmp of the German innovator Erwin Piscator, Joan Littlewood's left-wing Theatre Workshop and the "interventionist" community collectives of Peter Cheesewood. Only the latter two have had any demonstrable emulators in Canadian documentary theatre: Littlewood through George Luscombe's work, and Cheesewood through the documentaries of Ken Kramer at Regina's Globe Theatre and possibly the Mimmers' Troupe of Newfoundland. Otherwise, Filewod concludes, Canadian documentaries have tended to shy away from the kind of

ideological polemics that were popular in Europe, and focus more on what he calls "authenticating" community experience and transforming it into art — in other words, presenting heightened, dramatized versions of life in a particular community or region as the actors perceived it.

Not surprisingly, the theatres responsible for developing documentary drama were all "alternative" theatres with populist and sometimes overtly political programmes. One of the most interesting things about Filewod's study is the fact that he draws clear distinctions between the various companies, the directors, their techniques, their aims, and their audiences. The tendency in mainstream Canadian theatre criticism has been to shove collectives dismissively into a single bag ("the collective") and then declare it dead or at least moribund, a phase that Canadian theatre had to go through but has now fortunately outgrown. It is true that some aspects of the documentary — its political predictability for one thing, its earnestness for another — do not survive changes of time and taste very well. But Filewod's book is a reminder of how many of the movement's discoveries have survived and gone on to enrich other forms of theatre. For the first time, we now have a generation of actors, writers, directors, designers, and administrators who understand the importance of knowing what Canadians are really like — how they speak, how they move, what they think about, and what speaks to them and moves them.

Filewod heats *Theatre Passe Muraille's The Farm Show* as the prototype of the Canadian documentary play, and he sees Paul Thompson's unique contribution to the form in the way he combined the documentary with collective creation. He contrasts Thompson's approach with that of other directors, such as George Luscombe, Ken Kramer or Chris Brookes of the Mimmers' Troupe of Newfoundland, each of whom in his own way was more overtly political than Thompson

and, conversely, less influential. Brookes, for example, liked lighting, partisan plays (such as *Buchans: A Mining Town*) that could be used as tools in ongoing social conflicts, and his plays were frequently sponsored by political organizations. The Mummies' last play, *They Shoot Baby Seals, Don't They?*, was sponsored by the Newfoundland government. By contrast, Paul Thompson's notion of why a play should get done is far vaguer, less articulate and less geared to occasion (his two Olympic Games plays, one of them touring Canada in connection with the Calgary games, are exceptions) but he's absolutely clear about his own mistakes, once he makes them. His only brush with commissioned plays (Oft, for the Town of Petrolia) left him determined "ever to do it again."

I'm not sure Filewod's final study, of work by Edmonton's Catalyst Theatre, really belongs in this book. Behind that work lie the theories of the "theatre of intervention," quasi-dramatic forms of collective socio- and psychodrama that use the techniques and resources of drama for pedagogical, political, and therapeutic ends. Along these lines, Catalyst Theatre developed plays intended for specific audiences who were expected to take part in various ways in the performances and, indeed, whose participation was required if the play was to be complete. *It's About Time*, for example, was performed inside prisons. The question is not whether this kind of thing is legitimate but whether we are right to call it "theatre." To me, plays designed for captive audiences violate a basic, unspoken agreement in the traditional relationship between theatre and theatre-goer: the theatre gets absolute freedom of expression (within reason, of course: this is Canada, if you know what I mean), and the audience remains free to come and go, to be approving, critical, or indifferent. After reading Filewod's generally sympathetic analysis of a performance of *It's About Time* for prisoners, I felt that instead of pushing the frontiers of theatre back, the play had stepped outside them altogether into a" area where drama no longer engages with society at large, but merely gets put to "use" in closed shops.

Filewod's book does a" impressive, if somewhat detached and dispassionate job of making sense of a mountain of fascinating material. His book should encourage people to look at the theatre they see around them in more complex ways, to avoid making sterile generalizations about "collectives" and "documentaries," and perhaps to see that behind all them wheatfields and Hockey Night in Canada, real life and real arguments go on. And the best of our theatre documentaries found new ways of putting that life on stage. □

## BRIEF REVIEWS

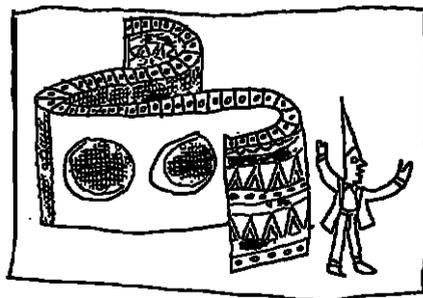
### BALANCE SHEETS

**Just Rewards**, by David Olive. Key Porter. 298 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 1 55013 153 6).

THIS IS a book about business ethics. The author, a practising Canadian business journalist, has a sure eye for the compelling turn of phrase and colourful quote. Ivan Boesky, whose insider trading earned him a \$100-million-dollar fine, is appraised by his sister-in-law in the following terms: "He is the most avaricious, arrogant piece of sewage I've ever met." The author also sates our natural interest in the details of crimes and indiscretions committed by rich, powerful, brilliant people.

The author's purpose, however, is not merely to entertain. The business of ethics and the ethics of business are serious matters. The reader is provided with historical background and a treatment of the topic from a number of different vantage points — the practice of ethics in government, the teaching of ethics in business schools, the stock market, corporate charitable giving, and a comparative discussion of Canadian and U.S. business ethics. This book is filled with facts thoughtfully arranged and inter-related. It is unfortunate, however, that none of the sources of the many citations are given in order that the critical reader can check for accuracy and contextual relevance.

*Just Rewards* is a" entertaining and informative book, but it does contain some logical lapses. It begins with the premise that there is now a crisis in



business morality. Much is made of the conduct of the A.H. Bobbins company in distributing the deadly Dalkon Shield and (rather unfairly) of Union Carbide's assumed responsibility. for the mass poisoning at Bhopal. The implication is that things in a recently gotten much worse on the business morality beat. No evidence for this proposition is cited. Indeed, the history of business peccadilloes that olive gives tends to support the opposite conclusion.

The assumption that business people are less moral than others is also unsupported, though in this case, the author can be accused of nothing more serious than playing up to popular stereotypes. And *Just Rewards* occasionally indulges in left-lib business bashing and a fond belief in the government-control cure. The value of the book is further diminished by its almost exclusive focus on large business. Most business people do not function in large corporations.

Nevertheless, *Just Rewards* is an informative, thought-provoking book that ought to be carefully read.

— s. WYNTON SEMPLE

### BELLES LETTRES

**Juvenilia**, by Elizabeth Smart, Coach House, 170 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 354 2)

THIS PECULIAR little book is exactly as its title describes it. Elizabeth Smart, the author of *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*, began writing at the age of eleven when she was confined to bed for six months with a suspected heart ailment. She wrote whimsical and romantic stories and poems, which she illustrated herself, and began to keep a journal, a" activity which she continued until her death in 1986.

In 1929, when she was sixteen, Smart collected her stories and poems into a notebook which she called *The Second Edition of the Complete Works of Betty Smart*. Alice Van Wan has culled the thirteen stories, seven poems and one play collected here from Smart's existing notebooks, which are housed in the Literary Archives at the National Library of Canada.

The collection covers "work," if one can use that term, written between the ages of twelve and nineteen, along with a" album of photographs of the young author and, most interesting to the general reader, a selection of letters home that Smart wrote from London in 1933 while she was there studying music.

Unfortunately, there is little in *Juvenilia* that will be more than diverting to the general reader; this is a book for confirmed Smartophiles only. The stories are clever and oddly enigmatic for such a young author, but one soon gets the feeling of being Crapped with an ambitious stage mother making you sit through yet another song by her adored prodigy.

The facsimile pages from the notebooks do have a certain naive charm, with their faulty spelling and emphatic underlinings. But, all cleaned up, set in

elegant type on the page they seem less so. There is an over-serious, even pompous air to this collection, which belies the simplicity of the young author's imaginative flights of fancy.

— NORMAN SIGURDSON

## CRIME & PUNISHMENT

**True Crime Stories**, by Max Haines, Toronto Sun Publishing, 241 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919233 30 9).

WITH THEIR SHORT LENGTH, trashy tone, and sensational content, Max Haines's tales of crimes and criminals make good reading for the bathroom. The 48 stories in this collection are destined for eventual publication in Haines's Toronto Sun column, which explains their length (generally four or five pages) and perhaps also their tone.

The crimes he recounts are diverse, but Haines uses the same formula for the lot: he gives the criminal's background, some basic facts of the case and of the police investigation, then concludes with the punishment meted out.

He includes tales for slice-and-dice fans. Indeed, these are his specialties. For example: he tells the story of a French priest who had some medical training and, among the young women of his village parish, several lovers, one of whom he got pregnant. Before the child was born, the priest murdered his lover, then delivered the child via Caesarean section. He first baptized the baby, then stabbed it to death. Another story recounts the case of a pair of horny teenagers who murdered the girl's mother so that they could mess around undisturbed, which they did for weeks while mother decomposed in the kitchen.

This is Haines's eighth book. Obviously people find his tales entertaining — and so they are, in a ghoulish way. Still, the reader comes away dissatisfied. Haines never investigates the psychology of his criminals, never delves beneath the surface. Some tales are poorly told, and a number are related with a juvenile leer.

There are better authors of true crime stories than Max Haines. Among Canadians, there's Orlo Miller, whose *Twenty Mortal Murders* deserves special mention. There's also the British writer Colin Wilson, who's written several collections, most notably a two-volume encyclopedia of murder. The reader is advised to pick up one of these authors before dismissing the genre as a whole.

— BRIAN HENRY

## FICTION

Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs, by Patrick O'Flaherty, Breakwater, 62 pages, paper, unpriced QSBN 0 920911 25 0).

PATRICK O'FLAHERTY is a short-story writer who assumes the posture of the traditional story-teller. Summer of the Greater Yellowlegs is a collection of twelve very short pieces, all narrated from the omniscient third-person point of view and all slight in theme.

The narrator's distanced stance, coupled with the shallowness of the characterization, prevents us from caring greatly about what takes place. One of the main problems is the vagueness of the writing. In the title story, for example, the unnamed protagonist — suffering from an equally unspecified emotional affliction — decides to build a fence around his cabin "with the help of a muscular

and taciturn fellow from down the shore." This "fellow" gains no vitality, and other secondary characters include "one of his neighbours," "the postmaster," and "an aged neighbour," who remain just as insubstantial. We learn that Colin, the main character's brother, committed suicide when his "life had bottomed out to the sour dregs," but Colin's exact problem is no clearer than his brother's.

