

BOOKS

NAN BUSH IN THE CITY

A profile of
Tomson Highway

INQUEST

Scenes from a play
by Timothy Findley

An interview
with Marie Laberge

The short list for
V. H. Smith/B
Best Novel A

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The matter of England

Perhaps cultural amnesia, whereby the name "Hamlet" is more evocative of a television ad for cigars than of Shakespearean tragedy, is that "true international style common to all industrial democracies" alluded to by Northrop Frye

LIVING IN ENGLAND, even the plushly prosperous south, is a depressing, disturbing experience. With "loadsamoney" the rallying cry of the day, much of what's best about Britain seems to have vanished or been hideously mutated. Salisbury Cathedral is losing its spire to acid rain; Hereford Cathedral is having to flog the Mappa Mundi in order to subsidize its operating costs. The right-wing gutter press moulds public opinion with an egregious contempt for truth. The unbearably congested streets of London stink with leaded petrol fumes; drastically underfunded, the Tube is an increasingly perilous mode of travel. Patients from mental hospitals, discharged into non-existent "communities" as an economy measure, shelter in doorways, à la Mayhew; on your way to performances at the National Theatre you are guaranteed to run into teen-age beggars whose dole money has been cut off, but for whom no more than temporary "work-schemes" exist. Prince Charles has taken an hour of prime time telly to deplore the shoddy, ugly, alienating state of much recent British architecture, and the pernicious power of developers and magnates (among them the Bronfmans) over the cityscape. The National Health Service is collapsing for lack of adequate funding, while private medicine becomes more and more attractive — to those who can afford it. Universities — even Oxbridge — are losing some of their best faculty to the U.S. as funds are cut and vacancies frozen.

That British society is becoming increasingly undemocratic, thanks to an "elected dictatorship" supported by less than half the popular vote, is not just the conviction of the present opposition parties, but also of many of Britain's leading writers. Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, John Berger, Margaret Drabble, John Fowles, Antonia Fraser, Germaine Greer, Michael Holroyd, David Lodge, Ian McEwan, Harold Pinter, Salman Rushdie, Marina Warner, and Fay Weldon are among the signatories of Charter 88, "united in one opinion only, that British society stands in need of a constitution which protects individual rights and the institutions of a modern and pluralist democracy." The denial of a suspect's right

to silence; and the changing of the Official Secrets Act to make it a criminal offence for civil servants to release classified information even in the public interest, are two of the most dramatic instances of the Thatcher government's attempt, not merely to change the laws of the land, but to put itself above them. Among the other freedoms the present government has eroded are "the universal rights to habeas corpus, to peaceful assembly . . . to freedom of expression, to membership in a trade union, to local government, to freedom of movement . . ." "By taking these rights from some," the Charter argues, "the government puts them at risk for all."

"Do writers in England . . . sit down each day agonizing over how best they can manifest Britishness?" wondered John Metcalf in a recent issue of *Books in Canada*. The answer is yes, if to manifest Britishness is to explore, in Seamus Heaney's words, "not just the matter of England, but what is the matter with England." Margaret Drabble's *The Radiant Way* and Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* are two complementary explorations of this

second "matter." And David Lodge's *Nice Work*, short-listed for the 1988 Booker Prize, presents a postmodern version of the "Two Englands" polarity, in which the north-south economic divide is complemented by the impasse between industry and academe, a situation that takes on special significance in the light of the present government's plan to shift the burden of financing higher education from the shoulders of the State to those of Business. In the theatre, plays such as David Hare's *The Secret Rapture* and Alan Ayckbourn's *Henceforward* have been critically acclaimed for having "tackled head-on the ethos of our present government and asked vital questions about the Condition of Britain." And Harold Pinter's succinctly stunning play, *Mountain Language* — about the brutal treatment of political prisoners in a very English jail — can be seen as an objective correlative to the fears and anxieties that underlie Charter 88.

Two writers have eloquently "agonized" in newsprint over socio-political developments that are having an appreciable effect on Britain's literary culture. In a recent issue of *The Guardian*, Margaret Drabble argues that those who oppose the radical restructuring of contemporary Britain need not be seen as "traitors and enemies."

It has become in some way unpatriotic to suggest that we do not live in the best of all possible countries. The Government and its supporters seem to believe that if we have enough money in our purse, that ought to satisfy us, and that it is somehow graceless and tactless of those above the poverty line to keep on referring to those below it.

Drabble deplores the new Britain envisaged by those whose stated aim is to eradicate socialism, and laments the changes being brought about by market forces in the field of communications:



ILLUSTRATION BY JAUREGUI FALCKON

We can say goodbye to the BBC and decades of fine public broadcasting, we can say goodbye to the World Service which so well deserves its reputation and its name, we can bid farewell to the challenging investigative documentaries of Granada. We had our hour of British glory and let it go.

Philip Norman, in another *Guardian* article, "Faking the Present," describes the 1980s as Britain's "Age of Parody."

First . . . there is self-parody — the officially sanctioned drive to earn money from tourists by presenting ourselves in every possible ridiculous historical cliché and stereotype. Then there is parody as escapism, the device of a people increasingly unsure about their own place in the world and afraid of the present, let alone their future.

The result is the metamorphosis of Britain into Fantasy Island, a world of leisure and lifestyle characterized "by relentless substitution of the cosmetic for the material, the superfluous for the desperately needful, and by almost maniacal expenditure on what is not advertising so much as adsturbation."

The Americanization of Britain is a topic for discussion in public affairs journals and in those few newspapers not under the control of Rupert Murdoch and his ilk. Sharing a language with the United States, Britain, like Canada, is particularly vulnerable to "cultural" invasion from the land of Rambo and Dynasty. Once the television industry becomes deregulated, British viewers can expect to drown in the dreck to which North American viewers have long been inured. The publishing industry is in the process of being "megatized," and while this leads to enormous advances for a handful of established writers, it makes it less and

less likely that alternative or authentically avant-garde voices will be heard. A recent debate about the condition of poetry in Britain struck a familiar, Canadian chord. "The truth is that British small-press poetry publishing rests on the work of a dedicated band of voluntary workers who periodically burn out under their self-imposed burden," observes Graham Mort, a poet and small-press editor. Commenting on the niggardliness of Arts Council contributions to the writing and publishing of poetry, he concludes that a hypocritical British arts establishment celebrates poetry "as one of our most important artistic traditions," but seems content to let it starve in the street. One could, of course, simply point to the Faber and Faber list while muttering *sauve qui peut*. Yet as another *Guardian* reader points out, even canonical writers are in trouble:

In the centenary year of Eliot's birth it is worth mentioning that in my own fairly well-educated office of a hundred souls, only four people other than myself had ever heard of T. S. Eliot, and three of these knew him as the lyricist of *Cats*. Others fared less well. Yeats, that plucky young lad who won a stage in the Tour de France; Philip Larkin, a comic strip character. . . .

Grimmer and Grimmer. Perhaps such cultural amnesia, or designer ignorance, whereby the name "Hamlet" is more evocative of a television ad for cigars than of Shakespearean tragedy, is that true "international style common to all industrial democracies" to which Frye alluded in *The Modern Century*. If so, then long live the kind of "nationalism" that is currently engaging some of Britain's finest writers.

— JANICE KULYK KEEFER

Looking back

IN HER EARLY play *Canadian Gothic*, Joanna McClelland Glass wrote of constricted lives in a small prairie town in the 1950s. Near the end, two of the characters talk about Canada's new, mobile society. "Well, it might be easier, making your mistakes and leaving them behind. In the old days we just piled 'em up in one place and scratched a living off the top," says one. The other replies, "Don't you think you do that whether you move or not?"

Glass knows a lot about moving on without leaving things behind. She left her home in Saskatchewan in 1957 on an Alberta Arts Council scholarship to study acting at Pasadena Playhouse, but a year later she decided that Hollywood was not for her. She made plans to go to Toronto, but was sidetracked in New York, married a Yale graduate student in physics, and lived in New Haven, Detroit, Washington, D.C., and Berkeley. Divorced since 1976, she spent 13 years in Connecticut, raising her three children. Yet her latest play,

Yesteryear, which had its premiere in Toronto in January, returns once again to the familiar Glass territory of small-town Saskatchewan in the 1940s and '50s, the setting of what she calls her "four prairie plays." And in real life, the 52-year-old playwright, novelist, and screenplay writer has moved back to Canada.

But her return isn't the completion of a circle: for one thing, Toronto, she says, is a world away from the Western Canada she grew up in. And she is not sure how long she'll stay.

Glass came to Toronto in 1987 for the CentreStage production of her last play, *Play Memory*, and stayed to write *Yesteryear* for Bill Glassco. She is impressed with the Canada Council, which enables theatres to produce shows that would be stillborn in the competitive commercial theatre world of New York, and she is delighted by the Canadian actors — including R. H. Thomson, Kate Trotter, Fiona Reid, and Charmion King — who

made up the cast for her first Canadian premiere in 11 years. Preparations for her American productions, on Broadway and off, sometimes involved bringing out maps of Saskatchewan and convincing the actors that adding "eh" to the end of every sentence wasn't the only guarantee of Canadian content.

Not all of Glass's work for the theatre has been set in small-town Saskatchewan: *American Modern*, a one-act play written in 1972 explored urban angst south of the 49th parallel and *To Grandmother's House We Go* (1980) involved an American matriarch and her dependent family. But the very popular *Artichoke* is set on the Canadian prairies. It was eventually taken seriously by American producers, but at first, according to Glass, they would "just open a manuscript and see Saskatchewan and close it."

Artichoke was produced off Broadway in 1975; and in 1984 *Play Memory* was directed on Broadway by Hal Prince. It is a dark vision of the deterioration of a prairie tobacco salesman turned alcoholic, and was based on her father, who turned his back on society after being fired for improperly using gas coupons during World War II to keep himself and his colleagues in business. With many disturbing scenes drawn directly from real life, Glass travelled deep into painful territory.

"In *Yesteryear*," Glass says, "I'm looking back with rose-coloured glasses. I wanted to write the flip side of *Play Memory*. There is a great deal of pain and suffering in this play, but I have flipped it around and taken a whimsical view." Set in 1948, it tells the story of David McTavish, a decidedly idiosyncratic house painter who has lived in the back room of a hardware store for 15 years — ever since the day he caught his fiancée in an amorous clutch with a visiting goalie, and horsewhipped her out of town. During one of the regular gatherings of the town's leading lights in the hardware store, he learns that he has won the Irish Sweepstakes. He decides to buy the local whorehouse and move in; part of the sales agreement is that all the prostitutes get pensions. (Emma, the madam, describes her function as "being in public service.") Then his former love returns to town.

The play ends happily, with second chances handed out liberally. "Many of the little stories in *Yesteryear* came from my father's memories of those small towns. When my dad would roll in on Friday night, we'd feel very citified hearing these stories about the whorehouse and the pensions and the guy in the back room of the hardware. I wanted in the play to simply write these people as they were," says Glass, "without any kind of judgement."

Yesteryear provides the most upbeat conclusion to life in Glass's dramatized Saskatchewan to date, with its concluding affirmation of the possibility of reconciliation and fresh starts after years of absence. "Do I believe in second chances? I believe in hanging in there, and stamina, and persistence," Glass says. "And I suppose I believe in second chances."

— ANN JANSEN

Likely stories

Did Bukharin support the plight of the peasants? Sometimes history is rewritten by mistake

By I. M. Owen

LIKELY: *The offer will likely be accepted.* This use of *likely* as an adverb exactly synonymous with *probably* is becoming so common that it might almost be regarded as regular. Indeed, in my editorial work I have often let it pass, feeling that to correct it would make me seem excessively fussy and old-fashioned — which of course I'm not. But now I've decided to harden my heart. The sentence above became *The offer is likely to be accepted.* No more Mr. Nice Guy.

The point is that the *-ly* ending makes the word look like an adverb, but it's normally an adjective. Idiomatic English uses it as an adverb only when it has a qualifying word preceding it: *most likely, quite likely, very likely.* There's no obvious reason for this; it's just the way the language has developed. The *OED* says that the adverbial use of *likely* by itself is "rare except *Sc. or dial.*" Fowler (1926) goes further, saying that it is *never* used "in educated speech or writing," but then he adds tentatively, "American usage, however, may be different." Gowers (1965) expands on this: "in Scotland and Ireland it is common in speech and in U.S. may be found in print." But before we decide that as red-blooded North Americans we should reject the rule, let's listen to the *American Heritage Usage Panel*:

Likely, as an adverb, is preferably preceded by a qualifying word such as *quite, very, or most*: *He will very likely arrive on Friday. The new government quite likely will be more receptive to change.* Without qualifiers, the preceding examples are both unacceptable to more than 70% of the Usage Panel.

Incidentally, I'd like the second example better if it ran *will quite likely be*, but that's another story. See Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (either edition) under "Position of Adverbs," section 4.

FORMER: Some weeks ago, I'm told, there was a reference in the *Toronto Star* to a *former immigrant from France*. Is this possible? Some of us are natives, some are immigrants. There's no way of changing from one category to the other — except being born again, I suppose. My informant also told me that she had seen, in another place, the phrase *originally born in Saskatchewan*.

Here's a frequent journalistic use of *former* that irritates me: *He entered the cabinet*

of former prime minister Pierre Trudeau in 1972. Pierre Trudeau wasn't a former prime minister in 1972.

NEAR MISS: Larry MacDonald of Ottawa wrote to the *Globe and Mail* in January:

It seems to me that the *Globe* is starting to wander in that Alice-in-Wonderland world of euphemisms when it talks of a near-miss of two passenger planes at Pearson International Airport.

Would it not be more correct to say near-collision?

The *Globe and Mail* never comments on its Letters to the Editor, so perhaps I may answer MacDonald here. This is preferable to sending my answer to the paper. I've sworn off writing to the *Globe and Mail*, since its copy-editing is likely to make it appear that I've used expressions that would shame me if a reader of this column saw them.

The *Globe* set the letter in a box, which I take to imply approval. Yet MacDonald is surely wrong. What happened at the airport was nearly a collision, but it wasn't one; it was in fact a *miss*, but a *near* one. Therefore, a *near miss*. By the way, I see no need for a hyphen in the phrase.

MacDonald's letter ends:

During the Second World War, we didn't say, "Hey! that was a near-miss! We did say, "That was bloody close!"

Certainly. But I think an official communiqué mentioning the incident would have said *near miss*.

The use of *near* in combinations to mean "almost," as recommended by MacDonald, is ranked as obsolete in the *OED* and the most recent citation is from 1625 — *near-isle* for "peninsula." I admit, though, that it has lately been revived in journalese with combinations like *near-riot* and *near-crisis*. It would be nice to make it obsolete again; failing that, let's reserve the hyphen for this use to distinguish it from phrases like *near miss*, in which *near* has its basic meaning of "close."

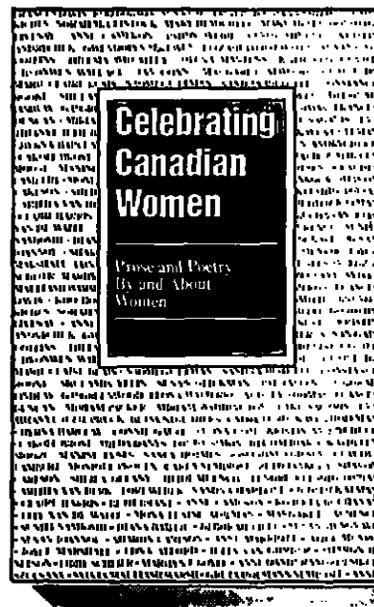
SAY WHAT YOU MEAN: *Bukharin is back in favor because he opposed Stalin and supported the plight of the peasants* (Jeffrey Simpson in the *Globe and Mail*). This is rewriting history with a vengeance. Until now it has been generally believed that it was Stalin who caused the peasants' plight, and that Bukharin was against it. ☐

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tion, laughter and joy: this is the triumph of comedy" and "Unhappy childhoods, loneliness, suicide, alienation . . . desperate people" are his subject matter.

He raises aesthetic expectations but the diction, repartee, and characters that serve *Nurse Jane* so well appear more often in *Joggers* and *Hope Chance* as clumsy or sentimental. Stratton's achievement then is not as admirable or as interesting as his intent.

— DANIEL DAVID MOSES

THE PAST

DICTIONARY OF CANADIAN BIOGRAPHY VOLUME VII 1836-1850

edited by Frances G. Halpenny
*University of Toronto Press, 1088 pages,
\$70 cloth (ISBN 0 8020 3452 7)*

THE VOLUMES of *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (11 of which have appeared since 1969) have been highly acclaimed by both scholarly and general reviewers. It is warm praise simply to call volume VII, which covers figures who died between 1836 and 1850, more of the same.