O'Flaherty's dialogue does nothing to flesh out the hazy characters peopling his stories; the speeches are stilted, and are more often statements of opinion than expressions of feeling, especially in "A Friend to Mao." Also, O'Flaherty uses literary allusions and quotations in such a clumsy way that they are distracting rather than revealing of character or theme: see, for instance, the references to Samuel Johnson in "Leaving Anna" and "The Prophet." O'Flaherty is much better when he slows down and works at rendering his scenes more concretely, as in "Fish Killer," where the situation and characters come alive for the reader.

As a whole, these tales are too brief and thin to be as "memorable" as promised on the back cover: O'Flaherty needs to become more engaged in his characters' lives.

— ALLAN WEISS

The Celluloid Barrette, by Elizabeth Gourlay, The Caitlin Press, 172 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 929576 17 6).

THIS is poet and playwright Elizabeth Gourlay's first collection of short stories. It is a varied collection; though one character, Marnie Blair, appears in several stories, most are connected mainly through recurring images, particularly those of death.

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those stages in her life when she comes face to face with death as a real and frightening presence. I" "View on an Autumn Day," IO-year-old Marnie sees a corpse for the first time. and her impulse is to run away. Gourlay — as she does too often — explains Mamie's motivations overtly: "that compulsive activity, that manifest energy must have been, Marnie thinks . . . their natural, innocent way of trying to disprove death." It is as if Gourlay does not trust her reader to see this without help. In "Youth and Age," Marnie is a middle-aged woman meeting a childhood friend for the first time in 30 years. Their encounter brings home to her the reality of the passage of time and the onset of old age. I" "Crow," the bird symbolizes death in an annoyingly insistent way.

Some of the other stories deal with the same theme, more or less successfully. The supernatural pervades "The Brink of Destruction," "A Dog's Life . . ." and the title story, but such-ghost stories seem slight and out of place in this collection. Much better is "Blind Street," with its evocation of evil, and "Les Ecureuils" (the collection's strongest story), which portrays the malice underlying the superficial politesse of students at a private girls' school.

Some stories are too slight to stand on their own, while in others the symbols and themes are hammered home to the point of insulting the reader's intelligence. But there is enough good writing in this uneven collection to make the reader wish that Gourlay had not chose" the easy way out so frequently. — ALLAN WEISS

## MIXED MEDIA

*Prime Time at Ten*, by Knowlton Nash. McClelland & Stewart, 332 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 6703 8).

THIS BOOK is the sequel to *History on the Run*, Knowlton Nash's memoir of his days as a foreign correspondent. In the present volume, Nash, who is bowing out this spring after ten years as anchorman of CBC's "The National: takes the reader through the bureaucratic intrigues and ego battles behind the scenes of the CBC's nightly newscast.

At the time the book was written Nash would have had no idea that he would soon be relinquishing his anchorman's chair to Peter Mansbridge. But with some prescience he begins his chronicle with Lloyd Robertson's abrupt departure from that job in 1970 and his defection to CTV. Nash's description of the controversy over Robertson's departure and his wily salary negotiations reads more like a tale from Hollywood than front the world of journalism.

From that fiasco Nash goes on to describe the debacle of Peter Gzowski's ill-fated late night television show "Ninety Minutes Live" (the critics quickly dubbed it "Ninety Minutes Dead") which again points up the uneasy relationship between news and show biz.

The book's greatest strength is the author's numerous thumbnail sketches of the many and varied people he has dealt with in his television career, from Steve Hyde, a irreverent Australian-born floor director for "The National" "The Journal" and "Front Page Challenge," who once directed Indira Gandhi to her seat by saying, "Put your little ass over here, dearie," on up to Prime Minister Mulroney who phoned Nash up after a newscast and bellowed, "I'm mad as hell. . . you're not giving me a fair shake."

*Prime Time at Ten* is told with wit and intelligence, the same characteristics that have endeared Nash to millions of viewers of "The National" over the past decade.

— NORMAN SIGURDSON

## ON STAGE

Quebec Voices: Three Plays, edited by Robert Wallace, Coach House. 163 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 321 6).

THE PLAYS of the subtitle are: *Provincetown Playhouse, July, 1919* by Normand Charette; *Breaks* by René Gingras; *Don't Blame the Bedouins*, by René-Daniel Dubois. The last two of these won the Governor-General's Award for best play published in French in 1983 and 1984 respectively.

*Breaks* is the easiest of the plays to imagine as it is read. It is conventional, the story of 30-year-old Pete, a composer confronted by the two alternatives left to post-referendum Québécois. Should he continue in his dreams or change his lifestyle to begin making money? The pull of idealism is personified by François, a poor, unstable young epileptic; the business-only element is represented by Pete's landlord, the aging and scheming Dupuis.

Pete is torn between the lure of Dupuis's lucrative deals and François's insistence on his former ideals.

The play itself is beautifully wrought. A literal reading of it places the three characters in the real setting of Pete's loft apartment in old Montreal. But the entrances of François and Dupuis and the musical interruptions give" in the text create the sense that the entire play remains within the mind of Pete. It is between these two realities that the play fluctuates and its brilliance is made clear.

*Provincetown Playhouse, July, 1919* is more complex and is definitely set in the

mind of its central character: Charles Charles 38 Years Old.

Charles Charles 38 is in a" asylum, where he imagines himself 19 years earlier, a" aspiring playwright at the Provincetown Playhouse. It is the opening night of his play, ". . . a masterpiece: a one-man show for three players, a drama on beauty. It's unstageable, but I'll stage it anyway." The characters who perform the play-within-a-play are Charles Charles 19, Winslow Byron, and Alvan Jensen. In this unstageable masterpiece a bag with a baby in it is to be stabbed repeatedly. Because of his jealousy, Charles Charles 19 places a real baby in the bag and subsequently it is killed, unknowingly, by the actors on stage.

*Provincetown Playhouse* is ostensibly a whodunit. This question, however, is the only device that keeps audience attention and carries the play forward. Along the way, the relationships between the boys are explored, as are the aesthetics of theatre — all within the mind of the playwright who by legal and moral definitions is insane. The real fascination of the play is in watching the intricate workings of a brilliant but crazed mind.

*Don't Blame the Bedouins* is far and away the most complicated — and confounding — of the three plays. Its language — even in and perhaps because of translation — is almost impenetrable. This is not a play to read. It is a play first and foremost to hear. Various dialects, accents, and languages are used to simultaneously attract and alienate the audience. The characters are many and imaginative, the plot impossible to describe accurately and fairly.

Theatre lets happen what can't in life: it is the dynamic physical and verbal expression of ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Each of these plays in content and form lives up to this ideal.— MARC CÔTÉ

## THE PAST

The Half-Million: The Canadians in Britain, by C. P. Stacey and Barbara Wilson, University of Toronto Press, 210 pages, a.95 cloth (ISBN 8020 5757 8).

"OVERPAID, over-sexed and over here" was the ill-natured British judgement on the vast legion of America" soldiers who began arriving in 1942 to win the Second World War. One gathers from this elegant social history of a forgotten aspect of the war that their English hosts may have had the same opinion of the Canadian soldiers and airmen who had begun arriving two years earlier.

Unlike most men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in the First World War, few of the Canadians who began arriving in England in 1939 considered

themselves at home. They found the climate miserable, the food unpleasant, and the people, on the whole, unfriendly. In turn the British found their Canadian guests crude, disorderly, and undisciplined. The Canadian corporal who pursues his randy way through John Bowman's recent film, *Hope and Glory*, is faithful to the stereotype.

Fortunately, with time and the administrative measures Stacey and Wilson describe, the stereotype was changed. The British pub and British wartime fortitude earned Canadian respect. There is also no doubt, Stacey and Wiin argue, that the British learned to like Canadians a lot better after the Americans began to arrive.

Among the minor frustrations for Canadians in this century is how little impact Britain's largest dominion had on the one-time mother country. Forty years after the wartime invasion of 493,000 Canadians, almost nothing tangible remains but a parish hall in rural Surrey, some documents in British police records, and the families created by 41,351 wartime marriages between Canadians and their hosts.

Stacey, the dean of Canadian military historians, and Wilson, the omniscient archivist of Canada's military records, have left their own monument. Accurate, sensitive, and superbly illustrated, *The Half-Million* is a monument the survivors and their descendants can cherish.

— DESMOND MORTON

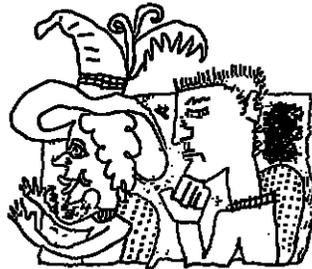
*Champlain*, by Joe C. W. Armstrong, Macmillan, 336 pages, \$29.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9501 8).

"IT WILL BE clear to readers . . . that I view Champlain as a great heroic figure . . ." Reading this introduction to Joe C.W. Armstrong's *Champlain*, one fears the worst. Suspicion is heightened by bizspeak jargon about the 17th-century explorer's "feasibility studies" and "promotional packages." One embarks on the first of Champlain's 29 Atlantic crossings with some trepidation.

Yet the voyage is pleasant after all. It was of Champlain that one historian wrote, "No other American colonial founder had a more attractive character." We delight in the company of this Renaissance man full of curiosity about his planet, puzzling over the location of inland seas, sketching the flora, fauna, and folk of Central America, Florida, Acadia and of the Laurentian region which absorbed his colonizing enemies from 1608 until his death in 1635. Predating the particularly invidious nineteenth century theories of European racial superiority, Champlain seems to have treated the natives — especially his allies among them — as humans and as in-

dividuals, forming personal friendships with several native leaders and receiving kindness in return. When he compares Indian shamans to similar figures in European and Egyptian cultures, Indian ceremonies to ballets and Breton dances, the learning and cultural relativity of this apparently committed Catholic are impressive. His fort at the edge of the known world was 'like a well-ordered Academy' where history books and saints' lives were read aloud at mealtimes.

Champlain dreamed of a permanent settlement at Quebec which would establish French claims and provide a base for further exploration and mis-



sonary work. His fortitude was repeatedly tasted by successive backers, who wanted only quick fur trade profits, reneging on promised settlers and supplies. He showed his mettle when the sixty colonists, reduced to foraging in the woods for roots to eat, were besieged by English privateers in 1628-29. Champlain fended them off with bold (but courteous) words until most of the colonists were evacuated, and remained to face the marauders virtually alone.