Historians have long appreciated the power of these volumes to lift shadows and raise veils from mysterious railway promoters, nuns, and tribal leaders who fall beneath the ranks of the shining greats but nonetheless merit mention here. Academics and more general readers, too, wander through less purposefully for the pleasure of milling in a bygone crowd, hearing what mattered to the middling surveyors, preachers, and silversmiths of long ago.

It is noteworthy that the volumes up through VII reflect the initial dominance of western fur and eastern fisheries in our economy. Over half the 538 subjects of volume VII made their careers in regions outside Ontario and Quebec. Here is redress for the centralist bias in much of our historical writing.

Women, unfortunately, are less well served, representing only four per cent of the entries. One wonders whether the criteria for inclusion are too much directed towards male activities. Although past political documents seldom mention women, there are many female diaries and letter collections for the period covered by volume

VII, and the history of private life is an increasingly accepted part of the historical field. More notice might have been taken too, of the founders, patrons, and matrons (and perhaps the inmates!) of the charities, orphanages, and magdalens which proliferated after 1830. Where is Lucy Hedge (died 1838), who pioneered Canada's Sunday school movement? And where are the founders of Montreal's Ladies' Benevolent Association (established 1815) who went door-to-door to discover needy immigrants, and helped lay the groundwork for both the Protestant Orphanage and the General Hospital?

Let us hope that the 20th-century volumes, which will soon begin to appear, will correct this shortcoming while maintaining the many virtues of this splendid project. — JAN NOEL

BILLY BISHOP: CANADIAN HERO

by Dan McCaffery
*James Lorimer, 225 pages, \$24.95 cloth
(ISBN 1 55028 095 3)*

BILLY BISHOP's status as a First World War hero rests on two claims: that he shot down 72 enemy aircraft and that he strafed a German aerodrome, single-handed; the latter exploit earned him the Victoria Cross. Both these assertions have been contested since the war ended. Dan McCaffery sets out to vindicate Bishop as Canada's ace of aces.

He gives the arguments both for and against the truth of the legend a thorough going over, but his admiration for his subject gets the better of his prose: "Bishop was about to nail an opponent when a second Albatros got behind him and stitched his Nieuport's fuselage with a stream of lead. Before the German could deliver the death blow, Jack Scott streaked out of nowhere, sending the Hun down in flames." Metaphorically rich, yes, but one wonders whether this is history, mock-journalism, or just a comic book without pictures. The use of the term *Hun* for "German" stains McCaffery's writing throughout.

This is too bad because Bishop is an intriguing figure. Not only was his experience unique, to say the least, but the media's creation and glorification of the image of "Bishop, the lone warrior flying above the clouds in a little open cockpit biplane with scarf flapping rakishly in the

wind," while Europe exterminated itself below him, is a stunt almost equal to his reputation as a pilot. But by confining himself to finding out whether Bishop "nailed" all those "Huns" or not, McCaffery offers a disturbingly naïve and blood-thirsty way to recall the Great War. — WARD MCBURNEY

SOCIETY

THE LAST DANCE: MURDER IN CANADA

by Neil Boyd
*Prentice-Hall Canada, 286 pages,
\$16.95 paper (ISBN 0 13 523887 0)*

IT WOULD be a mistake — in fact, it was a mistake — to expect in this colourfully titled volume an exposition of intriguing murders in the fictional English style. It is, rather, a sociological treatise, complete with statistics, graphs, and chapter-end notes about murderers and victims alike who are, for the most part, materially disadvantaged and mentally limited. It is sombre and depressing reading; and yet it does bring together a wealth of information about Canadian murders of the past century or so, and about the legal steps toward and away from capital punishment by which their perpetrators were dealt with.

Almost the only case considered at any length is that of *Wilbert Coffin*, the Quebec guide and prospector who was hanged in 1956 for the killing in the bush near Gaspé nearly three years earlier of three American hunters. It is a fascinating case, if only because there was and remains so much doubt about Coffin's guilt.

Other colourful cases — notably those of Peter Demeter and Colin Thatcher — are touched upon so lightly that they are almost brushed off. Perhaps Boyd feels that they have already been sufficiently analysed elsewhere. Thatcher, for instance, is dealt with in seven lines.

Both Demeter and Thatcher were, and are, powerful men. It is tempting to wonder whether it may be out of simple prudence that they get off so lightly in this book. Demeter in particular may be thought to have shown a remarkable ability to reach out from his prison cell a long, vengeful arm; and murder, after all, is not only of the past and of the present, but of the future. — BERT COWAN

THE LYNCH MOB

by Charles Lynch
*Key Porter, 197 pages, \$19.95 cloth
(ISBN 1 55013 108 7)*

CHARLES LYNCH, in seeking to hang his seemingly endless anecdotes about our post-war prime ministers upon some structure, adopts the device of ranking them in terms of what he regards as their effectiveness (St. Laurent first, Joe Clark last). It is a successful device in that it challenges the reader to play that same parlour game, but it is a somewhat thin scaffolding for his relentless outpouring of generally good-humoured tales about our recent prime ministers.

Some of the anecdotes are first-hand, drawing upon Lynch's 52 years as journalist; others are reworkings of familiar subjects. Almost all are recounted with verve and charity. If that is what one seeks, then Lynch on Mackenzie King's perceptive dog, Diefenbaker's ravings, or Mulroney's surplus shoes will not disappoint. He is generous in his laughter at the foibles of our prime ministers, certainly more generous than his journalistic colleagues whom he knows only too well.

Canadians will search their media columns and channels in vain for favourable reports on governments and prime ministers of any stripe. Each prime minister gets the treatment, regardless of affiliation. There's the buildup on the way to the office, and then there's the teardown.

Lynch, let it be said, does rather better than that in *The Lynch Mob*.

There are random asides of a more serious character: the evolving role of the Supreme Court or the deplorable impact of public opinion polls during elections. After the umpteenth anecdote, one longs for Lynch to expand upon such a passing observation as "pollsters have cheapened the whole political process. . . . They have disenfranchised the populace and reduced elections to [a] mockery. . . . We shall need to await another and very different book from Lynch for expansions of this and other important insights. In the meantime, Lynch, in offering his anecdotes about our prime ministers, has helped us to laugh a little at ourselves — and for that his readers should be grateful.

— ROY MACLAREN

Nanabush in the city

Tomson Highway writes in English, but he dreams in Cree, and his plays combine his knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure and artistic language

By Nancy Wigston

TOMSON HIGHWAY was born in a tent, in the middle of a snowbank on his father's trap-line, on a remote island on Maria Lake in northern Manitoba. The second youngest of 12 children, he spoke only Cree until, at the age of six — at the behest of the government — he was sent away to a Catholic boarding school in The Pas. He returned to his home only in the summer months. Two years ago, *The Rez Sisters*, his play about life on the "rez" (reservation), won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for the best new play of the year, and was runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for Best Canadian Play. One of two plays invited to represent Canada at the Edinburgh Festival, it earned extravagant praise.

In the words of one critic, the Native Earth Performing Arts Company (which presented *The Rez Sisters*) was "a group on the threshold of developing a very individual national theatre"; another reviewer lauded the "skilled and inventive ensemble players"; and a third called the play a "bundle of fresh, strong perceptions rooted in the commonplace, built on affection and eliciting it."

Tomson Highway is Native Earth's artistic director, and was busy with rehearsals for the group's latest production (*The Sage, The Dancer, and The Fool*) when I visited him in his Toronto home just east of the downtown core. It was a rainy winter morning, the kind of weather that means everyone you know is recovering from the flu. As we sat over our cups of coffee in a blue-and-white farmhouse-style kitchen, his soft voice barely disturbed the sounds of dripping water outside the windows. A white cat



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL OREBSTEIN

Tomson Highway

came in, and curled up at his feet.

His mind was on a film offer for *The Rez Sisters* that his agent was working on. He seemed to be thinking aloud, debating his choice between two interested production companies, one with lots of money, the other with less — but with a reputation for doing quality work. "My choice is whether I want to make money or a beautiful film. I wish there were more people who did things because they loved them."

Tomson Highway is doing something he loves — no question about that. But it's been a long road from the Brochet Reserve, where he spent his early years in what he has called "an exquisitely beautiful nomadic lifestyle," trapping in winter, fishing in summer. A measure of the distance he's come is the fact that his two eldest siblings never attended school, and to this day speak Cree and Chipewyan, but no English. Learning to exist, let alone succeed, in the white man's system was an exceptional feat.

"The Department of Indian Affairs had an iron grip on treaty Indians," he recalls. "We were wards of the Crown. The band councils were elected, but the chiefs were answerable to the department. In the early '50s, Indian children between six and 16 were forced to go to schools where they were 'missionized' by the Roman Catholics. It was an all-out policy of assimilation. The intent was to turn Indian kids into white kids. A lot of the kids got treated badly, it was terrible. Girls had their heads shaved. There was child abuse, there was sexual abuse."

It isn't a time he wants to dwell on. He says merely, "It was a dark landscape. When the stories come out, people will be shocked. A lot of my colleagues from those days are dead, by suicide, by alcohol-related violence that they levelled at each other. Very few of us made it through." But he did well, going to high school in Winnipeg, and then studying music at the University of Manitoba and eventually collecting honours degrees in music and English from the University of Western Ontario. "I was in a privileged position. I was a smartass. I always had the highest marks — the teacher's pet. I learned everything to a T, got my two university degrees. I was a role model. I played the game. Now I'm going back to tell the story."

While at boarding school he had learned to play the piano. "Piano lessons were my through-line to sanity, I was hanging on to that." A young professor of music, newly arrived from England, became the Churchill High School student's piano teacher. "I was one step away from Main Street," Tomson remembers, referring to the city's notori-

ous downtown strip. "William Aide [now of the University of Toronto Faculty of Music] was my teacher; he noticed, and took me under his wing. He was like a father to me." Highway studied music for two years at the University of Manitoba. When Aide went on sabbatical to England, he took his student with him to study concert piano.

London in the early '70s was Tomson Highway's artistic coming of age. "I was lucky. I got whisked off my feet, and was entertained royally. I really experienced things from the inside. These were the days of glitter rock — David Bowie — and artists like David Hockney. I met all sorts of musicians and artists, film-makers, and actors. Every night I went to see a film, a concert, a play, an opera, or a ballet — often two in a evening. Seven nights a week sometimes. I saw Joan Sutherland, Leontyne Price, Rubenstein, Jacqueline du Pré. The world's best. Something inside me said, 'I'm going to be like that.'"

Another year at Manitoba, and then, with his mentor, a year at Western, and Tomson Highway was faced with a choice between music and the needs of Indian people on the streets. "I asked myself, what can I do with classical music and the Indian people?" Chopin lost. At 23, the young graduate went to work helping with children's recreation programs, prison inmates, Indians facing the courts. One group he worked for, the Ontario Organization of Indian Friendship Centres, was formed in 1959 to assist native people who had moved to the cities, a pattern that began in the 1950s. "The immediate impact on them was shock, and the result was the classic image of the Indian drunk on the street," says Tomson.

During seven hard years he learned to cope within organizations that, in essence, had to become un-Indian to exist. "In order to be eligible for government grants," he explains, "to satisfy the Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations' definition of a corporation, Indian people, who had governed themselves in a hereditary system based on community consensus, had to adopt the elective system and form boards of directors, with presidents, vice-presidents, secretaries, and so on. Whereas the Indian system — of politics, of theology — is a circle, a never-ending circle, the elective system, the European system, is a straight line, what I call the Genesis to Revelations line: progress, progress, progress, from point A to point B, until the apocalypse comes. As a result, the circle was shattered, and got stretched open to a straight line. The impact, psychologically and spiritually, was devastating."

Being "buffeted about" within this emerging system for seven years, privy to internal hatreds, jealousies, and power struggles, became yet another rite of passage for Tomson Highway. The gratifying part was that he came into contact with so many people across the province: kids, old people, street drunks. "I fell in love with them madly. To this day I can go to any town in this province, any reserve, and I walk into a home and it's my home. The friendship, the emotional support is immense."

At 30, he decided it was time to make it all connect. "So I started writing plays, where I put together my knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language. It amounted to applying sonata form to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk, say, at the corner of Queen and Bathurst. As an Indian person in this country, you are aware, like it or not, that that is the first and only way most white people see Indians. It's an indictment. That's our national image. In fact, the average white Canadian has seen that visual more frequently than they've seen a beaver. To my mind, you might as well put an Indian drunk on the Canadian nickel."

Angry but not bitter, Tomson Highway set to work. The primary challenge was to produce works in English that were the equal of or better than those produced by native speakers. Not fluent in English until his mid-teens, Tomson says he still dreams in Cree, all his stories come to him in Cree. The ethos of the Cree language — quite unlike English — forms the basis of his plays. How is the language different? "Well, first of all it's hilarious. The central figure in our mythology is a clown, a Trickster, who stands at the centre of our dream life, as opposed to the European context where the central figure is an agonized individual. European mythology says we are here to suffer; our mythology says we're here to have a good time. The language that grew out of that mythology is hilarious. When you talk Cree, you laugh, constantly."

"And secondly, it's very visceral. You talk quite openly about the functions of the body, which in English are taboo. The Trickster was a very sensual character — making love, eating — all those bodily functions, he celebrated them, he lived for them. The Trickster's most frequent conversational partner was his anus. In English the immediate impulse is to censor that, but in Cree it makes perfect sense."

"The third distinction is that there is no gender given to words. By that system of thought the mythological Trickster is neither exclusively male nor

exclusively female; or is both simultaneously. In the European languages you must always deal with the male-female-neuter hierarchy. God is male, irretrievably. Suppose Jesus Christ had been a woman? What an outrageous notion. But the Cree figure was never made flesh. He is strictly a figure of the imagination. No one has ever seen him."

No one, perhaps, except the audiences across the country who've enjoyed *The Rez Sisters* (a new production opens at Montreal's Centaur Theatre this month); he leaps and dances around the stage, visible only to those characters in the play, like Marie-Adele, who are about to die. The play, based on Tomson's mother and her seven sisters, was workshopped at the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company, West Bay, Manitoulin Island, and appeared at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto in late November, 1986. An immediate hit, it tells the stories of seven women, siblings and in-laws, who dream of leaving their reserve to make it to the Biggest Bingo in the World, being held in Toronto. The only "male" onstage is the Trickster, Nanabush (played by Tomson's brother, René, a professional dancer) disguised as a seagull, a nighthawk, and finally the Bingo Master himself.

The play is a raucous mix of the comic and the tragic, a true reflection of what Tomson Highway has seen in his lifetime. The effect is something like the "magical" theatre Tomson observed in the plays of James Reaney. While attending workshops with Reaney at Western, he had been impressed with the way mythology was superimposed on the events in the characters' lives, particularly in *The Donnellys*, a trilogy that deals with an Irish Protestant family in Ontario in the 1800s, whose feud with another family led to violence, torture, and murder. In these plays "man and the gods interact," he recalls. "By means of poetic metaphor, Reaney transformed Mr. and Mrs. Donnelly into Father Sky and Mother Earth, the seven sons become the stars, the daughter the moon. I'll never forget it."

James Reaney vividly remembers the young student who supplied him with the Cree terms he needed for *Wacousta*, a play that used conversational Cree for a lacrosse game — something that had never been done before. "He was clever, literary, an awfully nice guy doing honours English," he recalls, "and I woke up one day and realized he had a play on in Toronto." Reaney loved *The Rez Sisters*, which he calls "a wild mix of things, funny and sad at the same time. It moves from ordinary life on the reserve to God as a dancer — what a knockout concept. The play mixes myth and documentary,

and it drops the realism that Canadian theatre tends to get saddled with. I found it utterly fascinating."

Reaney's reactions were echoed across the country and in Edinburgh, as *The Rez Sisters* gave audiences a picture of Indian life they didn't expect. Catherine Lockerbie, one of the critics, called the play "a celebration: a great, sassy, comic pulsing celebration of down to earth womanly life." Next on Tomson's agenda is the flip-side of the sisters, a play exclusively about men — some of the sister's men, as well as some new names and faces — called *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapushkasing*, slated to open at Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille in April. This time around the game is hockey, and Nanabush assumes female shapes. In fact, Tomson Highway has a whole *Rez* cycle in mind, a total of seven plays dealing with different aspects of reserve life. The next one after *Dry Lips* will be a musical, featuring a band headed by one of the indomitable *Rez* sisters, the "Indian biker chick," Emily Dictionary.