The book, like its hem, combines bravura with more scholarly virtues. There are cinematic descriptions of events such as the naval battle on the St. Lawrence between Champlain's sponsor Emery de Caer and the privateering Thomas Kirke, who nailed down his ship's hatch to keep the captive Champlain out of the fray. Armstrong's colorful narrative complements Champlain's rather dry descriptions, yet the original journals are quoted often enough to give authority to the whole. An avid map collector, the author brings real insight to the interpretation of the tiny figures and obscure annotations in Champlain's charts and *Voyages*.

The end result is a bright portrait enhanced by perspective and shading. Champlain's far-seeing eyes and resolute heart are unmistakable: but his little vanities and pruderies are delineated too. Though ours is neither a nation nor an age for heroes, this rendering could conceivably make the difficult transfer from the page into the reader's soul. The author has crafted him life-size: he stands tall, but not so far aloft we cannot see his face.

— JAN NOEL

## POETRY

An X-Ray of Longing, by Glen Downie, Polestar, 96 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 919591 23 X).

GLEN DOWNIE'S poems, like perhaps all worthwhile human endeavours, are constructed in the space between what could be (or should be, or once was) and what is. His title implies a juxtaposition of technology, emotion, and perception, of human achievement and human need. The technology is sometimes alienating and depressing, but it is also used for the relief of pain — as in a number of poems on medical procedures. Prominent among Downie's preoccupations are his desire to belong to an integrated human community, expressed in a sequence of travel poems, and his hope for a satisfactory mode of living with nature instead of exercising dominion over it. But the longing in these poems sometimes has a more desperate edge, as in "Garage Accident":

All you want is to be someone else. The whispers of loved ones exhaust the possibilities.

In view of the poem's title, we cannot ignore the menacing ambiguity of "exhaust.:"

But Downie is also a funny poet. "Better Homes and Gardens," with its "slug-shredded lettuce" and decaying pears, is a delightful bit of grotesquerie; and "Private Screening," in which an avant-garde f&n turns out to be a blurred, amateurish image of Jesus "like the Shroud of Turin flapping in a stiff breeze" makes fun — but of what? Pretentious art films? Our need for religious revelation? Or maybe it's not funny at all:

But we're all awake now, leaning toward him, desperate to make out the word his mouth is shaping, the healing miracle he's doing for us with those hands.

It's the disturbing range of possibilities that gives Downie's work its resonance.

— PAUL DENHAM

*The Bright Particulars: Poems Selected and New*, by Kay Smith, Ragweed, 99 pages, \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 920304 54 0).

IN THE DEDICATION to this volume of new and selected work, Kay Smith pays tribute to those in her life "whose faith has helped keep the spirit unquenched." The poems themselves attest to the consistency and tenacity of that spirit: taken largely from three previous collections (published in 1951, 1971, and 1978) and augmented by a generous selection of new work, they vary stylistically but are cohesive in their



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humaneness. **transcendental** faith, and **passion** for **beauty** in the world. Though there are poems of grief, disappointed love, and a few of fierce **social** commentary, most of *The Bright Particulars* is upbeat. Smith is true to her generation, though not **old-fashioned**. Unlike much contemporary work, her poetry isn't ironic or cynical; the post-modernist concern with language itself **doesn't raise** its self-referential head. In essence. Smith is a **poet of experience**; her poems celebrate the gift of perception and the senses:

*In the green and silver chorus of the grass they lose themselves, the bright particulars  
Discovery begins  
In the single that is singular, the one stem your eyes are suddenly unsealed to see  
Jointed with the latest, fragile, golden light.*

A strong Christian sensibility pervades much of this book, as P. K. Page notes in her introduction. It's particularly pronounced in poems such as "When All the Trees" and "The Eye of Humility," which I suspect are taken from Smith's first collection. (Unfortunately, there's no indication which poems came from which volume, so the reader is left to guess when tracing the poet's development.) Elsewhere, the religious element is not so overt, though it endures in an overall spirit of the sacredness of the world and of experience. And it's not a narrow spirituality; the carnal is embraced wholeheartedly, proof that the poet wants to be "clothed simply in being" in all its dimensions.

The section of newer work contains several very fine poems about aging that challenge society's stereotype of the elderly; "the blood of old women continues to cry out/to stag even to dance wildly in their veins." In these, the poet's voice is less formal, more direct. Though Smith is always very deer. I found some of her early work too self-consciously lyrical and overwritten. But then, I'm of another generation. And overall, if the poet's elegant style is sometimes too rich for my tastes, there are enough genuine "bright particulars" in this collection to deserve attention.

Naked Croquet, by Doug Melnyk, Turnstone Press, 94 pages, 88.95 paper (ISBN 0 88801 122 9).

AT FIRST it's hard to know what to make of this book — an arrangement of fragments of speech, conversational in tone, some banal, some bizarre, some horrible, grouped under headings that seem, for the most part, spurious. But then I stopped wanting to make something of it, and started just enjoy-

ing many of visual and performance artist Doug Melnyk's "text/vignettes." Partly it was acclimatization; partly it was that those snippets of disembodied speech became longer, developing into full-blown anecdotes with their own inner logic of telling. Though Melnyk's textual collage resists being reduced to simple narrative or thematic patterns (the same "poem" may juxtapose comments from a variety of speakers on sex, a car accident, the antics of a family pet or a strange dream), the individual texts themselves often do insist on making sense of experience through narrative. The author's point may be that modern urban life is too complex and fragmented to yield a story in any conventional, linear way. But it was those chunks of narrative that I found most appealing. The best ones, comical and hilariously absurd, made sense of themselves while revealing the non-sense of much that goes on around us. Take this fragment from "As It Turns Out," which describes the speaker's experience during a series of brief power failures:

... each time the power came back on, all sorts of noises started up all over the apartment, like the TV and the fridge and all sorts of machine noises. For some reason even the announcement from the telephone-answering machine sounded, every time the power came back. Three times I sat in the bath tub, in the dark, waiting for all the lights and noises to start, and to hear my own voice announce, There is nobody home, but you have three minutes to leave your message.

Naked Croquet is like eavesdropping on a conversation at a party or on the bus — sometimes what you overhear just isn't worth tuning in to, but you can also catch occasional snatches of speech that are weirdly memorable. And it's at least as entertaining as Disney World, which one voice in this book describes as "all these things and all fake . . . It's a lot of B.S. really but so true to life."

— BARBARA CAREY

The Stubborn Particulars of Grace, by Bronwen Wallace. McClelland & Stewart, 112 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 7710 8790 X).

I WAS IMPATIENT with this book. I was impatient because reading it made me want to write; because it made me feel that I could give coherent voice (as Wallace does) to

all the selves I am ambiguous and incomplete, as always, as the same old rhythms rise and change and relocate themselves, keeping it up, keeping on for as long as I do

This effect arises only partially from

the poems' subject matter: particulars of life experience recognizable to us all, such as coping with the death of a close friend, or something less dramatic but equally important in determining how we've come to be what we are-say, the ritual of Sunday dinner with family. Wallace gives equal time to these smaller, often overlooked details of a life, weaving them together to show how the past acquires new meaning, and how we are constantly "re-telling" our lives through our memories. "Funny what returns and how you can't predict/what you'll use it for," she writes in "One of The Things I Did Back Then." Here, a specific smell that conjures up childhood summers leads to the memory of sifting through old newspapers' birth and death announcements to find new identities for American deserters from the Vietnam War, and then on to the specifics of identity itself. Wallace gives us lots of those specifics, as stories that are never quite separate or finished, in a voice that is colloquial, familiar and, especially, inclusive. This quality of inclusiveness, of inviting the reader to share in the poet's vision rather than to admire it, is probably why *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace* is such a remarkable achievement. From a poem on the daredevils who try to make it into the Guinness Book of World Records through some zany stunt, to a powerful sequence on violence against women, Wallace is letting us see how those stories fit into our own.

Where it seems impossible that one life even matters . . .

I'll argue the stubborn argument of the particular, right now, in the midst of things, this and this

she writes in the closing lines of the final poem. It's an argument that this book wins, hands-down. — BARBARA CAREY

## POLITICS & POLITICOS

The Parliament of Canada, by C.E.S. Ranks, University of Toronto Press, 313 pages, \$15.00 paper (ISBN 0 8020 6651 8).

C. S. FRANKS of Queen's University was the founder of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group, and 10 years later has produced a useful and generally clear account of Parliament and how it actually functions as compared with the way it functions in theory. The book carries on its back the Eugene Forsey seal of approval, so that the reader can be confident that it contains no factual inaccuracies.

Now that people all over the country can watch the House of Commons in action, an explanation for the citizen of

how it works would be very useful. This is almost such a book, but not quite; I find in it, for example, no account of the stages of legislation. And, though it's fairly well written, more determined copy-editing would have made it significantly more accessible to the lay reader. On the other hand, such copy-editing would probably have deprived us of some breathtaking insights, as for instance: "The political career of a member of parliament has three stages: the pre-parliamentary career; the career in parliament; and the post-parliamentary career."

Franks puts his finger on the most significant weakness of our parliament when he points out the extreme brevity of that middle bit — the parliamentary career. More than half our MPs have less than five years' experience. And he's not talking about the present House, where the proportion must be even higher; his figures are taken from 1961, 1971, and 1981. In contrast, at Westminster more than half the MPs have more than 10 years' experience.

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The main theme of Franks' book is the reforms that Parliament has undergone in the last 30 years, and the further reforms that are being discussed. His purpose "is not to make more proposals for reform" — though he can't resist it in his chapter on the Senate, where his suggestions are more moderate and more sensible than any others I have seen".

The flaws in the system — single-member constituencies the first past the post declared winner — are obvious enough, and in recent years many people have been recommending a change to proportional representation or, more extraordinarily, keeping the present system but adding 100 members chosen by k s puts the case for these proposals fairly enough, and then says: "In comparison, the arguments against proportional representation are neither clear nor simple." He proceeds to state them — clearly and simply — and in the process the case for P R to add emigration in this case) and in part to the fact that Canadian writers travel more now than in the past. "Perhaps too," he says, "Canadian writers are aware that more and more parts of the country's map have been explored at least once."

The single transferable vote as it used to be called. This wouldn't give each party representation in exact proportion to its popularity, but would at least ensure that each constituency would be represented by the least unwanted of its candidates.