Something exciting is happening here. Tomson Highway is part of the first generation of university-educated Indians: articulate not only in Cree but in English. He is fired by the "astonishing realization" that, contrary to what he was told, his language, his culture, his history are not third rate but first rate. "Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near-destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation."

Last summer Tomson found himself on a panel at the Vancouver Authors' Festival with two West-Coast "anglo" playwrights. "Someone in the audience asked us about our roots," he recalls. "My geographical roots are in northern Manitoba, but I also have spiritual roots, which are powerful. The anglos questioned themselves, but they couldn't find a solid mythology. Whereas with us it's passionate, electric."

He gestures to an empty chair behind the kitchen table, a deep blue director's chair. "Because there's an Indian in this room, the Trickster is here. He's an extension of my spirit. For all intents and purposes he's sitting here." I turn and look at the chair, which seems a little less empty than it was a minute ago. "But if I were to leave this room he'd be gone too. There'd be no Indian spirit in this kitchen." Just then the phone rang, as if on cue, breaking the spell. Tomson Highway got up to answer it. Outside the windows the grey Toronto cityscape looked even duller than usual. ■

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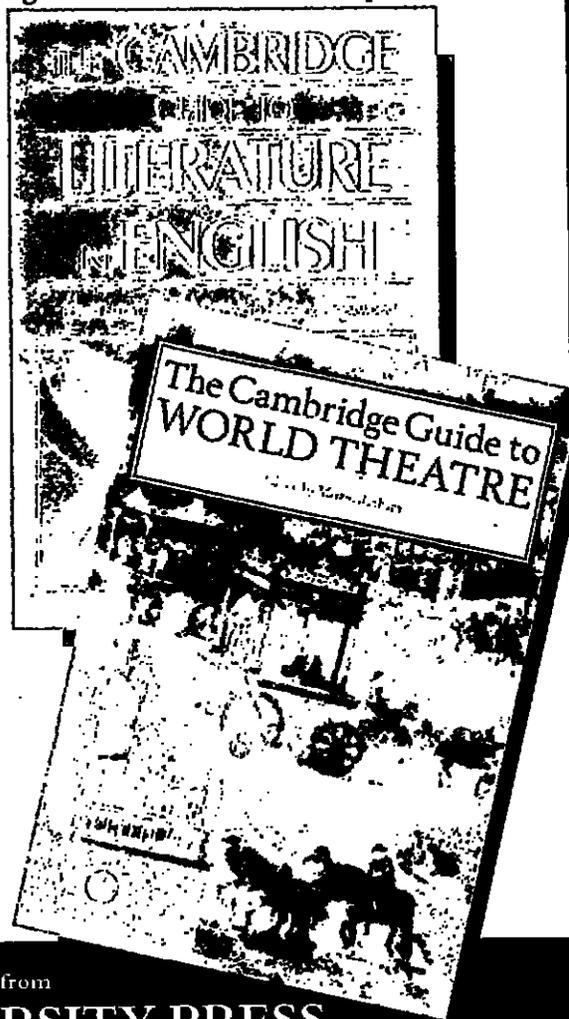
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Inquest

*'She thinks that's where she lives . . . In her dreams.
Not even last night's dreams. Sometimes, the dreams she thinks
she lives in are ten years old — or twenty'*

By Timothy Findley

Author's note

THIS IS the opening scene of a play in progress; *Inquest* is the working title. The play is set in the late 1960s and takes place in Ottawa. It deals with memory, and a double crisis: a diplomat is being investigated for homosexual activities while in a foreign posting; and his wife, who has Alzheimer's disease, is becoming more and more disoriented. Is anyone's memory valid in the light of what we need to remember and need to forget, choose to remember and choose to forget in a time of crisis? And what if we can't remember — or at least, not as others would have us recall the past? Whom does memory serve? Ourselves, or others?

— T.F.

Cast

Harry Raymond:
Canadian Ambassador to Moscow
Marian Raymond: his wife
Diana Marsden: their daughter
Norman Michaelson:
Prime Minister of Canada
Juliet Michaelson: his wife
Mahavolitch and Jackman:
RCMP intelligence officers



ACT ONE

Autumn. Late afternoon. Downstage, there is a garden. A sense of order over-run by time. The place has not been lived in for two years. A sunroom juts out into the garden at an angle. There are many windows. Double doors lead to a series of wide steps and the steps lead down onto the lawn. Upstage, an exit leads from the sunroom to the rest of the house via a short staircase. Wicker chairs, a settee, and tables are all pushed to one side and covered with an inadequate dust sheet. The stage is empty.

JULIET (Off) How lovely! The trees . . . I'd forgotten.

DIANA (Off) I can't believe you'd ever give it up.

JULIET (Off) I can't believe it either. And the garden! Oh, Norman — what fools we were.

DIANA (Off) Do we have to go in through the house? Can't we go this way?

NORMAN (Off) I don't see why not.

Diana Marsden enters the garden.

DIANA Oh, my goodness . . . Wonderful!

Norman Michaelson enters — pausing to let the others pass before him.

NORMAN You care for that, Diana?

DIANA Yes. Oh, yes. Daddy? Do come. The view!

Juliet Michaelson enters — followed by Harry Raymond.

JULIET There you go, Harry. Diana wants to show you the river.

Harry crosses to Diana. Juliet lets him pass, hanging back near Norman.

DIANA Don't look till you get here, father. Don't. There. How about that!

HARRY Yes. . .

DIANA Nothing anywhere beats the view up the Gatineau. Not in October.

JULIET (Taking Norman's arm) We were appallingly happy here. Simply appallingly happy. Weren't we, Norrie. . . Of all the houses everywhere — in all our lives, we were never, never better off than here.

NORMAN True enough, I guess.

Mahavolitch and Jackman enter. Both wear raincoats and both are carrying hand luggage.

I'm afraid you lads will have to take that in through the front.

MAHAVOLITCH Yessir.

Mahavolitch and Jackman prepare to exit.

NORMAN Once you're inside, you might come down and unlock that door. (Sunroom) Where's Mrs. Raymond?

MAHAVOLITCH Can't say, sir. We thought she'd come round with you.

NORMAN No. No. Harry?

HARRY Yes, Norman . . . What is it?

JULIET Where's Marian?

HARRY I don't know. Didn't she . . . ?

DIANA (breaks away: calling) Mother?

NORMAN She can't have gone far.

Mahavolitch and Jackman start to set down the luggage.

No. No. Don't do that. Just get on with your business. We'll find Mrs. Raymond.

M and J (together) Yessir.

They exit — with luggage.

DIANA She was with us, I swear. (Calling) Mother?

Diana exits.

HARRY Where can she possibly have gone?

JULIET Not to worry.

HARRY Marian?

JULIET No. Let me. Diana and I will find her.

Juliet exits.

HARRY I'm sorry, Norman.

NORMAN She'll turn up. (*He looks around the garden*) You know — it's quite true: we were happier here than anywhere else we've ever lived, me and Juliet. And we've certainly had our share of cities. Athens, Moscow, London . . .

Mahavolitch and Jackman appear in the sunroom and unlock the doors — after which, they begin to arrange the furniture, removing the dust sheets, etc. Norman looks at the river.

Funny, isn't it, given the past, to say we were happiest in Ottawa, of all places. But, dear God, those hills, that river. . . And, of course, our children were born here. (*Looks at Harry*) Diana was born . . . where was it? Japan?

HARRY That's right.

NORMAN Wonderful, isn't it — the ridiculous stuff a person remembers.

HARRY Yes. Next thing you know, you'll remember where *you* were born.

NORMAN (*Laughs — then sobers.*) I'm sorry. That was completely thoughtless.

HARRY Yes, it was. But I forgive you. (*He smiles*)

NORMAN (*Also smiling*) That's very big of you.

HARRY Well — I guess I'd better get used to forgiving you. I dare say, over the next few days, I'm going to have to do lot of forgiving. Aren't I.

DIANA/JULIET (*Off*) Mother . . . ? Marian . . . ?

Pause

NORMAN Have you talked with her? About why you might be here, I mean?

HARRY No. But she's made — or she's making — her guesses. You know that nothing official has been said: only that I've been called home "on special duty." And she's not a fool, Norman. Neither am I.

NORMAN No.

Harry crosses to the edge and looks at the view.

HARRY We all know what "special duty" means.

NORMAN (*making light of it*) Do we?

HARRY Oh, for Christ's sake: stop being so goddamned diplomatic. Take off your bloody white gloves! In the double-double-double-talk of our beloved External Affairs, when an ambassador is called home on "special duty" — we all know perfectly well it means he's under investigation.

NORMAN Yes. Well. We'll talk about that tomorrow.

Off-stage, a dog begins to bark in the distance.

HARRY At whose instigation, Norman? At whose instigation was I brought home? (*Norman does not answer.*) Was it yours?

NORMAN I'm only a servant, Harry. A servant — like you.

HARRY Like hell, you are. You're the bloody PM.

NORMAN Yes. But when it comes to matters like these, the bloody PM is still just a servant.

HARRY Whose, then? Whose servant?

NORMAN (*lights cigarette*) Circumstance. The servant of circumstance . . .

HARRY What circumstance this time?

NORMAN We'll talk about it tomorrow.

HARRY But . . .

NORMAN *Tomorrow.* (*Beat*) Today, rest. That's a hell of a journey you've just made. Moscow to here: non-stop.

JULIET/DIANA (*Off*) Marian . . . ? Mother . . . ?

HARRY (*giving in*) Yes. I'm tired.

JULIET (*Off*) Yoo-hoo! Marian . . . ?

NORMAN What about this, Harry? Disappearing like this: is this par for the course?

HARRY Par for the . . . You think we keep score? Marian, 3, disease, 4? She's ill. It's a sickness.

NORMAN I'm sorry.

HARRY The worst part is, it has no pattern: no design. Sometimes, we don't even know when she's in it. *She* doesn't know. And there's nothing — there's no medication. All I can do is . . . watch.

NORMAN I'm sorry. I am. (*Beat*) Look, you must have an A-1 case of jet-lag. Let's just celebrate the fact you're here. Why don't we go find a drink?

Norman starts toward house.

HARRY Yes. (*Takes a step: stops*) You know, the funny thing is — she forgets where she is, but she remembers all her dreams.

NORMAN Dreams?

HARRY Yes. She thinks that's where she lives . . . In her dreams. (*Waits: laughs*) Not even last night's dreams. Sometimes, the dreams she thinks she lives in are ten years old — or twenty.

They start up steps, Harry hanging back.

NORMAN She'll turn up. They'll find her.

HARRY She mustn't be harmed here, Norman. No harm.

Norman and Harry join Mahavolitch and Jackman in the sunroom. Norman says a few words to them and then leads Harry up the stairway into the body of the house.

DIANA/JULIET (*Off*) Mother . . . ? Marian . . . ? Marian . . . ? Mother . . . ?

Pause. The dog barks.

Marian Raymond enters. She looks at the view — perhaps the sound of the dog attracts her attention — nothing more. Diana enters.

MARIAN Where have you been, Diana? I've been looking for you everywhere.

DIANA I'm sorry.

MARIAN Are you alone? I thought I heard Juliet.

DIANA You did. She's . . .

MARIAN All the leaves are turning red. Winter's coming. Not my favourite. Maybe the reason they've brought us back is to give your father a posting in the tropics. You think? Perhaps?

DIANA I don't know, mother. Everything happened so quickly. I got a 'phone call: "*Come to Mirabel / Your parents are arriving.*" That's really all I know.

MARIAN (*Merely saying it*) Liar . . .

Still at some distance, the dog barks.

DIANA It's true, mother. I don't know anything . . .

Marian waves her hand for silence. Diana listens.

It's only some dog. Down by the river. (*Beat*) All I know is, you're here and I'm glad you're here.

MARIAN You're glad. Yes. (*Beat*) Is he lost? The dog. Do you think he's lost? Or in trouble. Which? Look — there's Juliet.

Juliet enters.

Somebody's lost their dog. Is it yours? Were you looking? Is that where you've been all this time? Have you seen this? (*The house*) Window-wonderland! Maybe it's their dog that's lost. Whoever lived here last . . .

DIANA I don't really think so, mother. The house has been empty a very long time. This is where you're going to be staying — you and father — until they tell you what's going to happen next.

MARIAN I hope what happens next is Cairo — or Mexico. Anywhere but *what's-its-face* . . .

DIANA You've been to Cairo, mother. You and father were posted there in 1958.

MARIAN (*as if Diana had not spoken*) Did you ever have to suffer the wonders of *what's-its-face*, Juliet?

JULIET *What's-its* . . . ? Where?

DIANA Moscow.

MARIAN What makes you so certain I meant Moscow? (*Turning*) Have you, Juliet?

JULIET What?

MARIAN Been there?

JULIET Where?

MARIAN Moscow.

JULIET Yes. We were . . .

MARIAN Let me tell you, it was not delightful . . . It was not . . . delightful.

JULIET That was our last posting.

MARIAN Where?

JULIET *What's-its-face*. (*She smiles at Marian — but there is absolutely no response.*) Moscow.

MARIAN Muscovites are pigs . . .

JULIET Just before Norrie became Prime Minister.

MARIAN Swine.

JULIET Yes — well. We rather enjoyed it there. I think it's one of the most beautiful embassies we have. All those fireplaces! The smell of woodsmoke — beech and birch and apple wood . . . That lovely view of the river. Not unlike here. Except, of course, bigger. Older. Slightly more . . .

MARIAN Russian? (*Gives a dazzling smile. It vanishes at once.*) We haven't been to India. Or Mexico . . . Maybe they'll give us Mexico. You think?

DIANA Maybe there won't be a posting at all. Maybe they'll let you rest for a while.

MARIAN Rest? Not here, pray God. We wouldn't want that.

DIANA I think daddy looks tired. Don't you, Juliet?

MARIAN We will not rest here. (*Listens*) Oh, that poor dog . . .



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Canada 

JULIET Well — it isn't something for us to decide, anyway: whether you rest here or in Mexico or Timbuctoo That's what I always loved most about External: someone else makes all your decisions. The only thing you have to do is catch the right plane.

Norman comes down into the sunroom carrying a drink. He has removed his top-coat. Mahavolitch and Jackman have finished setting the furniture in place. Whatever conversation they have with Norman is not heard through the glass windows but their talk is obviously about their investigation of Harry Raymond. Watches are looked at: schedules are discussed.

MARIAN You know — I swear I've been in this garden before. (She walks down-stage)

JULIET You have.

MARIAN That view. The river . . .

JULIET You used to visit us here when Diana was a baby. After you came back from Japan.

MARIAN There was a swing over there . . .

JULIET That's right.

MARIAN Hanging from that tree . . .

JULIET That's right.

DIANA What tree?

MARIAN And I used to swing . . . way out over the edge . . .

DIANA What tree? Where?

JULIET We cut it down . . .

MARIAN And the view was . . .

DIANA Isn't that funny . . .

MARIAN Electrifying . . .

DIANA I don't remember any tree.

MARIAN Wonderful! You could swing right into the sky.

DIANA Why did you cut it down?

JULIET It was old, I guess. I don't remember.

MARIAN Dangerous and marvellous! I used to have dreams about letting go. Just letting go and sailing out over that ravine *Kerplop!*

Diana laughs.

With you in my lap.

DIANA Me?

MARIAN Yes. Baby Diana — in her swaddling clothes.

DIANA But only in your dream . . .

MARIAN Don't be afraid. Mummy was always with you. I never let go of you. Not for an instant.

DIANA Well — thank you. Did we . . . land?

MARIAN But, of course.

DIANA Hmph. In my dreams — when I'm falling, I never land.

MARIAN Well — in my dreams, I do.

JULIET *Kerplop.*

DIANA Are we killed?

MARIAN Killed?

DIANA When we land — are we killed?

MARIAN Well, of course we are. You don't think you could fall that distance and not be killed, do you?

DIANA No. I suppose not. Except in dreams, things are different.

MARIAN How? Different?

DIANA The rules are different, mother. You don't land. You don't die. The rules are . . .

MARIAN Not in my dreams.

DIANA But it only ever was a dream, wasn't it.

MARIAN What?

DIANA You on the swing. Me on your lap. *Kerplop.*

MARIAN No. The tree was right there. Don't tell me you don't remember?

DIANA No. I don't.

MARIAN Tell her, Juliet . . . how we

used to sail out over that ravine. She doesn't believe me.

JULIET All I remember is the tree.

MARIAN (*dispassionate*) Liar.