— I.M. OWEN

## REVIEW

### Maps in the mind

By Edna Alford: ctoral

87: But Canadian Stories, edited by David Helwig and Maggie Helwig, Oberon, 167 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 876 3).

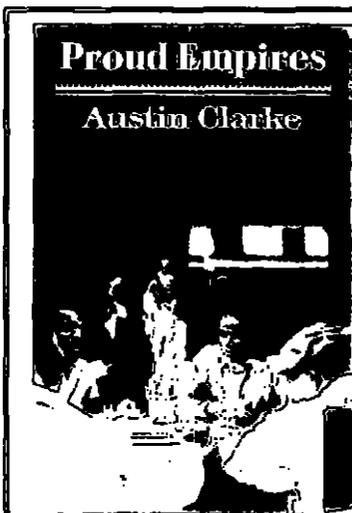
IN THE INTRODUCTION to Oberon's 17th volume of *Best Canadian Stories*, editor David Helwig quoted Kent Thompson's observation that "the Canadian-fiction writers he came across were more and more writing about distant places." He speculates that this may be due in part to continuing immigration (one is inclined to add emigration in this case) and in part to the fact that Canadian writers travel more now than in the past. "Perhaps too," he says, "Canadian writers are aware that more and more parts of the country's map have been explored at least once."

The stories chosen for this collection tend to support the validity of the first two hypotheses but, in my view, to refute the third. Though set in places as far apart

as Normandy and North Carolina. St. John's and Vancouver, Saskatchewan and Mexico, taken together they remind the reader that the best cartographers of fiction, Canadian or otherwise, are more concerned with charting the infinite variations and similarities of inner maps and their relative positions in the global "head" than with literal differences in climate, vegetation or topography.

Although place is undeniably significant in many of the stories, their proximity to each other as works of fiction is equally significant. Six of the stories are concerned with separation and/or death, two of these with the effects of broken adult relationships on children, one with the recollection of the deaths of Canadian soldiers in Normandy. In the words of the former French naval officer in Norman Levine's story, "Something Happened Here," "If you do come into the world — then you cannot go."

Six of the stories address metafictional concerns either overtly as in Gary Geddes's amusing, satirical "Kitenmax, The Russian Gang & The Enemies of Fiction," Douglas Glover's "The Obituary Writer," Diane Schoemperlen's "Tickets to Spain" and Eugene McNamara's "The surgical Procedure," or more subtly as in Leon Rooke's "The Blue Baby" or Rick Hill's "The Storyteller." "There was the time all this ended, but you "ever



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knew when it was that time was, so it was as if that time never ended, which is one reason to think about it," Rooke's narrator says. "I think about it because it ended, but-really ended, that is why I think about it." And tells about it in what I have come to call the past permanent tense.

Two of the stories, the first and last in the collection, are about death watches, Rooke's "The Blue Baby" and Glover's "The Obituary Writer." Although they differ in many ways in their evocation of both internal and external landscapes, they share common thematic ground with each other and with Linda Svendsen's fine story, "Flight" — the hurting and healing in these stories fall from the same hand, often at the same time, and create unresolvable tensions in both the characters and the reader.

Kenneth Radu's delightful story, "The Cost of Living," and Diane Schoemperlen's innovative "Tickets from Spain" are whimsically satirical treatments of contemporary urban experience.

The editors, David Helwig and Maggie Helwig, acknowledge that "in any given year, the inclusions in this anthology are in some part a matter of chance. Two people search and read and think and offer you what they most liked." To their credit, the stories they most liked reflect the rich diversity, both technical and thematic, of short fiction written by Canadian writers wherever they may be, or come from, on the literal map, and again, as in past Oberon collections, some strong new voices are introduced, in this case Rick Hilles and Kenneth Radu. Some of the stories might have benefited from a more careful editorial scrutiny even though many of them were previously published, and I found the number of typographical errors distracting — there were five in Eugene McNamara's story alone.

"But characters?" the narrator says in Geddes's "Kitenmax, The Russian Gang & The Enemies of Fiction."

"Don't ask me about characters. You hang around them too long and you start treating them as if they were human. Believe me, Reader B, I've tried everything: unlisted numbers, emigration, plastic surgery. But they always find me. Maybe God had in mind



a nice abstract creation, too, an exercise in pure form, but couldn't hack the pressure, all those disembodied voices out there whispering: Write me in, write me in, write me in."

"Art is a two-way process," he has said earlier in the story, "a collaboration be-

tween writer and reader, so the onus is on you to tell me where we go from here." I recommend that you read them in. All of them. □

## REVIEW

# New voices, old ballads

By John Oughton

Questions I Asked My Mother, by Di Brandt, Turnstone Press, 64 pages, 87.95 paper (ISBN 0 88801 115 6).

The Ballad of Isabel Gunn, by Stephen Scobie, Quarry Press, 60 pages, 510.95 paper (ISBN 0 919827 52 8).

Poems New and Selected, by Henry Beissel, Mosaic Press, 140 pages, \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 88982 358 9).

THESE BOOKS show three ages of poetry. Di Brandt's first book reveals a fresh talent. In Stephen Scobie's new work, an experienced poet in mid-career sets himself some new challenges. And Henry Beissel's Poems New and Selected looks back on the accomplishments of a much-published writer achieving seniority.

Two words about Brandt's book: buy it. Few first books have such a sure tone and ambitious scope. Like Rudy Wiebe and Patrick Friesen, Brandt has Prairies Mennonite roots. She too celebrates and questions that culture, but from the viewpoint of a sensual yet sceptical feminist.

Brandt examines sexual dynamics: the erotic elements in a woman's love for Jesus and the conflicts between an intelligent daughter, a father who upholds patriarchal tradition, and a mother who just wants to keep the peace. Her style is conversational, deceptively simple. She eschews punctuation and capitals but avoids the paradoxically pretentious effect that approach often has:

*she lost perspective they said at first skipping the occasional beat then they noticed entire bars missing finally the score itself blank space still she refused to stop humming*

There are surrealistic and visionary moments in these poems. Predominantly, however, they are down-to-earth, rooted in a woman's body and a prairie landscape. Her language mixes biblical cadences with colloquial speech and variations on clichés and fairy tales, suggesting the Scottish poet Lii Lochhead more than any Canadian influence. But Brandt has her own voice, one that we should see in print again soon.

Stephen Scobie's *The Ballad of Isabel Gunn* also examines the situation of a

woman in a patriarchal system. Isabel Gunn's story is an odd but true footnote to history. She was born in the Orkney islands off the coast of Scotland (like Scobie's mother): in 1803 she dressed as a man and took a position with the Hudson's Bay Company to accompany her lover to Canada. Gunn completed a three-year contract in the north, though she became estranged from her lover. She passed — and worked — as "John Fubbister" until she bore a son.

Although it has the spareness and compression typical of the ballad, the book more closely resembles a collage. Scobie quotes from voyageurs' songs and ballads of the time and adds entries from the journals of Hudson's Bay factors. There are illustrations of the ship that took Fubbister/Gunn to the new world, a ring of monoliths on the Orkneys, and other historical scenes. The book is elegantly designed and printed.

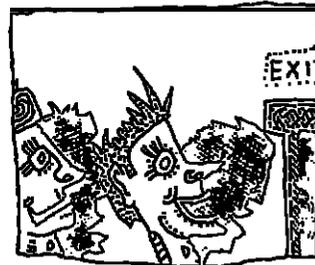
The poem ranges from matter-of-fact statements the real woman might have made:

*I laughed and said I had worked for a year, no man complaining I'd not done my share, but they smiled at my foolishness, and told me it was not becoming for ladies to argue to moments of anguished lyricism:*

*I froze from civility: thk frankness, this despair, this final Canada.*

Scobie's book is a valuable addition to the poetic genre that invests historical characters with new imagery: Gwendolyn MacEwen's T. E. Lawrence poems and Marilyn Bowerin's Marilyn Monroe are other-notable examples.

Beissel's book is more problematic: it's the kind of volume one wants to admire but can't unreservedly. As editor Gary Geddes indicates in the preface, Beissel's



poetry has not yet found "a larger audience." Perhaps his protean talent is such that inadequate energy is available for his poetry; he has published several plays, translations of the German poet Walter Bauer, and children's books, as well as six previous collections of poetry. This volume incorporates poems from those earlier books and work previously published only in magazines.

Beissel's themes are powerful and poetically worthy ones — nature, political injustice, the artistic impulse — end his experiments with form are sometimes very effective. Yet often a passage is ruined by unfortunate sound combina-

tions (“the heart opens the bluebound/ book which with their plumed pens the trees write”) or overly prosaic intrusions (“the barbarous sophistication of those/ who have forgotten what once they knew”).

If the poetry thus sometimes falls on its face, at least it is because the poet is attempting too much rather than too little. A piece that trips on its ambition is more interesting than one that sinks into ennui. □

## INTERVIEW

# John Krizanc

“I don't see myself as a political person. I think I tell morality stories. I try to be as compassionate as I can towards my characters. I try to humanize the bad guys.”

By Ann Jansen

**J**OHAN KRIZANC'S *Prague* has won the 1987 Governor General's Award for Drama. It deals with the moral, political, and artistic choices demanded of clowns and bureaucrats alike in a Communist state. Krizanc is best known for the popular *Tamara*, a multi-layered theatrical extravaganza set in Fascist Italy, in Gabriele d'Annunzio's mansion, with as many as nine scenes happening simultaneously in various rooms. The play was first produced by The Necessary Angel Theatre Company in Toronto in 1981; it recently opened to favourable reviews in New York, and is in the fourth year of its Los Angeles run. John Krizanc was born in Lethbridge in 1956 and grew up there and in Edmonton, Sudbury, and Toronto. He worked as a book buyer at Toronto's The Book Cellar for 16 years. He was interviewed in Toronto by AM Jansen.

**Books in Canada:** *Tamara is a giant puzzle, with the audience putting together the pieces. Does puzzling it out distract from the intent of the play?*

**Krizanc:** To some extent it does. To me the play's about that puzzle. I thought the best way to write a critique of Fascism was to give people more democratic freedom than they've ever had in the theatre. In this pluralistic society people of many different political and religious beliefs are trying to function together. For the audience, the intermezzo is important because it's about freedom of information, which you don't have in a Fascist state. In this theatrical democracy we set up, strangers have to make the play work by sharing information. *Tamara* is the only play I've been to where people actually talk about the play. But on the other hand, *Tamara* is destroyed by the sum of its parts, because the subtleties of the play, its implications, are overwhelmed by the experience. When Richard Rose and I conceived the play,

it was never our intention that it should be about running around the house and drinking champagne. It grew out of a political concept, and the idea that one of the problems with theatre is that you're subjected to the particular politics of the authors or directors. As a small-l liberal, while I respect the intentions of that writing, I often find that I withdraw from the overstated politics. I like a theatre that is informative, but not one that is overtly aggressive.