JULIET And the swing, of course. I remember the swing.

Norman comes to the doors of the sunroom and opens them.

NORMAN How would you ladies like to come in and have a drink — take a look around?

Mahavolitch and Jackman exit into the house.

JULIET Good idea. It's getting cold.

Juliet makes for the steps — but Marian and Diana hang back.

Is the inside still as lovely as it was?

NORMAN A little barren, perhaps. Nothing on the walls. Missing furniture. But we can rectify all that.

The dog barks in the ravine.

MARIAN Maybe he's found our bones, Diana — yours and mine. Hidden all these years beneath the leaves.

Marian smiles at Diana and heads for the steps. Harry enters the sunroom from the house — carrying a tray with bottles and glasses on it.

HARRY One thing about a safe house — they always have the best liquor.

NORMAN Yes. And plenty of it.

Marian has been on the instant of passing through the doors to the sunroom. Now, she stops in her tracks.

MARIAN Safe house? Did Harry say . . . safe house?

No one answers: Pause.

Who were those men? Harry?

Harry pours a drink for Juliet and hands it to her.

Norman? Who were they? Juliet?

Juliet almost speaks — but Norman stops her.

Were they police? Policemen? Were they . . . ?

No one answers.

Is that why we're here? Safe house? Policemen?

She looks at Harry.

So . . . they've caught you. At last.

Hold.

The lights fade — except on Marian, who suddenly turns and sits on the steps.

I'd sell my soul for a cigarette. ■

And the winner is

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'Aurélie can make you cry because she knows how to console as well . . . She can take the public in her arms because she's free of me now, as her creator. I'm touched, and moved, that people give themselves over to my theatre'

By David Homel

MARIE LABERGE is one of Quebec's most popular playwrights, whose stage has always been the darker side of family power relations: incest, family violence, anorexia, and the break-up of that community. She has written 18 plays, 10 of which have been published in book form by Montreal's VLB Editeur. Laberge won the 1981 Governor General's Award for theatre with her play *C'était avant la guerre à l'Anse à Gilles*. Laberge is equally at home performing, having played in Chekhov, Brecht, and three of her own works.

BiC: Last night you won another prize, a European one this time. What was it?

Laberge: It garnered me honour only, I'm afraid. The prize is called the "Chevalier des arts et des lettres de la France." The French government gave it to me for my contribution to the French-language arts community. A complicated name for a prize, but very pleasant to receive.

BiC: Your plays have been successful in Paris, especially *L'homme gris*.

Laberge: That's right. I think *L'homme gris* was responsible for winning me this prize. Even though the jury was acquainted with *Oublier*, they know *L'homme gris* was translated into five languages, and that it played 200 times in Paris.

BiC: Does that prove that a play written in joul can succeed in France?

Laberge: The language is not really joul; it's more like québécois French. But remember that, when my plays are done by French actors, they are adapted for European French syntax, which re-

places the original québécois speech. I write in québécois to touch a French audience. But the québécois language doesn't have the same emotional effect on a French audience. A French audience will consider a Quebec play in québécois as folklore or exoticism, and they'll laugh, which is not what I'm after.

So I adapt. I have a colleague who works with me, Jacques de Decker, a Belgian writer and journalist.

BiC: People think of you as a perfectionist; how does a perfectionist work in an art form that is collective by nature?

Laberge: I don't think that being a perfectionist keeps you from working with



Marie Laberge

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other people. It just means that you make life a little more difficult for your co-workers. You have to be a perfectionist if you respect yourself and your art. After all, life is short!

BiC: *What I'm getting at is the relation between your text and what ends up getting played on stage. The current production of Aurélie, ma soeur at the Place des Arts is a very literal staging of the text, it seems to me. Of course, this time you directed it. But in other cases, have you been happy with the productions of your plays?*

Laberge: If a play is strong, well written, normally an actor should feel what the director wants him to feel. When there is a concordance of feeling between the stage designer and the actor and the lighting man, the director should simply try to crystallize and elicit each person's creative feelings. Last night, everyone in the production had the same sense of *Aurélie, ma soeur*, and that's what you felt on stage. The director has to be careful that the meaning doesn't start to slip away or change during a production. Take *Aurélie, ma soeur*: the character of La Chatte could be played in a harder, or know-it-all kind of way, but I think that there are plenty of indications in the text that the character is still full of hope, and that she hasn't been spoiled by life. As the director, that's the way I wanted her played. I wanted the balancing force of love — parental or otherwise — to shine through, the kind of love that's not possessive. Of course, I've never seen *Aurélie* directed by anyone else.

BiC: *Last night, about halfway through the play, I heard one of the audience members start to cry. How does that make you feel?*

Laberge: I heard it too. It was just when Aurélie says, "I miss my sister so much that, sometimes, it's as though I never had a childhood myself." When I heard that person in the audience cry, I thought, *My God, she must miss someone just as badly too!* That person's tears were liberating, I think. Aurélie is the type of character who can make you cry because she knows how to console as well. It's a lot less frightening to cry when you know that someone can console you. Those tears will do that person good in the end. Aurélie can take the public in her arms, because she's free of me now as her creator. I am touched, and moved, that people give themselves over to my theatre, that they actually let themselves go that way. Because letting yourself go is a rare gift.

BiC: *Your theatre is very emotional, especially compared to other playwrights. Your theatre is less one of spectacle, compared to Robert Lepage or Carbone 14.*

Laberge: But Carbone 14 provides a

very emotional experience too.

BiC: *True. But their emotion is not based on the text, the way yours is.*

Laberge: There, you're right: emotion never springs forth from the text, with either Lepage or Carbone 14. It comes from another type of equation.

BiC: *That's what sets you apart as a more traditional playwright: your effects are always based on words, on the text.*

Laberge: That's the way I am! It doesn't bother me any more, though there was a time when it did.

BiC: *Why? Did you want to be more "modern"?*

Laberge: Of course I did! It was sad being nothing more than a poor little emotional playwright, who could only pull off a dramatic situation when the characters were exposed in their total humanity, their suffering and abandonment, their power and impotence. I remember I once wrote a play where I wanted to be intelligent and nothing else. No emotions, no identity crises on stage. Just because you can make an audience cry doesn't mean you've reached the *sumum* of your art. Seeing and accepting your limits is no fun at all! At one point for me, emotions were a limit.

BiC: *And now?*

Laberge: Now I know I don't have an enormous talent; I just have the talent I have, and I've got to work with it. I guess you could call that growing up But that won't keep me from trying to deepen it, perhaps by working from the dark side, the other side.

BiC: *The family is always the dramatic heart of your plays. And your families always seem to be in critical condition.*

Laberge: I don't know too many families that aren't in that condition! Being in critical condition is practically implied by the word "family."

BiC: *A family can be in critical but stable condition.*

Laberge: And that's often the case with my families. In *Avec l'hiver qui s'en vient*, the condition had remained stable throughout an entire lifetime. Thirty years of failed relationships came to a climax during that one evening at the theatre, 30 years of life as a couple.

BiC: *If you postulate that the family is the building block of society, that it stands for society, what does that say about life in our particular province?*

Laberge: Of course, in the microcosm of the family, the way I describe it, there is necessarily a kind of copy, a model, of what happens in our society. Human beings don't change very much between what they are in a relationship, or in a family setting, and how they are in society. The same feelings of responsibility and awareness are at work. You can't achieve lucidity in a relationship without

achieving it in your point of view toward society. The opposite is true too. I prefer to show the human heart in its manifestations in day-to-day life, rather than on a giant, social scale. That's because the political dimension is a little dry, when left to itself. . . . I've always wondered why people, both men and women, get involved in politics. What motivates them? I know why I do what I do; the rewards of my life are immediately accessible. The life I live is very gratifying. People tell me secrets they would never tell anyone else, even people I don't know. But men and women in politics are the most dubious sort. Would you trust them, would you tell your darkest secret to a politician? No, of course not. But there is something human about them once you get them in their family setting. That's the only way I could write about them.

BiC: *Let me go a little further into the social aspect. Your dramatic moment is always the one when people suddenly find that they're fed up. . .*

Laberge: They are breaking-point dramas.

BiC: *Breaking points that remind us of a time when Quebec was collectively going through its own big breaking point, after the grande noirceur and Duplessis's reign.*

Laberge: A weariness that began to turn aggressive, you could say. At the same time, I'm not sure you could link my theatre directly to a political dimension. Look at me: I was born in 1950, I don't have an enormous knowledge of the past, but my feeling is that Quebec has always had an attitude of struggle. It's always an alternation of struggle and fear — and fear won the Referendum. But as soon as our struggles begin to fade or lessen, we pick them up again. That keeps us young. We struggle but we're afraid at the same time. In this dialectic is a frenetic search for who we are, and for the right to live the way we are. It's the fundamental struggle of all human beings, and I think that's what makes Quebec interesting as a place to live. I constantly feel the threat of the anglicization of Quebec. I feel that threat, but it helps create our strength too, because it shows us how French we are.

BiC: *With the sign-language issue, we've come into a time when the impulse to fight has returned.*

Laberge: And it's about time! Not only is it legitimate, it's essential. And it's an essential part of the vitality of Canada too, not just Quebec. The English Canadians are part of this struggle, whether they know it — or like it — or not. That's why they are afraid of losing Quebec. With the free trade issue, English Canadians will have to go through the same

fears for identity that we've been experiencing all along.

BiC: *Quebec helped give us free trade on election night.*

Laberge: Yes, but I'm talking about English Canadians' difficulty in determining their personality over and above that of the United States.

BiC: *Let me ask you an inevitable question, given the nature of your theatre: what are the sources of your material? When I saw you in the theatre with your mother, watching a play about a most unusual and irregular family situation, I wondered what the good lady might have been thinking.*

Laberge: I don't think she was worried, since what I write about is totally different from what really happened to me, in my family. After my first play, people asked me, "Was that the way it was in your family?" And I answered, "No, I'm not telling my story, I'm telling a story." My family understands what I write; they know it's not about them. I write fiction. My sources are my own, what I feel. My way of feeling is more important than the events that might have inspired those feelings. I don't write autobiography. My family doesn't feel that they are being exposed to public view; that's simply not the case.

BiC: *Incest has become a dominant theme in your work, including in Aurélie, the play currently being staged. It's a theme that's grown in visibility lately, on our side of Canada too.*

Laberge: If you look at incest, you see that it's essentially an abuse of power — an abuse of power in the family that plays on the emotions. It's also a total denial of the individual's being. It's a very powerful source — which is why the Greek tragedy-writers fastened on it. It's difficult for the human being to dissociate emotion, and sexuality, and sensuality, and feelings of love and loyalty. When Aurélie talks about ignorance, you understand that escaping from ignorance is a long process. Even though sexuality in our society is spread all over the place in some ways, its real essence is kept hidden: its power, and its power relations. You can crush it or keep it down or repress it, but it's always there. Incest for me is linked to anorexia, like in *L'homme gris*; it's the same relation. The stomach of the anorexic feels hunger, it wants food, but the need for control is greater; the same thing can be done with a person's sexuality. Had I personally suffered from incest, I would probably be discussing it from a single, constant point of view, which is not the way I write. But can I really claim not to have suffered from incest? Perhaps I don't even know the truth. I once met someone who had been drinking, who was

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drunk, and she said to me, "My father made love to me." The next morning when she was sober, when I asked her about it, she was totally incapable of remembering it — it was a completely repressed memory. When you think about what that implies, it's a little disturbing.

BiC: *You were brought up in the country, weren't you?*

Laberge: I'm a country girl, but my country has since turned into the city. When I was a girl there were cows in the field in front of my house, and a forest. I spent the first 12 years of my life there, in L'Ancienne Lorette. It's become a suburb of Quebec City since then, though in the old days the city felt like a long way away, especially since we didn't have a car. From the attic window — all us daughters slept in the same room — I could see the lights of Quebec City glittering at night. I always remember that when I'm in Paris or any other big city at night; I think how far I've come to be inside a city. I'm a country girl who's become a city woman. I need the country to relax, or write in, but I could never live full time there.

BiC: *Is it my imagination, or are there a lot of solariums in your work?*

Laberge: There's a summer kitchen in *L'Anse à Gilles*, and there's a solarium in *Aurélie*. The solarium is an addition to the house, but it's not quite the house, because you're almost outside. In *L'homme gris*, everything takes place in a motel room, it's very claustrophobic, and dangerous too. The more you go outside, the more you can sense the outside, the better the chances for the spirit to escape, to take wing, to have contact with the outside world. The solarium is the image of openness, while retaining a sense of protection. Unfortunately, I don't have one in town, and besides, I've never had one in my life!

BiC: *Of all your plays, has *L'homme gris* had the most staging?*

Laberge: Yes, because it's been translated the most.

BiC: *Why that play in particular?*

Laberge: That's a question I absolutely can't answer. I've speculated plenty, but I've never found the answer. Why is that play so attractive? Perhaps I can offer an answer. One day, a woman, a professor, told me, "There has never been a Greek myth where a daughter killed her father." I think that, socially, *L'homme gris* has been popular because society is ready to accept that a daughter can raise her hand against her father. Fundamentally, the vision of woman in society has changed. A woman can do that without her action being seen as something foolish or insane or absurd. It's a sign of changing times. That was this woman's opinion; perhaps she's right.

BiC: *L'homme gris was translated into English too, and played in Toronto.*

Laberge: Yes. It was called *Night*. Hard to find a title . . . and the production was not good. Very bad, in fact.

BiC: *What happened?*

Laberge: It was just very bad direction.

BiC: *What didn't they understand?*

Laberge: The fundamental relationship of the play. They didn't see the daughter. For them, the daughter was simply a walk-on, a spear-carrier. That made the entire meaning of the play disappear. The man did his monologue, and the daughter just stood there like a walk-on. Whereas the theatricality of the play is in the relation between the two. When a director wants to do *L'homme gris* [published by Methuen of England, Rina Fraticelli, translator] and he tells me that you need a very good actor to play the father and an adequate actress to play the daughter, I always tell him that the opposite is true. It takes a really great actress to play the daughter, and a good enough actor for the male role. If you don't know that, you're going to screw up the whole thing.

BiC: *Still, there's enough stage direction that should indicate the subtlety of the daughter's acting in the play.*

Laberge: Yes, but the directions apparently don't tell some people enough about the daughter's internal workings. I've seen a lot of stagings of *L'homme gris*. I don't go any more, it hurts too much. Most of the time directors understand half, or maybe a quarter of what makes the daughter tick. In France, the daughter was portrayed as someone psychologically messed up, someone half spaced out on medication, whose understanding was deadened, who practically didn't listen to her father. But if she doesn't listen to her father, there's no more play — it's finished.

BiC: *Was that the problem in the Toronto production?*

Laberge: That wasn't the case in Toronto. First of all, they didn't have enough time to rehearse, only two weeks. Two weeks isn't enough to rehearse one of my plays — or anybody's play, in fact. Just because there's only one speaking part doesn't make it any easier. Even if you work eight hours a day, that doesn't solve the problem. First of all, when there are only two actors on stage, you can't work eight hours a day. You keep taking things out of the actor without ever putting anything back in. Rehearsals are for replenishing, not just for emptying yourself, then saying we'll start over again tomorrow. The theatre is more complex than that. You don't just keep going over the text until it's right . . . All I can hope is that the text is strong enough so that something will

come through. Most of the time that's what happens.

BiC: *Was *La Guerre à l'Anse à Gilles* ever played in English?*

Laberge: It was read in Toronto, and in Montreal at the Playwrights' Workshop, and at the Ubu Repertory in New York. Good things happen at the Ubu. During the reading of *L'homme gris* there, there were two psychiatrists in the hall, and a woman who had been anorexic. The psychiatrist came up to speak with me, and the woman was standing nearby, and she said, "Why did the daughter do that? Why did you have her kill her father?" I asked her, "What bothers you about it?" "I was an anorexic for ten years, and I understand everything you're saying in your play," the woman answered me. "But now the girl is going to go to prison. They're going to lock her up, and that's awful." I told her, "No, she won't go to prison. They'll analyse her father's blood and see how much alcohol it contained, and they'll look at her record from the psychiatric hospital that she's just left, and how all her dreams spoke of incest, and they'll understand that, very likely, her father intended to assault her sexually, and she defended herself." That seemed to comfort this woman, and she said, "Oh, in that case, it's all right." Then the psychiatrist said to me, "Your play could not have ended any other way. The daughter would have died had she not tried to liberate herself that way." Then the woman said, "Yes, I know you're right, but I was so afraid they were going to lock her up." It was just incredible having a reaction like that! They believed in that character of mine. In reality, I had no control over that character any more, or over the way the play ended, and I certainly was not aiming for a violent end to it.

BiC: *What are you working on now?*

Laberge: I'm going off to Paris tomorrow, to give some talks and read *Aurélie* in a theatre in Paris. There are big plans for *Aurélie* in Paris for next year. I'm about to start work on a new play that's been inside my head for the last couple of years, and that I'm about to write. I'm going to shut down the phone and start working. I'm nervous, and excited too, and afraid, all at the same time. I'm also doing a screenplay for a TV film, which a producer is looking at. I'd like to do something in that medium.

BiC: *Any other plans for the future?*

Laberge: I'd like to get back on stage. Acting is the most direct relation with people. You can write, or direct, or try to transmit your thoughts some other way, but being on stage is the best way to find out about the quality of a play. When you act, you're talking directly to the public. It's really the place to be. □

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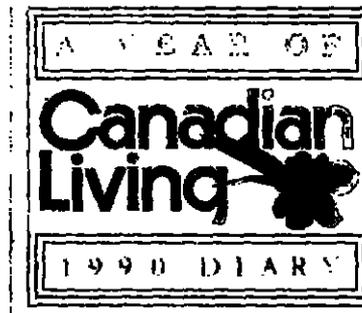
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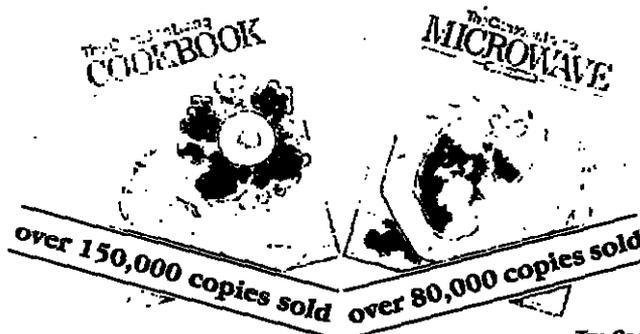
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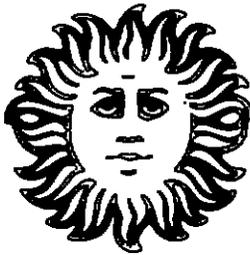


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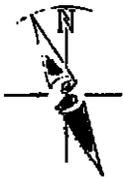
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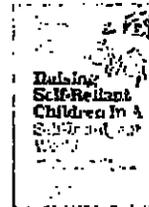
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An opinion for every occasion

Readers uninterested in Shaw's hobbyhorses may be tempted to skip. But those who do will miss the full richness of what Yeats called 'the sewing-machine that smiles'

By Mavor Moore



Michael Holroyd

BERNARD SHAW: THE SEARCH FOR LOVE VOL. 1

by Michael Holroyd

Chattr & Windes (Random House), 456 pages, \$32.00 cloth (ISBN 0 7011 3332 5)

ALL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES," wrote George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950). "are lies." As usual, however, he made an exception of his own case: "Everything about me that is of the smallest public interest has been told, and very well told, by myself." Unable to match the elusive Shakespeare in anonymity, as in so much else, he set out to achieve the opposite: a persona so public, and a body of writing so permeated by that persona, that posterity would be kept as busy finding Shaw among a million lies as extrapolating Shakespeare from twenty truths.

And the strategy worked. The Shakespeare industry today is rivalled in size and growth only by the Shaw industry. There are Shaw Societies all over the globe, Shaw festivals (Canada's among the best known), musical adaptations, films and world seminars. Battalions of graduate students, in every modern language, vie for

Shavian hooks on which to hang their theses. Books and learned journals flutter off the university presses, and (dearer to his ghost) those of commercial publishers, digesting and excogitating and growing by what they feed on.

Shaw wrote no single autobiography. Having talked about himself in many books, he declined to cover the subject in one — especially since it might give the lie to the stories already in print. "I find I can't go over my autobiographical stuff again," he told Frank Harris in a characteristically transparent alibi, "not only from lack of time, but from loathing." The idea of a moralizing prophet with a loathsome past so attracted hagiographers that long before he died the chronicles began to appear, some of them partly fabricated by the subject.

Much of the ground has been well tilled since. But there has not until now been a comprehensive biography comparing established facts, and other contemporary versions of the truth, with the malarkey GBS circulated during his long lifetime — more often to win converts, women, and notoriety than to record the past.

The accomplished Victorian scholar Michael Holroyd has undertaken to fill this gap, and we now have the first volume of his long-awaited three-part biography, covering the 42 years from George ("Sonny") Shaw's insignificant birth in Dublin to the celebrated G. Bernard Shaw's marriage in London to Charlotte Payne-Townshend in 1898. Holroyd collates fact and fiction meticulously, and wraps the collation in a skeptical and sparkling prose that rivals the master's own.

The book contains everything you may want to know about Shaw, and possibly more than you ever wanted to know about the motley cast, meek and mighty, who crossed his path and ended up in dramatic aspic. "Stella, Stella," wrote his pen pal Ellen Terry to Mrs. Patrick Campbell, the first Eliza Doolittle, "shut your ears tight against this blarneying Irish liar and actor . . . He will fill his fountain-pen with your heart's blood and sell your most sacred emotions on the stage."

But not all of Shaw's family, friends, and quondam hosts are as fascinating as these

two life forces, or as worthy of study as the socialist Beatrice Webb, who confided to her diary that Shaw's defects "come largely from the flippant and worthless self-complacency brought about by the worship of rather second-rate women." Holroyd demonstrates that Shaw, in his search for love, pursued a larger number of these than has been acknowledged.

The affairs, often simultaneous, acquit him of the frequent imputation of sexlessness or impotence. They also demonstrate his remarkable talent for projection: the personality with which he endows each lady is nearly always more appealing than she is. But mainly they demonstrate that the intellectual/voluptuary syndrome — cf. Arthur Miller/Marilyn Monroe — is universal, and that GBS, like others before and after him, saw no conflict of interest in the use of his critical and professional clout to further his conquests. Of greater psychological interest is Holroyd's detailed analysis of Shaw's lifelong predilection for playing *ménage à trois* with his married friends — as the poet Marchbanks does in that carefully muted sex-play, *Candida*.

The above quotations from Ellen Terry's letter and Beatrice Webb's diary illustrate two of the gold mines available to chroniclers of the Victorian era. The first half of Shaw's long life coincided with the zenith of letter-writing, the aural calm before the storm of telephony. It was also an age, now retired by television, when most literate women and many men nightly wrote up their diaries as a matter of course. Both letters and diaries, moreover, provided puritans (whether from choice or necessity) with an admired means of sublimation: animal urges distilled into human eloquence, and revenge into literary satisfaction. Shaw was one of the great letter-writers in a world of great letter-writers, and they attracted each other's correspondence. He also kept a diary.

But the biographer blessed with this embarrassment of riches also faces the intimidating range of G. Bernard Shaw's *curriculum vitae*. So, it must be said, does the reader of a biography of G. Bernard Shaw. Holroyd covers the full range like a cool polymath. Is the reader ready to follow?

In addition to theatre and his plays (which Holroyd anatomizes with wit and brevity), Shaw's interest and influence extended to politics, economics, local government, religion, military affairs, boxing, music, the visual arts, dance, shorthand, publishing, typography, phonetics, linguistics, medicine, public health, food, housing, the press, the occult, industry, labour, the death penalty, female suffrage, ancient and medieval history, German philosophy, and Irish anything.

That's the short list; he had an opinion for every occasion. The economist James Mavor (my maternal grandfather, whose name Shaw stole for *Candida*'s husband James Mavor Morell) wrote: "GBS, who dislikes everything Scots and has never been in Scotland, finds his model for standard English in Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, who is an Aberdonian. This is not due to perverse humor, but to rare per-

spicacity." Mavor called Shaw's grasp of economics "amusing and superficial."

But if Shaw was not equally expert in all of the above subjects, who is? Authorities in each specialty did (and still do) object that he uttered arrant nonsense, but they were never able to do it in concert — as Shaw very well knew. His technique before audiences and readers was to go around the clock, punching out one target after another, always passing on to the next (on the laugh) before the previous victim and his supporters could gather their wits. Those unable to follow the successive subjects had the consolation of laughter, and occasionally of learning.

This is the case here. Readers uninterested in some of his hobbyhorses, or unequipped to criticize either Shaw's premises or Holroyd's judgement in each case, may be tempted to skip. If they do, they will miss the full richness of the phenomenon Yeats called "the sewing-machine that smiles." But getting the whole

man in is hard. In pursuit of a special interest that crosses decades, Holroyd resorts to ganging history by subject rather than chronology. Keeping track of one thread we race forward in time and back again. This can be confusing, although the alternative, in light of the number of threads involved, might be worse.

Just as explaining a joke, no matter how well, is inevitably less satisfactory than the joke itself, Holroyd's superbly crafted commentary is sometimes upstaged by his quotations from GBS's own writings. What we get is an extended Holroyd setting for the selected gems of Shaw, which is unfair to both: the subject has a licence for ambiguity and lies, while the biographer is bound by precision and truth. But Holroyd has pinned and mounted his exotic specimen with loving care. GBS's great discovery, he says, is "the device of pretending to be what he was — but with a comic exaggeration that prompted disbelief." That will do nicely until Volume II. □

years later, and Chris Brookes's memoir of the theatre he founded will certainly inflame them.

Brookes was one of the most talented of the generation of directors who came of age in the late 1960s and left an indelible imprint on the subsequent development of theatre in Canada. He is also a gifted writer, and in *A Public Nuisance* he reflects on the history of the Mummerns with the uncompromising analysis, provocative radicalism, and easy style that later made him a first-rate journalist on CBC's "Sunday Morning." This account is an immensely lively testament to a remarkable experiment, and a valuable reflection, honest to a fault, on the contradictions of a political theatre that could never get its internal politics straight. Even so, Brookes cannot suppress the mischievous streak that so irritated those who came into conflict with him. At the end of his narrative he appends a list of facetious skill-testing questions that are guaranteed to raise a few blood-pressure readings.

Like many of the Canadian alternative theatres of the 1970s, the Mummerns began as a collective. Unlike most of them, the troupe saw collective creation not just as a means of developing an indigenous Canadian theatre but also as the organizing principle of the theatre of its community. In Ontario, companies like Theatre Passe Muraille declared their opposition to the institutionalized colonialism of the regional theatres that in the early 1970s still sneered at Canadian plays. In Newfoundland, however, there was no institutional theatre, and for a while it appeared that the Mummerns would enshrine the principles of political radicalism and collective creation as the basis of a regional theatre in the fullest sense of the term. That project ran afoul of the Canada Council, which as early as 1973, after the Mummerns had satirized federal cabinet ministers in its first community documentary *Gros Mourn* (created in collaboration with fishing communities slated for relocation to make room for Gros Morne park), rebuked Brookes for caricaturing real people; this, he was told, amounted to "political not artistic" theatre. The Canada Council under successive heads of the theatre section tried in vain to force the Mummerns to conform to standard administrative principles while trying to respect the troupe's political mandate. Brookes responded that those principles made his mandate impossible.

Ironically, the Council was also the troupe's most loyal patron in the absence of provincial funding. One of the sorriest episodes of the recent Canadian theatre (about which Brookes is more generous than I would have expected) had to do with the hostility of Newfoundland's Director of Cultural Affairs (at the time the province had no arm's-length arts council), who encouraged the schism that destroyed the troupe — and whose enmity was forever assured by a mysterious cream pie in his face at a Toronto gala. The splinter group of actors blamed the schism on Brookes's betrayal of the company's collective and socialist mandate; 10 years later, that faction,

St. George and the Turkish Knight

Our most radical political theatre may have died because it was too successful

By Alan Filewod

A PUBLIC NUISANCE: A HISTORY OF THE MUMMERS TROUPE

by Chris Brookes

Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University, 249 pages, \$19.95 paper (ISBN 0 919166 59 0)

THE HISTORY of the Mummerns Troupe is one of the most important that can be told of the alternative theatre movement that transformed Canadian theatre in the 1970s. It's a story that has much to tell us about the difficulties of creating political art in Canada, about the censorship implicit in our funding patterns, about the ways in which theatre can be a useful and productive political tool for oppressed communities, and about the often overlooked but fruitful theatrical traditions of working-class Canadians.

For the 10 years of its life (1972 to 1982), the Mummerns troupe pioneered the principles of what is today called "popular theatre," the application of theatre as a political instrument by oppressed or marginalized communities. The troupe's work bears comparison with such American companies as Bread & Puppet and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, and the British group 7:84. And in some ways, the legacy of the Mummerns may be greater

than those of its more celebrated cousins. Its brand of cocky, raw collective creations became a fixture of the St. John's theatre scene (which is still centred in the Mummerns' old home in the LSPU Hall on Victoria St.). Perhaps more importantly, the Mummerns' interventions in community struggles inspired adult educators in Africa to similar work, and this in turn has spawned the current widespread promotion of popular theatre as a form of community animation by development agencies.

For most Canadians who recognize the name, the Mummerns' reputation rests on the handful of shows that toured the mainland, particularly the 1978 *They Club Seals, Don't They?*, an angry satire on the anti-sealing media circus (a metaphor that gave the show its theatrical form) that was one of the most controversial plays in Canadian history. In Newfoundland the Mummerns are remembered first of all for their revival of the traditional Christmas mummerns' play, in which for the first time in generations St. George and the Turkish Knight replayed their ancient ritual battle in living-rooms and bars across the province. And the troupe is remembered in St. John's — not always fondly — for its extraordinarily bitter internal struggles, which eventually involved the city's arts community. The embers of that conflict still smoulder 10

now called Rising Tide Theatre, is the resident company in the provincially controlled Arts and Culture Centre, where it performs an undistinguished season of mainstream plays.

In its day the Mummings Troupe created a new kind of political performance in Canada by putting the company at the service of community action agencies — a principle that has been adopted since with more durability by Catalyst Theatre in Edmonton. Rejecting what he called Theatre Passe Muraille's "bring them back alive" approach in such community documentaries as *The Farm Show*, Brookes insisted that the theatre must work with the groups that create the agenda and structures of political change.

To that end, the Mummings worked with unions in the mining towns of Buchans and St. Lawrence; with Oxfam for a show on the Third-World economics of the inshore fishery in *What's That Got To Do With The Price of Fish?*; with the Community Planning Association of Canada in a show on urban renewal; with Native groups in Labrador, and, in a reversal that says something about governmental cynicism, with the provincial government in *They Club Seals, Don't They?*

Because of that insistence, the plays of the Mummings Troupe were designed to reflect the performance values of the specific target audience. In the year that I spent with the troupe I had the chance to see several of the shows in their double incar-



nations in Newfoundland and on tour in mainland Canada. It was clear to me that what was effective and true when played to an audience involved in the issue became something very different when transported elsewhere. I first met the Mummings in 1974 when Brookes took the troupe to create a people's history of the strike-torn mining town of Buchans. I will never forget the thrill and the raw political power of *Company Town* when it played in Buchans and in mining towns in Atlantic Canada, nor will I forget the frustration when it was dismissed in Toronto as a worthy but inartistic imitation of Theatre Passe Muraille. The inability of mainland critics to appreciate that the Mummings' plays emerged out of different cultural priorities had severe implications on the company's profile to funding bodies. The principle that community art must take its aesthetic standards from its audience is probably the second most important lesson to be learned from Brookes's memoir.

The most important lesson is that, as Brookes puts it pithily, as the twig is bent, so the tree will grow. The tragic irony of the Mummings Troupe is that Brookes was unable to establish a structure that could survive independently of his creative leadership. He founded the troupe under the legal fiction of a non-profit corporation called Resource Foundation of the Arts, and proceeded to ignore the obligations that status brought. It was the 1970s; the game was to find ways to use the system against itself. But the system retaliated when the Mummings acquired the LSPU Hall and the arts community in St. John's woke up to the fact that Brookes controlled what was legally a public foundation. In the wake of the ensuing battles Brookes found himself the proprietor of a privately owned company, while the LSPU Hall, renamed the Resource Centre of the Arts, became a truly public foundation that is still the mainstay of the Newfoundland theatre. Disillusioned, Brookes hit off to Nicaragua for a new life as a journalist, leaving the company in the hands of Rhonda Payne, who valiantly kept it alive for two final seasons.