John Krizanc



PHOTOGRAPH BY GEEFF ARMSTRONG

**BiC:** Your work is often described as political theatre. Do you agree with that label?

**Krizanc:** I don't see myself as a political person. I think I tell morality stories. I try to be as compassionate as I can towards my characters; I try to humanize the bad guys. To me, *Prague* is not a Cold War play. I'd say this to the actors in *Tamara* all the time too. Shove all this political stuff under the rug. These characters live it: they've had these conversations a thousand times. They're just interested in surviving.

**BiC:** Why did you choose politically

charged situations for both *Tamara* and *Prague*?

**Krizanc:** I was interested in my responses to them. D'Annunzio could have stopped Mussolini's rise to power, but he allowed himself to be bought, to be kept in women and cocaine. He had a live-in architect, a live-in string quartet and he spent his days designing his hour. He lost his moral centre; to me, it's very tragic. *Tamara* is a cautionary tale.

**BiC:** Where does this moral questioning come from?

**Krizanc:** It probably comes from being a Catholic. We've killed off God but we still have all this guilt, and all these questions. We have to build our own theology again based on a sense of humanity.

**BiC:** You grew up in a politically aware household. Can you describe your political post?

**Krizanc:** My family's very political. We didn't eat dinner until my father finished reading Hansard. My father was a real Pearsonian Liberal and my brother was an NDP-cr. They had tremendous fights. But I was always against politics. I hate people who are politically correct. I think it would be nice if the world was like that — if we could always know what side we should be on. I like more activism. What I hate is people who let the truth become subservient to political ideology. I think it has to be a personal truth.

**BiC:** You've been quoted as saying, "Everything I've written is fundamentally about the struggle, the very hard struggle, to maintain the liberal views I was brought up with."

**Krizanc:** Yes. So much of being a small-l liberal is the ability to compromise. So often we're left standing still in the middle of the road not knowing which way to go because we're busy weighing the alternatives and trying to give each a fair shake. And we end up getting run over by a truck. The left and right have always intrigued me. My father's from Yugoslavia. His brother was a Communist, and

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# Breakdancing the invisible

By Mary di Michele

The **Beginning of the Long Dash**, by Sharon Thesen, Coach House, 83 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 350X).

The **Eyes of Love**, by Raymond Souster, Oberon, 123 pages, \$11.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 682 8).

White **Light**, by Brian Dedora, Aya Press, 62 pages, \$8.00 paper (ISBN 0 920544 52 5).

SHARON THESEN barren reach / of modern desire." Yoking diction and lyric form lyrics a n culture, subjectsour world of "broken discourse"

abrilliant lyricist who is always aware of the limits of that form:

*While the strictures of the lyric huddle in the aether fumbling with matches, trying to do something with language. ("Eclipse Calypso")*

You can light no fires in the aether. Thesen brings in oxygen, fresh air, satirical energy. She writes exquisitely in

lyricist node and manag

at the same time, like releasing a balloon upto blownr sting, for the rude sound it itnakes as no accident

wind.nalogy refers to breaking

Thesenrists, there's she'll have "gildso pages before "The "gild"r Beds," describe

trot lilies." in

parchments Thesen one of the cleverest satirists I've read; she celebrates and smears at the same

The activities of the

dog are linguistically linked, and a contextual irony is achieved.

Thesen's work is essentially a poetry of linguistic impulse.. She is constantly exploring

"Being phrases" she sets up, with the /octor's BMW Prufrock"rance of "old logic the poem. IL is not the narrativethat causes Prufrock's appear-

denounced him, so he had to flee the country. Now his brother's retired, and they're finally reconciled, after 40 years of not seeing each other. When I write, I say, "Well, hem's a problem. How do I feel about it? I don't know exactly how I feel about it, what about this side, what about that side?" I try to look at the issues from as many different perspectives as I can. And I think that's a very Canadian way to perceive the world. Compromise is essential to the Canadian character and is one of the Canadian virtues.

BiC: But you're also writing about the people who do take stands, however wrong-headed.

Krizanc: My interest is in exploring the personal reasons behind public actions. The frustration is that the material of drama is heroism. We're looking for modern ethics, wondering why we can't have tragedy any more, why everything is reduced to melodrama. But it's impossible to believe in heroes now. If you believe in a black-and-white Luke Skywalker approach to dramaturgy, you're not going to have a good time at any of my plays. I just don't see the world that way. In Prague I started out with bleeding-heart liberal intentions to write about some noble dissident, so I could live vicariously through somebody who takes a stand. IL was also a response to Tamara, where D'Annunzio sells himself out to Fascism. I was intrigued by Vaclav Havel and Pavel Kahout and the other Czech writers who were standing up against Communist totalitarianism. I really admire those writers; I read everything In English on Czechoslovakia — hundreds of books. I went to Czechoslovakia; I was saddened because the dissident movement had been so successfully crushed. But I also have to question the consequences of those actions, of the stands that were taken. For example, Pavel Landovsky, who signed the Charter of 77, is now in Vienna and he's hem told not to return. But as a result of that action, his first wife lost her job, the son from that marriage was kept out of the university, and the daughter was not allowed to graduate. Her apartment isn't heated, so she has a hacking cough and goes around like Camille. You think, so he's a better man for thii because signing the Charter was the right thing to do. But what is the human cost? How many people have to fall in order for them to be goodness?

BiC: Do you begin your plays with ideas rather than characters?

Krizanc: Yes, usually. Ideas and Images. Prague started with Magnificat, a medieval play about the creation of the heavy plough — a play I abandoned. It was about the impact of technology on feudalism. I was trying to find some modern parallels and I thought of land

reform in RI Salvador, so I started reading about that. Then I came upon what Dubcek had been doing in 1968. I picked up a book on Charter 77: that idea fitted in with my frustration over Tamara — the incomprehension of reviewers drove me crazy. I thought. Well, I didn't get it, so I'll do it their way, on a proscenium stage. BiC: Do you go to the theatre, do you keep up with the work of other playwrights?

Krizanc: I don't like the theatre. I don't go to much. I like to see my friends work, but I'm not a great theatre fan. Traditional plays, with a beginning, a middle, and an end — I don't know why they're not on television. I don't like plays with characters that sound like me. I want people who sound better than I do: that's why I like Tom Stoppard. I never met anybody as smart and witty as a character in a Tom Stoppard play. I like experimental work: work that extends the form. When Carbone 14 did Le Rail in Montreal, the whole back wall was covered in paper. At the end they set it on fire and the whole building looked as if it was going to go. Them were people climbing 40 feet above your head. It was terrifying; if they'd fallen they would have killed you. I like physical theatre, stuff that has a hard edge and is really raw, anything that has theatricality, dance stuff, like Pina Bausch or Robert Lepage's work.

BiC: What would you like to do in theatre?

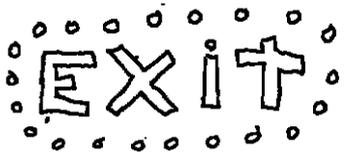
Krizanc: I haven't yet written a play that has as much heart as it does mind.

BiC: What ore you working on now?

Krizanc: I've been trying to tie quantum physics, Wall Street stock market stuff, bioethics and the New-Age-Goddess feminist kind of stuff together. I've been trvine to do thls for about a year. I just read and read. I wish I could work faster. I feel that I out everything I know about every single subject into each of the plays I write, that each is the sum of my knowledge to date. So afterwards I'm stupid for a couple of years; I don't know anything again. And then something intrigues me. But a lot of the ideas I have I can't think of ways to pull off on the stage. They involve too much money and too many characters.

BiC: So you're not writing one-person shows.

Krizanc: I thought I'd do a one-person show: just me complaining about the world, but what happens is that as soon as I get a point of view. I think, What's the opposite point of view? And then, What's halfway? It just refracts. □



association. In other words, the development of the poem is linguistically generated: "Our language careers / us around the bend" or "language breakdances / the invisible."

This is an intelligent and extremely self-conscious kind of writing. The "writer as satyr / in the front seat of a taxi amused / & full of intent." The play of syntax and meaning is ingenious. How is a taxi aroused? When it is a satire or satyr of the poet, of course, the poet who is writing, ah, driving the taxi.

Making the transition as a reader/reviewer from the original and incisive vision of Thesen's *The Beginning of the Long Dash to Souter's The Eyes of Love* is difficult. Souster's book is in two parts: "From a Young Man in Love 1946 1947," poems written and given to his wife as a wedding present, and "Sequence for Susi," poems written recently, after 40 years of marriage. The poems of the young man are trite, sentimental, self-indulgent, and (worse) extremely myopic. That he might have written them as a young man is understandable, that he should publish them as a mature writer is not. Can you imagine writing the following line in 1946/1947 with a clear conscience, so soon after the horrors of the Second World War and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "Have watched a darkness greater than any evil / Of great bombs falling shadow your delicate face"?

It seems to be that the love poem has to change radically to survive as a vital form; it has to be illuminated by what we know of psychology, history, and the universe today. These poems are not; they are cloying in their sentimentality. The lover is "little child" or "young child," the beloved is "little girl-wife." Little this and little that. It's "me looking at you, you looking at me," with the emphasis first and last place on me.

Brian Dedora's *White Light* is somewhat like Thesen's book in style, a poetry of linguistic impulse, a language that continually reflects on and probes its own surfaces. He is not as duplicitous as Thesen in the complex form of ironic satire. He writes a kind of staccato prose-poem line. His concerns are, in a more overtly philosophical way, with the phenomenology of language itself: "the slow articulation / tion from sensed to sound hearing in the saying of those words that spell."

The book is a long poem in 11 parts, a reflection and play with language, words pushed to carry and sustain their multiplicity of meaning, like white light, holding the full spectrum of colour. He attempts, through language, an orgasmic prayer, "ejaculations both hot and seminal." This is a thoughtful and intelligent book. □

## REVIEW

# Sea changes

By Joe Rosenblatt

Apostrophes to Myself, by E.F. Dyck, Oolichan, 46 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 88982 077 5).