In the United States, Bread & Puppet and the San Francisco Mime Troupe still muddle on; in Britain, 7:84 is losing ground to Thatcherism. Cynics might argue that the survival of these companies attests to their ultimate ineffectiveness. In Canada, for reasons this memoir so clearly reveals, our most radical political theatre may have died because it was too successful. □

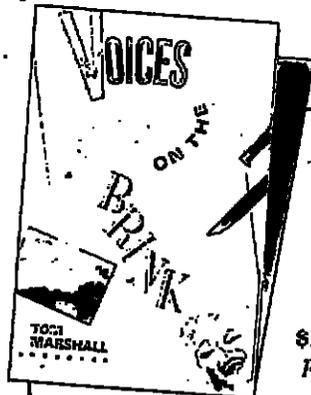
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Macmillan of Canada

BOOK REVIEWS

No wings, yet

By Carol Bolt

THE REZ SISTERS

by Tomson Highway

Fifth House, 118 pages, \$9.95 paper
(ISBN 0 920079 44 X)

TOMSON HIGHWAYS *The Rez Sisters* takes us from the Wasaychigan Hill Indian Reserve on Manitoulin Island to the World's Biggest Bingo in Toronto. It's a free-wheeling, unforgettable journey in terrific company, the Rez sisters, all of them full of energy and honesty and dreams and life.

There is Pelajia Patchnose, who wants paved roads "so people will stop fighting and screwing around and Nanabush will come back to us because he'll have paved roads to dance on." There's Annie Cook, who wants to go to Toronto to go to all the record stores, listen to all the live bands "and drink beer quietly, not noisy and crazy like here." There's Philomena Moosebait, who wants only a toilet "big and wide and very white." And there's Marie-Adele Starblanket who has cancer and who counts her 14 children on the posts of her white picket fence: "Simon, Andrew, Matthew, Janie, Nicky, Ricky, Ben, Mark, Ron, Don, John, Tom, Pete, and Rosemarie." Marie-Adele longs for an island, "the most beautiful, incredible island in the whole goddamn world" for her 12 Starblanket boys and two Starblanket girls. In all, there are seven vital, remarkable women; and we also meet Nanabush, the trickster, disguised as a seagull, a disturbing spirit whom only Marie-Adele and the mentally disabled girl, Zhaboonigan Peterson, can see.

ZHABOONIGAN

Don't fly away. Don't go. I saw you before. There, there. It was a. Screwdriver. They put a screwdriver inside me. Here. Remember. Ever lots of blood. The two white boys. Left me in the bush. Alone. It was cold. . . . Ever nice white bird you . . .

Wasaychigan Hill is "plain, dusty, boring . . . old Wasay" where the "old man has to go the hundred miles to Espanola just to get a job" and the "boys . . . Gone to Toronto. Only place educated Indian boys can

find decent jobs these days." It is also a world full of poetry and spirits, "where on certain nights at the bingo . . . you can see Bingo Betty's ghost, like a mist, hovering in the air over the bingo tables, playing bingo like it's never been played before," and where Nanabush courts Marie-Adele, dancing with her, begging her to fly away with him.

Marie-Adele tells him she has no wings ". . . Yet." Besides, she is going to Toronto. For tests. And to play the biggest Bingo in the world with her five sisters.

It is when the women start out for Toronto, driving through the night, that the story becomes most haunting. While the others stop to change a tire blown out on the pitch-dark midnight highway, Marie-Adele meets the Night Hawk, the dark side of Nanabush. He reminds her that she's dying and she's terrified. She talks about her husband, Eugene:

I could be really mad, just raging man just wanna tear his eyes out with my nails when he walks in the door and my whole body goes "k-k-k-k" . . .

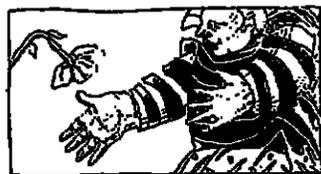
She talks about "the curve of his back, his breath on my neck, Adele, *ki-sa-gee-ee-tin ooma*, making love, always in Indian, only. When we still could. I can't even have him inside me anymore. It's still growing there. The cancer."

"Pelajia," she explains in Cree, "*Een-pay-seeek-see-yan*. Pelajia, I'm scared to death."

The six women continue together toward Toronto as Pelajia tries to comfort Marie-Adele.

You know, one time, I knew this couple where one of them was dying and the other one was angry at her for dying. And she was mad because he was gonna be there when she wasn't and she had so much left to do. . . .

We have seen the sisters raging at each other in a remarkable sequence, a riot of every conceivable insult. Now, when



they're gentlest with each other, when their journey has taken them simply and directly to the heart of the matter, the stage erupts again. Nanabush, in disguise as the Bingo Master, lets everyone in the audience play one warm-up game on the bingo cards included with each program.

Whoever wins this warm-up game, it isn't the Rez sisters. Then the biggest bingo in the world is called, for the big pot they all want, ("A HALF MILLION smackeroos! If you play the game right"). They do everything they can to win. Philomena plays 27 cards. But when they realize it isn't going to work, they storm the stage, complaining that the game is unfair. It's a wonderful moment of theatre, as the Bingo Master changes to the Night Hawk and waltzes away with Marie-Adele.

The Rez sisters return to the reserve without Marie-Adele. Although the play's final sequence seems empty without her, perhaps we are feeling the same loss the characters feel. After all, for two hours we have been part of an extraordinary, exuberant, life-affirming family. □

Questions of honour

By John Gilbert

TWO PLAYS: LITTLE BLOOD BROTHER and BACKSTREETS

by Vittorio Rossi

Ne-Age Editions, 115 pages, \$9.95 paper
(ISBN 0 921833 16 4)

ONE OF THE spin-offs of Canada's inevitably multicultural future may well be a dramatic literature that exploits the cultural myths and behaviour patterns of the Old World while examining their specific mutations in the New. If so, Vittorio Rossi, whose plays have attracted considerable praise and attention in Quebec, is one of the forerunners of a happy future. Resolutely Italian in flavour, the plays nevertheless explore the new Canadian avenues for their Italianism. Italians playing hockey, Italians engaged in a specifically North American youth culture — these are the mediations for cultural attitudes that they inherit from their ethnic past, but which undergo lib-

eration, and change, through being transplanted to Canadian soil.

The two plays published here have this in common: unlike, say, Harold Pinter's plays, which reveal a lurking violence beneath a surface of commonplace and convention, Rossi's betray a disarming tenderness beneath a violence of language and posture.

Both plays begin in the aftermath of an act of violence. In *Little Blood Brother* there has been a fight in a bar after a hockey game. *Backstreets* begins after a funeral for a boy who has died from a drug overdose. Both events trigger repercussions in the tight world of Italian male culture. In both plays the characters are three young men. In both plays a question of honour and, in some sense, the bankruptcy of that honour is confronted with humour and violence and anger through a dialogue that is as colourful and picturesque as it is indirect. The difference between surface and subtext is strikingly stark.

Little Blood Brother offers us the dilemma of a "macho" culture faced with the spectre of homosexuality: the three protagonists, Italians from Ville Emard in Montreal, live in a world of drug and money deals, hockey games, and Saturday night "meat markets." Deuce has been "hit on" in the showers by a male cousin of Rocco's and a fight has ensued. Deuce in Rocco's eyes has always been sexually suspect anyway and it takes Frank, Deuce's cousin, to calm things down and see beyond the imperatives of male honour to a sweeter sense of humanity, however awkwardly it is expressed. In the last line of the play the trio celebrates a return to harmony and compassion over the ritual consumption of a "medium pizza all dressed."

Backstreets takes place in the heat of summer by the local swimming pool. Moose and Animal lament the death of a friend, Tony. Tony, recently returned from a rehab centre, died suddenly after a day of drinking and, they suspect, doing coke. Their desultory and round-about discussion leads to suspicions that Nero, the third character in the play, who shows up later, is the pusher who brought about the death.

Again it's a world of drugs, prostitution and crime that we are exposed to. Animal's girlfriend is probably a whore; for Nero "a deal's a deal" and the possibility of its leading to a friend's death and the disgrace and shame of a whole family seems to be a secondary consideration.

In this curious infantile world of male vanity, and violent horseplay in the bright sunlight (the characters repeatedly grapple and cuff each other) there emerges a darker world of exploitation, illegal commerce, and death, born of the shiftless lives of the protagonists. What Rossi suggests so successfully in both plays is not the sensational milieu of high crime but the almost unconscious drift into criminality through futility and lack of choice in a closed culture. But once again, as in *Little Blood Brother*, *Backstreets* ends on a note of hope and idealism. Moose and Animal head for the refreshing and renewing waters of the pool armed with a rose for Betty, the dubious object of Animal's love. While they head out on their modest romantic quest, Nero, the pusher, drops to his knees to salvage the cocaine he has spilt during the preceding altercation: the contrast is redeeming.

What makes these plays by a young playwright so promising is their obliqueness. The violence has already happened; Rossi's wonderful dialogue circles vividly and humorously around the central drama focusing in the end on a fancy pizza or a single rose, modest symbols of a more humane world of fraternity and community which might one day replace the harsher world of male-bonding and organized crime. ■



The stronger

By Ann Jansen

ENDANGERED SPECIES: FOUR PLAYS

by Margaret Hollingsworth

Act One Press, 104 pages, \$10.50 paper (ISBN 0 9693639 0 1)

TWO OF THESE four short plays by Margaret Hollingsworth have significant characters who spend most of their time silent.

Both are men. As Hollingsworth explains in her short introduction, she is interested in the ways in which women have been marginalized:

The men are all much more secure in their worlds, and in order to keep that security they use words as weapons, they intimidate by silence, dominate by withholding knowledge and mete out small rewards when they feel they have been earned.

The opener in the volume, *The House That Jack Built*, is deceptively simple. Jack and his wife, Jenny, sit through the play on rocking chairs, a brilliant stroke that sets them prematurely in their places; the set is otherwise empty except for a large screen across which flash slides of a diminishing forest. Jack is determined to build a house for his wife, but she becomes increasingly disoriented in the move from lively downtown Toronto to a muddy suburb-in-the-making. The house is being built over a swamp, and the displaced wildlife becomes central to Jenny's ineffectual protests. Jack maintains that "There's no other way when you come right down to it"; Jenny is unconvinced, and terrified by the consequences of her desire to restore the natural (dis)order.

It's Only Hot for Two Months in Kapuskasing is intended as a companion play to *The House that Jack Built*, under the title *Endangered Species*. The obvious link is that both plays contain characters who have moved from Northern Ontario to the city; the more subtle connection lies in the dispossession of the female characters. The two women in the claustrophobic Vancouver apartment of the second play have two levels of communication, with "Inner Voice" statements reflecting their fears and angers; the Man speaks little and late. The Visitor has arrived at a late-night moment of crisis, but she is unable to discern the abuse in this relationship: the Man's silence may be as layered with falsehood as are his lover Gerry's accusations of betrayal. The air thickens and the tension grows until even physical escape doesn't prevent the Visitor from being infected with the imbalance in these lives — by the end there's something in her voice too.

The concern with art and creativity — Gerry is a potter; the

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Theatre History in Canada/ Histoire du Théâtre au Canada

A lively, illustrated journal published twice yearly, focussing on all aspects of the history of both English and French language theatre in Canada from its earliest years to the present. In addition to book reviews, the journal publishes articles on a broad range of topics including

resident and touring companies, individuals who have contributed to theatre craft and criticism, analyses of plays and performance calendars, and studies of the social as well as artistic conditions affecting the theatre. *THIN/HTauC* is the official journal for the Association for Canadian Theatre History/Association d'histoire du théâtre au Canada.



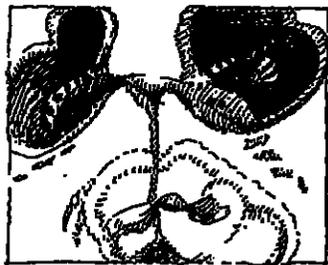
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Man a poet — in this play blooms into a central issue in the next, *Poppycock*. The title comes from a pronouncement by Ezra Pound that poetry of the 20th century would move against poppycock, would be "austere, direct, free from emotional slither." The play, which grew out of Hollingsworth's involvement with clowning workshops, uses one actor to present Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Adolf Hitler. Interacting with these men are the less famous women who relied on them: Hilda Doolittle, Dora Maar, and Winifred Wagner. *Poppycock* is about women who have been, to some extent, created by men: as the title suggests, Hollingsworth shows us the parts of their lives that have been defined as unnecessary, as poppycock. She doesn't revise history and wrest power from the men, but shows the multifaceted personalities that lie behind these named and possessed women. In doing so, Hollingsworth displays a brilliant control of speech patterns that support the implications of all that is said and shown on stage, which also has a physical richness that stems from the drama's roots in clowning.

The patterning of threes in *Poppycock* is followed by a quartet structure in *Prim and Duck*, *Mama and Frank*, with four characters in four rooms, within a play divided into movements labelled Feet, Hands, Body, Head. The four characters, including the mostly silent Frank, who, despite his wordlessness, is constantly ordering and shaping the household, spin about until the energy and anxiety levels start to compete in choreographed mayhem. At one point, the mother talks of no longer tap-dancing: "S'like the parts of my body they don't feel each other no more . . . My toes see, my toes they don't touch . . . see . . . they don't wanna touch . . ." Nothing seems to touch in the play, neither characters nor body parts, but Hollingsworth hits her mark in a telling exploration of power and personality, of the parts that can't make up a whole.

Hollingsworth's characters, and her audiences, have no easy task in environments where a misstep could prove fatal. *Endangered Species* presents struggles for survival in an assortment of wildernesses; the plays are complex, challenging, and highly rewarding. ■



War zone

By Judith Rudakoff

THE EAST END PLAYS

by George F. Walker

Playwrights Canada, 330 pages, \$16.95 paper (ISBN 0 88754 464 9)

NOTHING SACRED

by George F. Walker

Coach House Press, 112 pages, \$10.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 531 3)

IN MANY WAYS, Gina Mae Sabatini is the character who provides the key to understanding survival, the primary objective of the quirky inhabitants of George F. Walker's remarkable East End trilogy: *Criminals in Love*, *Better Living* and *Beautiful City*.

"I want a throbbing, connecting, living creative neighbourhood," she declares. In her working-class neighbourhood, those who wantonly give themselves to the raw basics of life and embrace its "Life Force," Gina Mae's "simple, ugly truth," may yet survive.

In a world in which everything is relative (as William proclaims in *Criminals in Love* and Nora echoes in *Better Living*), survival is as easy as breathing in. And then remembering to breathe out. It is a society in which nothing can be assumed. Destiny, the paranormal, and even witchcraft are debunked, while the minutiae of daily existence (oranges and bananas?) are imbued with almost magical properties. Mundane and empty ceremonies are elevated to the level of ritual: the handshakes in *Beautiful City* and the peremptory kisses in *Criminals in Love* become oaths sworn to seal pacts of mythic proportion. Sibyls and soothsayers, wise men and holy fools are translated into a drunken priest, a discount-store cashier, an alcoholic bum, a psychic subterranean builder and a plethora of ne'er-do-well small-time crooks.

And what of the traditional anchors of contemporary society — home, love, and mom? In Walker's East End Toronto, home is more a war zone than a

haven, love functions largely as a weapon, and mom . . . well, mom varies from cosmic communicator to karmic castrator. The cardinal rule in all three plays of Walker's East End trilogy is abundantly clear: if you sever yourself from the "Life Force" (the collective unconscious, the microcosm, the balance of yin and yang, the mother ship, whatever you want to call it) part of you dies. Whether you retreat to the artificial mall-world of *Beautiful City*'s Raft Family, or Nora and Tom/Tim's mole-world sanctuary in *Better Living*, the result is the same: you isolate yourself and you wither away. And dying isn't really the primary issue; it's the slow leaking out of the Life Force that is the unforgivable waste.

In The East End trilogy as well as in Walker's other recently published playscript, the award-winning *Nothing Sacred*, the glorious orchestration of ideas and words reads as well as it plays. Walker's characters, from the ferociously ardent to the timidly uncertain, are genuine, memorable, and always in some way recognizable. Even when they are based on the characters who populate Turgenev's novel of 19th-century Russia, *Fathers and Sons*.

In *Nothing Sacred*, a comedy filled with serfs and nihilists, class barriers and even a duel, Walker is surprisingly successful in synthesizing the contemporary and the archaic. One suffers nary a twinge when Bazarov goes off to "pick at things" in the estate kitchen. Nor does one flinch when the dandified Pavel's anachronistic nail polish is the topic of discussion. It all seems perfectly acceptable and removed from any restrictions of time or place.

There is no denying a curious spiritual relationship between Russian Arkady and Torontonian Junior Dawson. Piotr and William. Whether the plays are set in Walker's own era and in his own backyard, or in some exotic locale in a far-off time, the folks that populate Walker's neighbourhoods have the power to connect to each other and to us.

A note to the buyer: though the Coach House Press, with *Nothing Sacred*, goes Playwrights Canada one better with a display of photographs from the premiere production, the typeface and layout of *East End Plays* make that volume far easier to read. □

The roar of the greasepaint

By Richard Paul Knowles

WILLIAM HUTT: A THEATRE PORTRAIT

by Keith Garebian

Mosaic Press, 366 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 99862 404 6)

KEITH GAREBIAN'S "theatre portrait" of William Hutt is the sort of theatre book that gives the theatre books a bad name. As one of the first full-length biographies ever written about a Canadian actor, and as the biography of an undeniably major figure in Canadian theatre, the book should be of major importance. Unfortunately, Garebian passes up the opportunity to contribute to our understanding of a life in the Canadian theatre, and with it the chance to analyse the art and craft of a major Canadian actor, in favour of the both mundane and pretentious clichés, name-droppings and pop psychologizings expected in popular books about "stars." In fact, Garebian seems to be more interested in establishing Hutt's status as a star than in documenting his life, career, or craft.

Introducing his book as a "portrait rather than a full-fledged biography," the author sets out "to determine what has made Hutt the kind of actor he is today," confident that "the actor is the man," and that "William Hutt is the sum of all his roles, which are but pieces of himself." Garebian then describes Hutt's life and career chronologically in 21 short and eccentrically chosen chapters. The book's first three chapters deal with Hutt's first 30 years before turning in its middle section to what the author calls the "Swelling Act" of Hutt's developing professional career. Awkwardly juxtaposing descriptive accounts of Hutt's career with cursory (and often trite) commentary on his personal life, Garebian follows the actor from his early days with the Canadian Repertory Theatre through the first years of the Stratford Festival and the Canadian Play-ers, to his life and work in England from 1959 to 1961 and on Broadway in the mid-'60s. The last third of the book, which includes far too brief accounts of all of Hutt's most important performances, takes us through the Jean Gascón and Robin

Phillips years at Stratford to Hutt's subsequent work in Vancouver, London (Ontario), Stratford, Toronto and elsewhere in the 1980s, much of it with Phillips.

Garebian's book testifies to the importance of Hutt's career, and occasionally provides insight into his acting, as when Blaine Parker points to the importance of Hutt's superb emotional memory and recall, or when Robin Phillips analyses his "power to withhold" great emotions. Too often, however, Garebian is sidetracked by his weakness for bad anecdotes and trivial adjectives. The availability of anecdotes (some of them not even involving Hutt) seems to provide the selection principle for the book: any production around which backstage stories exist about Noel Coward, the Queen Mother, or Tyrone Guthrie's bathing trunks merits a chapter, while many of Hutt's most significant performances are passed over with little descriptive detail and virtually no analysis.

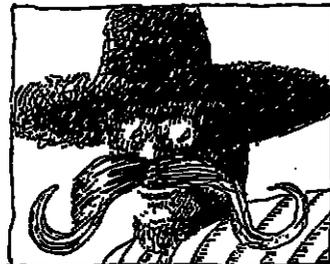
And the language! We hear of "one fateful weekend in January"; of Hutt's sister-in-law, "a shy, pink rose"; and of soldiers at a brothel "all ready to try their carnal fortune with the crones." People "perish," "opine," and have "stirrings within"; and they are gratuitously "lissome," "dapper," or "demure." While on one happy occasion "six hundred guests merrily cavorted to lute and lyre," on another, alas, "fortune's fickle wheel played its vry game." Writing like this is simply not acceptable in works of literary or dramatic criticism, including Garebian's. Why is it tolerated in books about the theatre?

Garebian's portrait is also problematic in its point of view. In spite of his declared unwillingness to write a hagiography, the author can't seem to detach himself sufficiently from his subject's views of the theatre to produce a genuinely objective account. Much of the book is based on interviews with Hutt and his friends, and what strength it has often derives from the insights of a Timothy Findley or the self-analysis of Hutt. But little of the historical material based on recent interviews is placed in any critical or analytical context, and a disconcerting amount of it is introduced by ambiguous phrases such as, "Hutt thought that. . . ." Did Hutt's opinion remain con-

stant for decades until he was interviewed by Garebian? Does he remember now with complete accuracy what he thought as a young man? Or is Garebian cheating?

In any case, Hutt emerges from the book as a rather pompous and self-possessed man and highly skilled artist whose genius is intuitive and whose strength is neither analytical nor evaluative. Is it, perhaps, the natural sympathy of a biographer for his subject that has produced the pomposity of language and absence of analysis in Garebian's portrait of Hutt?

Ultimately *William Hutt: A Theatre Portrait* begs to be measured against its own conclusion. Garebian there approvingly quotes Robin Phillips's claim that "when history is written [Hutt] will go down as the first big Canadian actor. Everything he does should be written down." Garebian goes on to lament that "most of [Hutt's] greatest performances have not been preserved with adequate concern for posterity." Why then does Garebian himself fail to document those performances rather than consistently and infuriatingly blame the absence of such documentation and recognition on what he sees as the failure of the Canadian "masses" to recognize its "stars." (Describing Hutt's tendency to announce to *maitre d's*, "my name is William Hutt, and I would like a table here," for example, Garebian finds that "this admirable authority was a bit misplaced in Canada, where the admiring public can recognize only hockey or film stars.") Garebian over the years has shown himself to be one of the country's most competent reviewers of classical theatre, particularly in his seasonal retrospectives of the Shaw and Stratford Festivals in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, *Canadian Forum*, and elsewhere. Hutt is undoubtedly one of our very best classical actors. The combination should have resulted in a better book. □



Narrative geography

By Paul Dutton

THE RADIANT INVENTORY

by Christopher Dewdney

McClelland & Stewart, 108 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 7710 2699 4)

CHRISTOPHER DEWDNEY has, over 17 years and some 10 or so books, fashioned a body of work that is original, challenging, witty, stylistically versatile, and remarkably cohesive. His early work was based on the theory that ontology recapitulates geology, as he mined a vein of paleontological imagery, riddled with fossils characterized as concrete memory, rife with suggestions of the past alive in the present, the whole serving as a paradigm of the human mind, of the unconscious and consciousness. In *Alter Sublime* and *The Immaculate Perception*, he moved towards a more clearly stated parallel between geologic phenomena and the structure of the human brain, between the stratified layers of rock that underlie our present physical environment and the evolutionary physiology that comprises contemporary neurostructure and consciousness.

The Radiant Inventory, his most recent offering, is of a piece with his earlier books. The expected elements of wordplay (both whimsical and earnest), reverence for nature, exhilarating leaps of imagination, and sometimes demanding diction are brought to bear on such themes (now familiar to his readers) as the nature of consciousness, the unity and simultaneity of past and present, dreams, natural history, memory, religion, technology, and the relation of self to self and to other. These elements and themes are worked with in lyric verse, prose poems, aphorisms, surrealistic short fictions, "pataphysical" probes, archly captioned photos and collages, and a new series of "Log Entries": prose fragments with poetic correlates (or disjunctives), earlier types of which appeared in *A Palaeozoic Geology of London, Ontario, Fovea Centralis*, and *Alter Sublime*.

Lest all this sound like terribly heavy going (which it can be at times), it should be remembered that Dewdney also has a light touch. He is, after

all, the man who came up with the idea that "The future is simply amnesia in reverse." And his explications of sometimes brain-bending scientific or technological concepts are often necessary lead-ins to wry and adroitly turned punch lines. While he's techno-sophisticated, he's also slang hip, and will use both facilities for humorous effect, as he does often in this book. When he hits his stride with a comic notion, there's none can beat him, as witness his instructional entry, "Knowledge of Neurophysiology as Defence against Attack," which blends hilarious concept and finely tuned phrasing to memorable effect.

Because I'm a hopeless techno-peasant, I have no way of gauging the accuracy of Dewdney's use of the terminology of physics, neurochemistry, and the natural sciences. I can sense, however, that the language is used appropriately, probably precisely, often poetically (both in the sense of image and of rhythmic euphony), and always to remarkable effect. You'd have to be deaf to all dimensions of poetry to miss the transcendent beauty of mood and mentation in "Elora Gorge," the prose-poem sequence that concludes *The Radiant Inventory*; its rhapsodic tone is ballasted with a sprinkling of technically specific terms. This moving and unromanticized paean to nature (Dewdney, in an earlier book, called nature "the divine technology") includes such striking instances of imagery and diction as this: "At midnight, on the eve of the midsummer solstice, the gorge is filled with fireflies. Pointillist image of living stars beneath the milky way." When he's not yocking it up ("Cool hands, luke heart") or genuflecting in para-religious awe at nature's majesty ("Elora Gorge" includes the phrase "Stations of the Gorge," a play on the Catholic devotional exercise of "Stations of the Cross"), Dewdney is either teasing with "pataphysics" (the science of possible solutions to impossible problems; a blend of hard research and soft logic, rendering startlingly convincing results) or lyrically evoking the large and small epiphanies of day-to-day existence: celebrating a love, eulogizing his father, meditating on November, or reflecting on trains ("A train is a state of things in transit, / a cartesian living-room passing through / a

narrative geography").

I mentioned the cohesive character of Dewdney's work. As with all things that are unified, the whole can be discerned from the parts. *The Radiant Inventory* provides a representative cross-section of his range of styles and concerns and is sufficient unto itself. It can be read for the gems of brilliance it contains, as well as for the impressive setting afforded those gems. But it also marks a significant point in his overall work and it will be most rewarding to those who read it in the context of what has gone before. □



The last best hope

By J. L. Granatstein

THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

by Patrick Watson and Benjamin Barber

Leaff & Orpen Demys, 295 pages, \$39.95 cloth (ISBN 88619 176 9)

DEMOCRACY, Winston Churchill once said, is the worst of systems, except for all the others. And surely this is so. So powerful is the democratic ideal that even the East Europeans call their dictatorships "democratic republics" and North Vietnam, all the while it was invading its neighbours, was still the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Democracy — the name if not always the practice — has a world-wide application.

But Canadians, like most of those who live in the West, tend to take democracy for granted. We accept our freedoms as a given, and many of us don't even bother to exercise our right to vote. In ordinary times, we tolerate those who denounce our relatively benign political masters, but in a crisis, we expect the security services to act with ruthlessness to protect us.

Patrick Watson has achieved a deserved reputation as a thoughtful television man of letters, and he, at least, recognized that democracy was something precious and too little understood. How could Canadians, he asks in his pref-

ace; have cheered their government when it imposed the War Measures Act in 1970 and used its sweeping powers to arrest over 450 men and women and hold them without charges or bail? "This casual disowning of freedom . . . troubled me deeply." That was the origin of this book and the 10-part television series that mirrors it (and that is currently being shown on CBC).

The Struggle for Democracy is a handsome book, lavishly illustrated with colour and black-and-white photographs, paintings, and drawings. There are wide margins stuffed with interesting quotes or excerpts, and the level of the prose is suitable for a bright Grade 11 student. In fact, the book looks not unlike an up-scale text book, with only the sample questions at the end of each chapter being omitted. In other words, this book is ideally suited to the usual television viewer who will watch it around the world.

The book is also not unlike a TV show. There are carefully selected illustrative scenes, set in an Indian village, for example, or an African township. There is some speculative futurology to balance the historical and philosophical passages that have to be included, and there are quick cuts from country to country. It is all a bit helter-skelter in a book, though it works very well on the small screen.

Inevitably, when the range being covered is so broad, errors creep in. There are dubious "facts" about the British sinking of the Argentinian cruiser *Belgrano* in the Falklands War and about the Maginot Line and the fall of France in 1940. That is to be expected. But more serious, Watson's text cites the Libyan leader, Muammar Qaddafi, as criticizing democracy for its political parties' destructive self-interest, for the domination of one class over another, for the misleading and arbitrary character of plebiscites. "Most Westerners see these as minor defects," Watson says, a little bit piously, to which the only possible response from anyone who lived through our November 21 election is "Oh, yeah?"

Still, this is often a tough-minded book. Watson can be brutally critical of the Roman Catholic church and its baleful influence in Ireland, he can attack Israel's brutal occupation of the West Bank, and he can be bluntly critical of the Aus-

tralian treatment of aborigines. The cant and hypocrisy of our democracy does not escape the lash. And Watson is also unafraid to ask if democracy is necessarily the best form of government for Africa or Asia where older forms of government may better meet the people's needs.

Textbookish it is, glossy it may be, but *The Struggle for Democracy* nonetheless is a useful primer for Canadians to ponder. We have just seen Canadian corporations buy themselves an election victory, and thus far there has been scarcely a whimper of protest. Is this to be the form of Canadian democracy for the 21st century? A book like this, if it forces people to think from whence they came and whither they are going, could have a salutary effect. □

Four quartets

by Joel Yanofsky

TONY'S BOOK

by Hugh Hood

Stoddart, 273 pages, \$14.95 paper (ISBN 0 7737 5206 0)

THIS BOOK marks the beginning of the second half of *The New Age* series — the seventh part of Hugh Hood's 12-volume chronicle of 20th-century Canadian society and culture. When the series is completed — in 1999, according to Hood — it will establish its author as one of the immortals. That, at least, is the way Hood sees it. His confidence in the absolute rightness of what he is doing is matched only by his extravagant ambition.

I'm not quite sure why, but I'm rooting for him. Even for Hood's most devoted readers, though, keeping the faith is becoming more and more difficult. Like its two most recent predecessors, *The Scenic Art* and *The Motor Boys in Ottawa*, *Tony's Book* is a frustratingly uneven, almost schizophrenic novel, by turns comic and pedantic, engaging and self-involved. Hood's main problem in *Tony's Book*, though, is a familiar one: he is too preoccupied with working out the elaborate assumptions of the previous volumes. As a result, his latest novel suffers the fate of most literary sequels — it doesn't stand on its own.

On the other hand — there is always the other hand in Hood's fiction — *Tony's Book*, for all its missing links, intricate

allusions, and inside jokes, is a triumph of structure over content. Divided into four equal sections, it employs four different characters to tell a deceptively dark tale of failed love and family betrayal.

It's the overlapping perceptions of this lively quartet, their range of gossip and opinions about each other, their inevitable digressions, that manage to keep the story interesting. Matt Goderich, the narrator of the series, is back and so is his wife, Edie. The narrative begins, however, with two characters who have had only cameo roles in the series so far: Tony Goderich, Matt's brother and the black sheep of the family, and Linnet, Tony's lover.

Linnet leads off. Hood's novels are not known for their fast starts and this one is no exception. Linnet spends far too much time telling us more than we need to know about her childhood in wartime London. But the momentum picks up when she meets Tony and falls in love with him at first sight. They seem like the ideal couple, at least from Linnet's point of view. She is a blonde bombshell and an aspiring actress; he is a successful playwright. Linnet expects they will get married, but her part of the narration stops abruptly as their relationship ends and Tony returns to Canada to attend his father's funeral.

Enter Tony. Picking up the narrative where Linnet leaves off, he reveals the one important fact she was unaware of: he is in love with his brother's wife. "I desired (Matt's) girl as soon as I laid eyes on her, with an extra twist of the knife because she was his." That, it becomes clear, is the main reason Tony left Canada. When he sees Edie at his father's graveside, he realizes the same old trouble has started again. But this time he has no intention of running away from it.

Meanwhile, the object of Tony's desire, Edie, has had her fill of marriage to Matt. Her narration is full of rationalizations and excuses meant to explain why, after 20 years, she is breaking the closest connection of her life. Although she is unable to come up with a good explanation for her decision to run off with Tony, she does manage to convince herself that Matt will hardly notice she is gone.

Tony's Book takes *The New Age* series, which has been pro-

ceeding decade by decade, into the 1970s. In the context of the time, Edie's decision to leave Matt is commonplace:

That was the way these things went in the mid-70s when walking out on your marriage from one hour to the next was the nation's most popular and fashionable form of entertainment. . . . Marriages were coming apart like shoe-boxes set adrift in the open sea.

But in the context of Hood's series it is a shattering act. From Matt's perspective, it is not just his marriage that has been destroyed, it is his meticulously ordered vision of life: "What Tony and Edie did to me was as bad as murder; they might just as well have left me for dead."

On the first page of the fourth and final section of the novel Matt says, "I don't think I'll ever be the same man that I was." This is quite an admission for him; it is also something of an overstatement. Despite what has happened, he is, of course, precisely the same person he was. Critics of *The New Age* have invariably made Matt

Goderich the main target of their scorn, often with good reason. Prudent, stuffy, moderate in the extreme, Matt can be pretentious, long-winded and, as in *Tony's Book*, maddeningly passive.