Advertisements for Paradise, by Allan Safarik, Oolichan, 63 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 88982 071 6).

Pear Tree Pomes, by Roy Kiyooka Coach House Press, 68 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 282 1).

ON THE RICHTER SCALE of cetacean intelligence, *delphinus delphis*, the common dolphin, rocks and rolls the most. This happy flipper conjured up in the mass mind as a potential Einstein of the seals the theme of E.F. Dyck's fifth poetry volume, *Apostrophes to Myself*. Only a mind absorbed in the mutation of mathematical propositions (the poet has lectured on math at the university level) could hone such stichic gems and place them so cleanly on the page as in "He Plays a Clarinet":

*He saw a lovely dolphinet  
dark and subtle as a clarinet,*

*her siren shape of wood and slender  
as a circle of arpeggios around a rock.*

*She was really just a common thing  
a bottle-nose, a B-flat clarinet*

*with sixteen keys and seven stops  
her embouchure was only typical.*

It instantly brings to mind Wallace Stevens's lines from "The Idea of Order at Key West," with its dolphinsque waves:

*For she was the maker of the song she  
sang  
the ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
was merely a place by which she  
walked to sing.*

There is a resistance in E.F. Dyck to cut loose, come out of a closed poetical system, and kick some hard spondaic rhythm about. In short, invent new truncated music.

The poet is well served by Oolichan Books for the book cover's unique design of two porpoises carnally dancing against a fire-brick tropical sun.

*Advertisements for Paradise* is Allan Safarik's fourth volume. The reader feels an intensity of tone in a poem such as "Angel Fish" with its intelligent opening:

*Is there anything more beautiful  
in the sky than water  
Blue eyes of the earth*

Erin Mouré

# FURIOUS

Erin Mouré's fourth book of poetry is charged with her distinctive energy and wit as she explores "pure" reason, the language of power, and the landscapes of love.

In *Furious* there is a fresh and often celebratory look at love, and, in an unusual finale, *The Acts*, Mouré challenges us to explore a feminist aesthetic: of thinking, of the page, of working life and the possibility of poetry.

104 pages, \$9.95 paper

ANANSI

JOHN KRIZANC



TAMARA

The sensational play that has been playing to 'standing room only' in Toronto, Los Angeles and New York.

IN BOOKSTORES THIS SPRING (p) \$14.95

Stoddart

John Krizanc is the Governor General's Award winner for Prague for 1987.

staring into the memory of space  
like an enormous bait

And a pointy last line: "I am the butterfly  
of the sea."

Safarik is best when he uses the pastels  
of his imagination. In one of the strongest  
poems in the volume (a definite anthology  
piece), "Winter Sun," he creates a  
cerebral winter in the image of a cat about  
todemolish "a mole's pink head." Again  
a succinct ending:

Nature is perfect in desire!  
I catch nothing but the cold light  
in the cage of my hand  
Bring it in, warm it by the fire

It is subject matter, whether it be fish,  
octopuses, cats, birds, or women, that  
triggers his creative enzymes. In "Moon  
in a Fraction of the Sky" he sets the  
atmosphere effortlessly. A delicate  
ecology centrally fixed is at once  
discerned by the discriminating reader:

Wanted to see the animal  
of you walking in the dawn  
from the nest of your steeping

Serious diners on poetry's soul food  
should look out for Allan Safarik's next  
tantalizing volume.

Roy Kiyōoka, painter and poet, has  
been creating since the late fifties. This  
reviewer, however, is puzzled as to why  
he didn't illustrate his poems, thus reveal-  
ing both a poetic and painter's side to his  
readers. Still, Toronto artist David  
Bolduc has illustrated this delicious  
volume with deft brush paintings and  
deep line drawings that serve to comple-  
ment Kiyōoka's shifting moods and *sof-  
to* cadences: "the pear tree's white blossoms  
tincture the night air." And Kiyōoka's  
fixation on the contours of a pear:

there will always be pears to look up  
at  
and pears to preserve  
pears to bite into and toss and last  
but not  
least there'll  
always be pears rotting into the  
ground to  
nourish the seed of a  
small pome

Roy Kiyōoka, like B.F. Dyck, is  
haunted by Wallace Stevens, but here  
only philosophically and without that  
echo.

If any poet has cast an indirect in-  
fluence on Kiyōoka's psyche it must be  
Bill Bissett, but only mildly and without  
the Bissett phonetic spellings and  
linguistic rioting on the page. Kiyōoka  
and Bissett share an Edenesque vision of  
an ideal world, free of cynicism and  
moral decay. Kiyōoka uses straight-  
forward language that is occasionally  
submerged in the pear sauce of opaque  
poetics:

What lay under the midden the  
mound of hair between her gated  
thighs

toucht his deepest presentiments.  
permeable as a summer rain and twice  
as  
penetrant she stroked the small  
of his back til he curled up a child  
in her ample lap and wept himself  
to sleep

The long and short sequences to an ex-  
tended poem written in a confessional  
vein is essentially the poet's version of "a  
small psalm to an old pear tree." These  
pear psalms have been written without the  
fear of embarrassment in the poet's coo-  
cealing his pain or joy. There are no  
disguises.

Roy Kiyōoka opens far more space  
than either E.F. Dyck or Allan Safarik,  
defying Edgar Allan Poe's notion that the  
longer poem is made up of weaker and  
stronger poems.

Pear *Tree Pomes* is an erotic collection  
even with their metaphysical moons  
orbiting about the salient pear. I would  
recommend a meditative tour of  
Kiyōoka's quiet gardens. □

## REVIEW

# Black and white in colour

By Wayne Grady

How to Make Love to a Negro, by  
Dany Laferrière, translated by David  
Homel, Coach House Press, 117 pages,  
\$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 248 7).

TOWARD THE END of this book, which  
was first published in 1985 in French as  
Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre  
sans se fatiguer (VLB Editeur), Lafer-  
rière's main character falls asleep on his  
typewriter, an ancient Remington he was  
told once belonged to Chester Himes, and  
dreams that he is being interviewed on  
television about the novel he has just  
finished writing. *Black Crusader's  
Paradise*. "I read your novel," says Mme  
Bombardier, the interviewer. "It takes  
place around the Carré St. Louis. In a  
nutshell, it's the story of two young  
blacks who spend a hot summer chasing  
girls and complaining. One loves jazz: the  
other literature. One sleeps all day or  
listens to jazz while reciting the Koran;  
the other writes a novel about their day-  
to-day experiences."

This is, of course, a fair description of  
How to Make Love to a Negro, the ruse  
of the narrator writing the book we are  
reading not being particularly new. Lafer-  
rière's novel takes place almost entirely  
in an airless, dark, one-room apartment  
on Carré St. Lads, which is still more or

less Montreal's bohemian mecca off Rue  
St. Denis about a block up from  
Sherbrooke. The two characters — the  
nameless narrator and his roommate  
Bouba — rarely leave the apartment, in  
fact rarely get out of bed (or, in Bouba's  
case off the sofa). Their primary motor  
functions seem to be limited to drinking  
cheap wine, changing jazz records and  
fornicating: through the apartment flows  
a constant and finally incredible stream  
of nubile, white, beautiful, intelligent and  
sexually Olympian women, with names  
like Miz Literature, Mir Suicide, Miz  
Sophisticated Lady, Miz Snob and Miz  
Mystic. The narrator's sexual prowess is  
the omnipresent theme of the novel,  
though this is far from pornographic or  
even erotic literature. Some of the chapter  
titles give a false indication of the novel's  
preoccupation: "Cruising in Place";  
"And Now Miz Literature Is Giving Me  
Some Kind of Blow Job"; "Like a Flower  
Blossoming at the End of My Black  
Rod." In fact, though there is much off-  
screen and some close-up activity, the  
bulk of the novel is an amiable, witty,  
philosophical portrait of Western, or at  
least North American, or at least Mont-  
real's, moral condition.

In the end, one comes to disbelieve in  
the women, and the dawning of that  
disbelief is the novel's crisis, since it forces  
on the reader a realization of the true  
bleakness of the characters' lives. The  
doubts begin to creep in early on, when  
Bouba asks the narrator what he's  
writing:

"It's a novel."  
"No kidding... A novel? A real  
novel?"  
"Well . . . a short novel. Not a real novel  
— More like fantasies."

The narrator adds: "There's nothing to  
it. It's about a guy, a black, who lives  
with a friend who spends all day lying on  
a couch meditating, reading the Koran,  
listening to jazz and screwing when it  
comes along."

"Does it come along?" asks Bouba,  
zeroing in on the good part.

"I suppose it does," answers the nar-  
rator. But suppose it doesn't, thinks the  
reader, and what remains is a stark depic-  
tion of loneliness, poverty and waste, of  
an immigrant culture trying unsuccessfully  
to adapt to, or at least imitate, our  
own. Later, in a bar ("Steep stairway.  
Smoky landscape. Waves of black gold  
moving across the dance floor. Starched  
dashikis. Negroes in rut."), the narrator  
chats up a white woman: "What do you  
do?" she asks.

"I write. I'm a writer."  
"Really? What do you write?"  
"Fantasies."

One's suspicions are more or less con-  
firmed during the dreamed interview,  
when Miz Bombardier charges the

brilliant young writer with not really liking women. "When people reveal their fantasies," he replies, "you'll usually find something for everyone — or against everyone. Let me point out that for all intents and purposes there are no women in my novel. There are just types. Black men and white women. On the human level, the black man and the white woman do not exist."

Laferrière, 8 former Haitian journalist who came to Canada to escape the political realities of that country, has written a tough, pugnacious, but (minus the women) essentially detached indictment of the social realities of this one. As Miz Bombardier points out, this "is the first

portrait of Montreal from the pen of a black writer," and one's first critical association is with Pierre Vallières's *White Niggers of America*. Laferrière's predicaments are not unlike those described by Jacques Renaud's 1964 *joual* classic, *Le Cassé* (also translated, and equally brilliantly, by David Homel, in 1984, as *Broke City*): his dreaming, ineffectual characters would not be too out of place in André Carpentier's *Rue St. Denis*. And it is easy to draw the obvious Quebec writer/black writer analogy in light of Max Dorsinville's 1974 study, *Caliban Without Prospero*, in which Dorsinville — also a black Haitian writer now living in Montreal — traces

the development of black American literature and compares its themes with those found in Quebec writing.

But perhaps a better, or at least more recent, correspondence can be found between black literature and women's literature, both of which have been ghettoized in universities as black studies and women's studies, and treated more as primary sociological sources than as literature. Dany Laferrière's ultimate demand here is to be taken seriously as an artist, preferably as the brilliant young black writer who blew Jimmy Baldwin off the map. *How to Make Love to a Negro* goes a long way toward justifying that demand. □

## FIRST NOVELS

### The short list

Five new novelists are in the running for the 1987 W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award

THE FIVE NOVELS in competition for the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award are: *Fire Eyes*, by D. F. Bailey (Douglas & McIntyre); *Squatters' Island*, by W. D. Barcus (Oberon); *The Blackbird's Song*, by Pauline Holdstock (Simon & Pierre); *The Butterfly Chair*, by Marion Ouednau (Random House); and *Selakhi*, by Sean Virgo (Exile).



*Island*, by W. D. Barcus (Oberon); *The Blackbird's Song*, by Pauline Holdstock (Simon & Pierre); *The Butterfly Chair*, by Marion Ouednau (Random House); and *Selakhi*, by Sean Virgo (Exile).

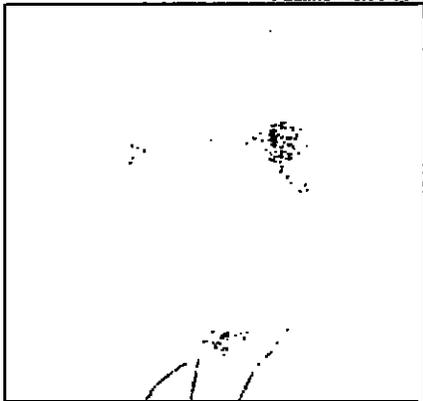
*Fire Eyes* is the story of Billy Deerborn, abandoned as a baby by his Indian mother and abused in foster homes during his childhood. At 21 he joins the army, which he thinks of as a "kind of family. .. the brotherhood." He becomes an explosives expert, and when he takes up with a young woman of angry revolutionary ideals, he is recruited to make a bomb for an attack on a nuclear power installation. *Fire Eyes* was reviewed in the August-September 1987 *Books in Canada*. D. F. Bailey lives with his wife and son in quiet seaside area of Victoria, B.C., where his favourite pur-

suits are "the archaic habits of yoga, meditation and vegetarianism." He studied psychology at the University of New Brunswick and Simon Fraser University, taught in an adolescent psychiatric hospital in the early 1980s, and has had poems and reviews published in *The Brunswickian*. He has plans for three more novels.

W. D. Barcus, the author of *Squatters' Island*, carefully preserves his privacy; he did not wish to have a photograph published on the jacket of his book or in *Books in Canada*. He was born in Guysborough, Nova Scotia, where his first novel is set. It tells the story of Andrew who, as a child, goes often to visit a mysterious island, investing it with magical significance. Later, when he returns to his childhood home bringing a young wife with him, he finds the island's meanings altered but still profound. *Squatters' Island* was reviewed in *Books in Canada* in May, 1987.

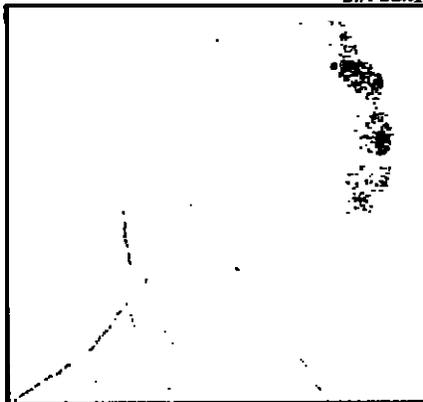
Pauline Holdstock lives in Sidney, B.C.

Pauline Holdstock



She was born in England, studied at London University, and has taught in England, the Bahamas, and Canada. She began writing in 1979 and has published

D.F. Bailey



short stories in many Canadian literary magazines, including *Exile*, *Grain*, *NeWest Review*, *the Malahat Review* and *This Magazine*. *The Blackbird's Song*, her first novel, is set in the remote mountains of China in the year 1900. Three young Canadian missionaries trapped by the Boxer Rebellion must escape on foot from their mission to "the gunboats and refuge" 700 miles away. Emily, William and Martha were moved by their strong faith to bring God's word to the Chinese; now reviled as devils by the country people, they have only their faith to protect them.

*The Butterfly Chair* (also reviewed in the January-February 1988 issue of *Books in Canada*), explores Else's painful and difficult memories of her childhood and the events that led up to her father's murder of her mother and his own

suicide. Finally she writes a long letter to her dead father, recounting his life to him in an attempt to understand it herself, and to give him "the explanation she has intended for so many years." Marion Quednau was born and raised in Toronto, where she studied at the University of Toronto, then moved to Tweed, Ont., where she raised dairy cows and show horses. She was fiction editor at *Branch & Out* magazine and has written an

Marion Quednau



eight-part series on handicapped children for the CBC. She now lives in Mission, B.C., where she teaches creative writing, instructs equestrians, and trains dogs. She is at work on her second novel.

Seán Vii, the author of *Selakhi*, was born in Malta and grew up in South Africa, Malaya, Ireland, and England. He came to Canada in 1966. He has published three books of poetry and two collections of stories (*While Lies and Other Fictions*, 1981, and *Through the Eyes of a Cat*, 1985). He has won first prize for fiction in both the CBC Literary Competition and the BBC-3 Literary Competition. *Selakhi* is set in the Solomon Islands, where Virgo spent three months and realized that, as he says, "the poem in my head was going to turn into something much larger." The complex, allusive structure of the book centres on the experiences, memories, and visions of 17-year-old Darien Hughes, who, in love with poetry, and irresistibly drawn to what he sees as a tropical paradise, runs away from his conventional colonial-English father to live among the island people — the shark people.

The judges for the 1987 W. I-L Smith/Books in Canada First Novel competition are Nigel Berrisford of W. H. Smith, novelists Mordecai Richler and Jane Rule, and critic Robert Fulford. The prize is \$5,000; the winner will be announced in the next issue. □

## LETTERS

### Answering back

IT WAS OMINOUS that this "backward" reviewer had tried to convert a technophobic writer into buying a word processor (I call my Macintosh "Chippy"),

the day before Alan Lord's attack came through the mail about my "imbecilic technophobia"!

I did not condemn "outright all of the.. nine-day festival *Ultimatum II: New Literatures*." Reviewing a nine-day marathon in the limited space of a column is like scrunching 9000 bits of information into 1 byte. (Ouch). So I focused mainly on the computer-video-synthesizer presentations. None were as positively innovative, let's say as bp Nichol's "First Screening" or "Fred and Ginger." Why wasn't bp, one of the pioneers of it all, invited? Too cheerful? I described Allen Ginsberg's video "Father Death Blues" as "very moving," and put in a good word for the more sane "Anglomaniacs" such as Rhythm Activism, Mohamud Togane, and Karl Jirgens.

Allan Lord obviously misread my "hysterical" tone. Comic relief makes for good copy; but surely not so lively "since Goering's pistol-waving days in the Third Reich." That comes from a self-appointed "president" of an enterprise which advertised one event with the doublethink slogan: "Samizdat Canada" — sponsored by \$51,000 of Canada Council and Ministère des affaires culturelles d' Québec money! Such censorship will drive any crooked worm with sunshades underground.

Lord dismisses yours truly as "old and out of sync with the times," yet "at work on a book for children" ("sing a McPaint program he'll be happy to know.) Has he ever heard of KidVid? Kids are the toughest critics, and come up with more imaginative alternatives to get through a day than any of Lord's loonies.

The power of words can still zap without technological special effects. Lord's logic is linear and blinkered, and there fore: backward. Advanced tools do not necessarily create advanced thinking. Time is cyclic, or flux, depending upon your point of view. Mark Twain was the first writer to use a typewriter in 1883. He would have laughed at the pretentious notion of being "avant-garde." Avant-garde perhaps? His artistry has survived because of his talent, not typewriter. Dope and wine and every poem a picture and every picture a poem is as retro as Li Po in his bamboo grove.

As for Anne Cimon's slap on the wrist: "He incorrectly associates American writer Marge Piercy, who is white, Jewish born in Detroit, Michigan, with Black American writers." Black Studies programs inscribe Marge Piercy on their reading lists. I am sure she appreciates it. Nadine Gordimer, another &b-profile "hits female writer, is also "associated" with the stronger lung power behind black liberation in South Africa. I was not interested in racial purity so much as "voices" of black consciousness in reviewing an

anthology entitled *Other Voices*. Is Michael Jackson black or white? Is John Howard Griffin black like me or white like you? When is an Oreo cookie not an Oreo cookie? Somewhere over the rainbow. . . . The barriers are mental, not physical. Ms. Cimon must realize by now that, just as there are male feminists, so there are also white blacks.

Ray Filip  
Montreal

## 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:

- Agapanthus, by Ann York, Sono Nis Press.  
Alexandria: A Saga of Northern Ontario, by Helene Brodeur, Watson & Dwyer.  
America, God and the Bomb: The Legacy of Ronald Reagan, by F.H. Knelman, New Star Books.  
Animal Uprun, by Bill Bissett, Talonbooks.  
The Animals in Their Elements, by Cynthia Flood, Talonbooks.  
Bare-Faced Messiah, by Russell Miller, Key Porter Books.  
Because the Gunman, by Maggie Helwig, Lowlife Publishing.  
Beople, Pete and the Senator: Canadian Musicians in Jazz, by Mark Miller, Nightwood Editions.  
The Box Closet, by Mary Melis, Talonbooks.  
Burning Bridges, by Nain Nomez, translated by Christina Shantz, Cormorant Books.  
Canada in the European Age: 1453-1919, by R.T. Naylor, New Star Books.  
Canadian Crusoes: A Tale of the Rice Lake Plains, by Catherine Parr Trull, edited by Rupert Schieder, Carleton.  
Channels, by Mary Frost et al, Windy Jack Press.  
The Chilliwack and Their Neighbours, by Oliver N. Wells, Talonbooks.  
The Classical Torso in 1980, by Diana Hayes, Pulp Press.  
Close Pursuit, by Carsten Stroud, Penguin.  
Const Sells Essays, by Wayne Suttles, Talonbooks.  
The Competition, by Robert Assels, Eden Press.  
Cookbook for College Kids, by Sheila McDougall, Centax.  
Crestwood Heights, by Christopher Hyde, Avon.  
Dawn Across Canada: Omelet to Railway in Ten Years, by Mac Atwood, Morris Publishing.  
The Dreams of Zoo Animals, by Valmai Howe, Nu-Age Editions.  
Driving the Angels Out, by St. John Simmons, Pulp Press.  
Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out, The Women's Press.  
An Error in Judgement: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community, by Dara Culhane Speck, Talonbooks.  
Evláhn, by Steve McCaffery, Coach House.  
First Water, Tigenis: A History of the Victoria Fire Department, by Dave Parker, Sono Nis.  
Flights of Magic, by John Steffler, illustrated by Shawn Steffler, Porcupine Books.  
From Snowshoes to Politics, by Cyril Shelford, Orca.  
Gathering Wild, by Marianne Huger, Brick Books.  
Gypsy Guitars, by David McFadden, Talonbooks.  
Hastings and Malia: Stories from an Inner City Neighbourhood, edited by Jo-Ann Canning-Dew, New Star Books.  
The History of Emily Montague, by Frances Brooke, edited by Mary Jane Edwards, Carleton.  
The History of the Labour Movement in Quebec, by Louis Fournier, Michel Dore et al, Black Rose.  
Hockey's Captains, Colonels & Kings, by J.W. Fittell, Boston Mills Press.  
How to Self Publish and Make Money, by Marion Crook and Nancy Wise, Sandhill Publishing.  
In the house of winter, by Anne McKay, Pulp Press.  
Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation, by Suzanne Zeller, U of T Press.  
Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach, by Bruce S. Elliott, McGill-Queen's.  
Jackrabbit Parole, by Stephen Reid, Seal.  
Lost Causes, by Jose Leandro Urbino, translated by Christina Shantz, Cormorant Books.  
Manitoba: The Province & The People, by Ken Coates and Fred McGuinness, Hurlb.  
Metaganam: A Journey from Lewis to the New World, by Jim Wilkie, Doubleday.  
Muskoka's Grand Hotels, by Barbaranne Boyer, Boston Mills Press.  
Nature's Big Top, by Lola Sneyd, illustrated by Doug Sneyd, Simon & Schuster.  
The 1987/88 Canadian Tax & Investment Guide, by Henry B. Zimner, Hurlb.  
Notebook of Stone, by Vivian Darroch-Lozowski, Pezembra.  
On The Edge: The Inside Story of the Canadian Women's Sol Team, by Currie Chapman, McGraw-Hill Ryerson.  
Open Fire, by Blaine Marchand, Author Books.  
A People in Arms, by Marie Jakober, New Star Books.  
Performance in Endurance Events, by Francois Peronnet

of *at*, Spodum Publishers.  
 Puzos, by Christopher Dewdney, Nightwood Editions.  
 Phillips: *The Man Behind the Monarchy*, by Unky Hall, Doubleday.  
 The Pre-Geography of Snow, by Lyn King, Brick Books.  
 Quebec Women: A History, by Micheline Dumont *et al*, translated by Roger Gannon and Rosalind Gill, The Women's Press.  
 Quick: *Quick Said the Bird*, by Thor Vilhjalsson, translated by John O'Kane, Penumbra.  
 Rhubarb for Good Measure, by Jocelyne Kidstone, Penumbra.  
*It's a Moral Man*, by B.J. Smith, Penumbra.

*Rose of the North*, by John W. Friesen, Borealis Press.  
 Rose-Dellian: A Saga of Northern Ontario, by Helene Brodard, Watson & Dwyer.  
 School's Out: A Fictorial History of Ontario's Converted Schoolhouses, by Anne M. Logan, Boston Mills Press.  
 The Seventh Year of the Moussa Bird, by Lou Vertolli and Frederick Biro, Eden Press.  
 Shadows in the Glass, by Beth Jankola, The Caitlin Press.  
 Singing Rib, by Linda Rogers, Oolichan Books.  
 Souvenirs: New English Fiction from Quebec, edited by P. Scott Lawrence, Cormorant Books.  
 The Starving Students Guide to Macromol & Cheese, by J. Schryer and M. Leggett, HMS Press.

*The Story of Chakapas: A Cree Legend*, edited and illustrated by Annie Downes Catterson, Penumbra.  
 A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder, by James De Mille, edited by Malcolm Paris, Carleton.  
 Streets Too Narrow for Pandas, by Deborah Eitel, Sono Nis Press.  
 Television and Your Child, by Carmen Luke, Kagan and Woo.  
 A Thistle in His Mouth, by Peter Huchel, translated by Henry Beissel, Cormorant Press.  
 Three Dollar Dream, by Lynne Bowen, Oolichan.  
 Too Few to Count: Canadian Women in Conflict with the Law, edited by Ellen Adelberg and Claudia Currie, Press Gang.  
 Torque, by J. Michael Yates, Pulp Press.  
 Tough Roots, by Jean McCallion, Penumbra.  
 The Trouble with Stephanie, by Joseph Louis, Seal.  
 The Ulysses Trilogy, by Saad Elkhadem, translated by Saad El-Gabalawy, York Press.  
 The Venetian, by Grant Buday, Oolichan Books.  
 The Vernacular Muser: Critical Essays, by Dennis Cooley, Turnstone.  
 Wacousta, by John Richardson, edited by Douglas Cronk, Carleton.  
 wayne gretzky in the house of the sleeping beauties, by michael dennis, Lowilfe Publishing.  
 Welcome to America, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, by Christopher Redmond, Simon & Pierre.  
 West of Darkness: A Portrait of Emily Carr, by John Barton, Penumbra.  
 Wild Animals I have Known, by Ernest Thompson Seton, Penguin.  
 The Wild Front Ear, written and published by The Writers of the Wild Front Ear.  
 William Wilfred Campbell: Selected Poetry and Essays, edited by Laurel Boone, Wilfrid Laurier University Press.  
 Willing Victims, by John Nold, Penumbra.  
 Wollstone: People Resisting Genocide, by Miles Goldstick, Black Rose Books.  
 Work in Progress: Building Feminist Culture, edited by Rhea Tregebov, The Women's Press.  
 Zen Forest, by Carolyn Zonallo, The Caitlin Press.

## CANWIT NO. 127

A FIELD NOTE in our December 1987 issue ("On the road to View Quebec") strongly suggested that, because of his Quebecois parentage, Jack Kerouac was really a Canadian writer. In a similar fashion, on the strength of his temporary residence in B.C., the CanLit world has long numbered the English novelist Malcolm Lowry as one of its own; and it has even been suggested that Wyndham Lewis's cranky, tenuous connections with this country make him one of us.

But why stop there? During the First World War, Raymond Chandler went up to Victoria to enlist in the army, and William Faulkner came to Canada to join the Royal Flying Corps. Ernest Hemingway did time as a reporter in Toronto. Part of Trollope's *Phineas Finn* deals with the creation of the CPR, and there is no authority anywhere who can tell you for sure that Prospero's island was not Cape Breton or even Newfoundland.

In short, there are a lot of unfortunate gaps in our official literary history, and readers are invited to help out where the CanLit johnnies have failed. Send brief snippets of real or imagined dialogue, narrative and criticism that show, perhaps, that Los Angeles was really Chandler's metaphor for Victoria; that Hemingway's dialogue is not too different from the sort of stuff you still hear on the Bathurst streetcar; that Saul Bellow's failure to deal with his Montreal childhood is the ultimate example of Canadian self-effacement; and so forth. The prize is \$25. Address: CanWit No. 127, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9. Deadline: April 1.

### Results of CanWit No. 125

Our request for possible titles for McClarkan & Newspider's North

American Library Series in which famous Americans have collaborated with Canadian writers resulted in many duplicated titles — the most common being *The Stoned Angel*, by Margaret Laurence and Timothy Leary. It was a close contest but Lois Grant of Calgary wins a *Books in Canada* sweatshirt for the following collaborations.

*In Praise of Other Women*, by Stephen Vizinczey and Gary Hart;

*A Test of Bawd*, by Margaret Laurence and Jessica Hahn;

*Jessica Then and Now*, by Mordecai Richler and Jim Bakker;

*Wives Are Girls and Women*, by Alice Munro and Mickey Rooney;

*Perpetual Lotion*, by Graeme Gibson and Elizabeth Arden;

*The Last Mike*, by Pierre Berton and Walter Cronkite;

*Roughing It with George Bush*, by Susanna Moodie and Ronald Reagan.

### Honourable mentions:

*Abra Cadabra*, by Joan Barfoot and Harry Houdini;

*The Shreddable Woman*, by Margaret Atwood and Fawn Hall.

— Claire MacKay, Toronto

*Starting Out, Again*, by Pierre Berton and Gary Hart;

Canada *Made Me an American*, by Norman Levine and Peter Murphy.

— Angela Home, Halifax

who *Do You Think You Were?* by Alice Munro and Shirley MacLaine;

*The Handmaid's Tail*, by Margaret Atwood and Hugh Hefner.

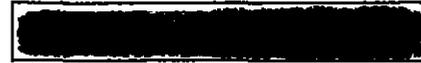
— Helen Porter, St. John's

*The Double Crook*, by Sheila Watson and Richard Nixon.

— Al Valteau, Langley, B.C.

*Not Wanted on the Visage*, by Timothy Findley and Estee Lauder.

— Alexandra Milburn, Orleans, Ont.



## CLASSIFIED

Classified rates: \$9 per line (40 characters to the line). Deadline: first of the month for issues dated following month. Address: Books in Canada Classified, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9. Phone: (416) 363-5426.

FOR A BIOGRAPHY of Hugh Gamer I would like to hear from those who knew him, particularly during the 1913-1940 period. Paul Stuewe, 149 Essex St., Toronto M8G 1T6, phone (416) 533-8429.

THE UNIVERSITY OF VICTORIA invites applications for the following seasonal position: Scriptwriter, to teach first and second-year workshops in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. from September 1, 1988 to April 30, 1989. The applicant should be able to teach scriptwriting for stage and should have some experience in screenwriting. The ability to teach other genres and teaching experience at the post-secondary level would be assets. This position will be filled subject to the availability of funds.

Canadian Immigration regulations require the university to assess applications from Canadian citizens and permanent residents of Canada before assessing applications from other persons.

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## SOLUTION TO CANLIT ACROSTIC NO. 12

Nobody down there ever gets anywhere. They work hard all their lives and at the end they own an old livingroom set and maybe a piano, and if they're lucky they might have bought a house and put a bathtub in it. I don't want to live like that.

— Hugh Garner, *Cabbagetown* (McGraw-Hill Ryerson)



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