But for all his shortcomings — perhaps because of them — Matt is, in the end, a likable character. He is also the perfect alter ego for Hood. Like Matt, Hood is able to see meaning in the most trivial and tedious things. It is this attention to detail, this faith in mundane miracles, that makes the excesses of his fiction pardonable. Edie's grudging praise for Matt could just as easily apply to the author of *The New Age* series: "When he bores you — and oh God he can bore you — he always knows that he's doing it and he gets your forgiveness. . . ." □



Capital offences

By Stan Persky

WRONG END OF THE RAINBOW: THE COLLAPSE OF FREE ENTERPRISE IN CANADA

by Eric Kierans and Walter Stewart
Collins, 232 pages, \$26.95 cloth
(ISBN 0 00 217834 6)

WHEN THE Gillette Canada razor blade company announced — less than 72 hours after last November's bitter federal election on free trade — that it was shutting down operations and putting 600 employees out of work, two of the least surprised people in the country were Eric Kierans and Walter Stewart. They're the co-authors of *Wrong End of the Rainbow: The Collapse of Free Enterprise in Canada*, a biting little tract that deals with exactly such nasty bits of business as the disposal of the disposable razor plant.

The sordid fiscal details of the Gillette case are fascinating and deserve a moment's attention. Gillette Canada was a debt-

free, productive, and profitable multinational branch plant that yielded a profit of about \$10 million annually on the 200 million blades it produced. However, its American parent, Gillette Co. of Boston, was fighting off takeover bids.

Desperate for cash, Gillette senior ordered Gillette junior to buy Oral-B Labs, a U.S.-based toothbrush manufacturer owned by Gillette of Boston. The Canadian branch plant obediently borrowed \$269 million from the bank, and one Gillette subsidiary became the owner of another Gillette subsidiary, leaving head office with a temporary chunk of cash in hand to fight off unwanted advances. As for Gillette Canada, it now had an interest bill of \$22 million, which accounted for most of the branch plant's 1987 loss of \$30 million.

A year and one Free Trade Agreement later, Gillette of Boston (now out of danger) decreed that its Massachusetts plant, producing two billion blades at 65 per cent capacity, wouldn't have any trouble grinding out an additional 200 million blades for the Canadian market. In the delightful world

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of big business, such manoeuvres are delicately described as a "restructuring program to eliminate excess capacity." Further, thanks to the F.T.A., the 10 per cent tariff on imported shaving gear would gradually disappear. Goodbye, 600 Canadian jobs.

Kierans and Stewart recite a litany of similar examples in arguing the thesis that "something has gone seriously wrong with the workings of Canadian capitalism." It's evolved, they say, into a system that's "selfish, sly, and mean-spirited."

Kierans, whose colourful and varied career includes stints as a stock exchange president, cabinet minister, economics prof, and businessman (as well as inheritor of former finance minister Walter Gordon's mantle as keeper of the nationalist economic conscience) and Stewart, a veteran political journalist, claim that contemporary corporate dominance is not really capitalism at all, "but the perversion." The erstwhile reformers even conjure up a vision of a nation of medium-size capitalists without monopolistic lust in their hearts.

Between the accusation and the dream, the authors provide a brisk thumbnail sketch of the rise of corporations as well as an overview of the problems of capitalism and the Canadian economy. There's even room for a trenchant critique of the free trade "chimera."

It is in these historical chapters that Kierans and Stewart give their version of a sorry tale we've become familiar with ever since George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965) and Karl Levitt's *Silent Surrender* (1970). It's a saga of foreign domination, under-industrialization and heedless export of natural resources. The eerie thing about this tapestry of Canadian entrepreneurial timidity and loss of economic sovereignty is that it just doesn't seem to grip the popular imagination. It's not clear that the present recitation of the story will have a more lasting impact than previous efforts.

Even less clear are the prospects for the modest remedies Kierans and Stewart advocate. Their 10-step reform package starts with a proposal for restoration of shareholder power by forcing corporations to abolish non-voting shares and fully distribute each year's earnings (currently, about 75 per cent of profits are "retained"

in company vaults). Then, there's to be a rejigging of the tax system to prompt companies to use resources more prudently, to stop wasteful takeover exercises, and to pay a fairer share of returns to the public purse. Finally, Kierans and Stewart call for Swedish-style control of capital in a bid to shore up our economic independence.

Whether or not these specific reforms really make sense is beyond the competence of innocent bystanders to determine. However, a great deal — too much — seems to hang on the authors' insistence that there is something, whether in theory or in Golden Age fact, called "capitalism" that is essentially distinct from the contemporary version of it which Kierans and Stewart dismiss as a perversion they call "corporatism."

On this crucial score, I found their argument fundamentally unpersuasive. It's not that I'm surreptitiously hauling out a brief for an alternative to the authors' trust in capitalism reformed, such as socialism of one stripe or another. Far from it. It's simply that the crux of their case is that what's before our eyes isn't really capitalism. If that contention falls, then the rest collapses like a house of cards. In my reading, Kierans and Stewart's central claim just doesn't stand.

Even if we believed in the cogency of their reform scheme, there's still the political issue of how any of this can be brought to pass. Kierans and Stewart recognize that this is a problem and devote their concluding chapter to the relationship of the political to the economic. While the historical portions of the book are wittily informative, the hortatory parts are composed in a rather tract-like style.

Everything Kierans and Stewart say about the need to give pre-eminence to the common good over economic greed is perfectly true and worth saying. The problem is that much of this comes off as a half-time pep talk to a team that's being clobbered. Or worse, the coaches seem to be talking to an empty locker room, while the players have gone off to sign lucrative advertising endorsement contracts. □



Island in the sun

By Neil Bissoondath

A SMALL PLACE

by Jamaica Kincaid

Farrar, Straus and Giroux (Collins), 81 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 374 266 387)

ANTIGUA, an island in the Eastern Caribbean approximately 30 miles north of Guadeloupe, is 12 miles long and nine miles wide. The birthplace of the writer Jamaica Kincaid, it is, indeed, a small place. But this small place has evoked from Kincaid a searing essay of pain and protest. And you, me — we, the reader — are brought along by Kincaid as victim, accused, witness, for she makes it clear that we are participant and perpetrator and observer all wrapped up in one complex package.

Kincaid declares her intention from the start. She speaks directly to You, her rage controlled by language finely balanced on a knife edge. And this rage is impossible to deflect: As you get your first view of the decay, "you needn't let that slightly funny feeling you have from time to time about exploitation, oppression, domination develop into full-fledged unease, discomfort; you could ruin your holiday." You squirm a little, hoping the discomfort is only momentary. But Kincaid does not let go: "The thing you have always suspected about yourself the minute you become a tourist is true: A tourist is an ugly human being." Your reaction to this frontal assault is to say, no, this is not me. I do not, by an airplane flight, become monstrous; my aims are innocent: some sun, some sand, the relaxation of a gentle intoxication. But now Kincaid's got you where she wants you, she the embodiment of the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, You the recalcitrant Scrooge.

The island she shows you is one melting into a physical and moral collapse. The school buildings resemble latrines; locals avoid the island hospital; the library, damaged in a 1974 earthquake, remains unrepaired more than a decade later. Drug smugglers, politicians, and their mistresses, creatures of western civilization, are clever and safely blatant in the ways of self-enrichment. But all this is not a corruption unto itself: it is

linked, intimately, to the outside.

Her rage flares in a bitter litany of historical injustice, slashing bitterly at the British and their colonialism: "You came. You took things that were not yours . . . You murdered people. You imprisoned people. You robbed people." She brands Horatio Nelson "an English maritime criminal," points out that Barclay's Bank was established with slave-trade money, spits out the bilious history of discrimination against black Antiguans, surging inexorably to the painful conclusion: You have unmade me totally.

And from there the bitter question: Is independent Antigua, in its economic anemia, its physical decay, its political corruption, "a worse place than what it was when it was dominated by the bad-minded English and all the bad-minded things they brought with them?" The answer is self-evident: A criminal past cannot help but create a criminal present, with even the future mortgaged to the servility of tourism, to You.

Make no bones about it: Whether you agree with Kincaid's views or not — and the picture she draws, personal, inexorable and undeniable, is still only part of the post-colonial story — *A Small Place* is a sad, searing, unsettling book, painful to read in its brutal and direct challenge to our mindless comfort. And in this, it is a vital work. □



Father knew best

By Peter Harcourt

THE COLONIZED EYE: RETHINKING THE GRIERSON LEGEND

by Joyce Nelson

between-the-lines, 144 pages, \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 919946 90 9)

DURING THE PAST 15 years, Joyce Nelson has established herself as the most astute cultural critic in Canada.

Whether eviscerating the ambitions of the international tourist industry, for CBC's "Ideas," or disclosing the possi-

ble show-biz source of the free-trade negotiations, for *Fuse* magazine, she has questioned the assumptions of our day-to-day activities, the neutrality of which we often take for granted. As a regular writer for *This Magazine*, Nelson has asked us to contemplate the full ecological ramifications of our willingness to sell, for a fast buck, our fresh-water supplies to the desert belt of the United States; and she has examined the ideological implications of an image of Mickey Mouse, that tireless world traveller, posed for a publicity photograph in front of the Great Wall of China, that ancient immovable symbol of a timeless frontier.

Roland Barthes, the French cultural critic, and I. F. Stone, the American media analyst, are her mentors. While she does do original research, Nelson's primary material is not far to seek: she looks at what is about and puts things together. Like Barthes, she is aware of the ideological implications of the most innocent activities; like Stone, she remembers things and so can document contradictions.

In a society that truly valued the importance of independent thought, she would be famous. In a society that truly feared independent thought, she would be silenced. In Canada (while she is slowly building up a following largely among academics) she is generally ignored.

Last year she produced *The Perfect Machine* — a book that explored the parallel development of two sinister industries — American television and the American bomb. This year she offers us *The Colonized Eye* — a book that rethinks the role that John Grierson has played in film in this country. Nelson examines not only Grierson's work at the National Film Board during the war but also his film policies for the future.

Nelson's book is as unsettling as it is intelligent. The popular view of Grierson is that he was a great British patriarch who had the ear of important political players and, because of his interest in the workers, seemed a little left of centre. Not so, argues Nelson. Grierson had the ear of important political players because he knew how to keep the workers in their place. Give them a little dignity on the screen and then tell them what to do.

Grierson was also a well-



known internationalist. This Nelson confirms; what she clarifies, however, is that Canada was to have no determining role in the constitution of the new international order that was to emerge after the war. That would be the responsibility of established industrial nations like the United States, Great Britain and perhaps, eventually, the Soviet Union.

For instance, in their film-making during the war, the British units were encouraged to acquire their own footage. The Brits produced images of themselves on the screen. At the NFB, on the other hand, with very few exceptions, Canada specialized in compilation films. In this way, under Grierson's direction, we were encouraged to think of ourselves as part of a larger, global operation within which we could be proud to play our tiny part. It is no wonder that even now, there is still a degree of self-consciousness in creating images of ourselves for our own film and television screens.

This puritanical prohibition of the indigenously visual was further compounded by two other decisions directly made by Grierson. During the war, Grierson established a number of rural circuits throughout Canada that were designed to take film into communities that lacked movie theatres. Since an uninterrupted diet of "Canada Carries On" and "The World in Action" films was considered too heavy for an evening's entertainment, a few cartoons were generally included. Although some of these cartoons were made by Norman McLaren and his team at the Film Board, most of them were supplied by Grierson's old friend Walt Disney, some of those even paid for by the National Film Board.

Similarly, towards the end of the war, Grierson's recommendation for the future was that Canadians should stay out of fiction, that in essence the grand American entertainment machine should not be challenged. Then as now, Nelson explains, Canadian production

would be restricted to news and information — the least mythologizing of all cultural activities; while the Americans would continue, through their entertainment programs, to colonize our national imagination with their own mythologizing fictional creations. Hollywood would help to hold in place Canada's position within the growing international system. And so it has.

The Colonized Eye makes for eye-opening reading, but Nelson writes with such a strong sense of urgency, that, arguably, there is something a bit specious about it by the end. For instance, by cross-cutting John Grierson on his first trip to the United States on a Rockefeller Foundation grant, with Mackenzie King a decade earlier going to work for the Rockefeller family, Nelson implies a conspiracy. And while there may well have been a growing collusion between American multinational corporations and the socially concerned intelligentsia of Europe, Nelson has not actually established this in her book.

A sense of narrative conspiracy, however, finally doesn't trouble me. It is the way that Nelson writes; her book reads like a thriller. One cannot put it down. And if Nelson is a bit harsh on Grierson the man (as she partially acknowledges), nevertheless she documents with great force and freshness the manipulations of power between government and business that take place behind closed doors. □



Monster theatre

By Bruce Serafin

JACK

by Chris Scott

Macmillan, 272 pages, \$21.95 cloth
(ISBN 0 7715 9928 5)

JACK is a novel that imagines that Thomas Neill Cream — a Montreal doctor who moved to London and was hanged for poisoning young women — was not only a poisoner but also Jack the Ripper. In the novel, Cream has an advanced case of syphilis that causes him to hal-

lucinate the presence of another man — Bell-Smith — whom only he can see, and with whom he occasionally "merges"; it is this Bell-Smith, he sometimes imagines, who does the killings; or else it is Bell-Smith who eggs him on to do them — the issue is left vague.

The killings are graphically presented; the psychopathology is extreme. Or is it psychopathology? The Ripper in this novel is not only insane, he is insane in a way that makes his motives beyond the reach of understanding. The real connection, I think, is not to insanity — there is none of that terrifying and pity-inducing comprehension that marks reading about true insanity — but to the dream. What occurs in the novel is everywhere dreamlike: a singular event, the killing and disembowelling of a London whore, is presented again and again with no real context provided for it, just as such things happen in dreams; and also as in dreams, it is presented each time with a little ritual signal that initiates the event: the Ripper saying to the woman, "I have to pass the exam."

Much of the novel is in the present tense ("She's opening her mouth to scream when he catches her by the scruff of the neck") and this contributes to the dreamlike atmosphere. Beyond that, there is a portentousness to everything, just as there is in dreams: as the Ripper walks up and down the London streets, everything signifies, everything seems to *mean* something.

This dreaminess causes the story to exist in a moral and psychological vacuum. The reader cannot compare it with anything in his experience (except the unreal and empty experience of nightmares), and so he isn't moved to any wider understanding of human extremity. The dream atmosphere heightens the grisliness of the events described (as in horror stories) but it doesn't illuminate them (as in, say, *The Death of the Detective*). This well-written book shares with horror novels and the creepier kind of murder mystery a Monster Chiller Horror Theatre atmosphere compounded of portentousness, bloody events, and a present-tense narration that is like a beating drum in the way it keeps the reader moving from one page to the next without stopping to think.

Sunny side up

A writers' manual offers tips on hatching new plots

By Linda Granfield

DURING THE long months you will have to spend wrestling with [your] book, you will have many moments, days, weeks, when you will loathe the thing." Many a writer can attest to the veracity of Jean Little's statement; some writers may add that "loathe" isn't a strong enough word! Little's very positive and informative essay, "How I Do It," is one of 35 articles included by David Booth in *Writers on Writing: Guide to Writing and Illustrating Children's Books* (Overlea House, 192 pages, \$11.95). The editor suggests that the book will help the writer in his "understanding of the process," and strengthen his "will to publish for children." Only a truly dedicated first-time author or illustrator will continue his attempt to burst into the children's market after reading some of the barefaced truths about the industry included in this book.

Children's picture-books (from the point of view of both writing and illustrating), novels and stories for juvenile and young adult readers, and poetry for children are covered in detail by authors obviously chosen to write about their specialties. Some of the articles are better written than others; fine illustrators, for example, are not always fine writers. Some of the pieces suffer from a surfeit of anecdotal material. Eric Wilson's "Developing a Series" leaves a reader still wondering how it's actually done, and Claire Mackay's piece on the selection of names provides laughter and information. While Meguido Zola quotes a multitude of other authors who have written about biography, Valerie Hussey sticks to the point of the exercise and details the author-publisher relationship, leaving few questions unanswered. Book reviewing, promotion, and the roles of agent, librarian, and bookseller are highlighted by *Writers on Writing*. An unfortunate omission, however, given the growth in the field, is children's non-fiction

other than biography.

This season, a flurry of first-time novelists (who might or might not have benefited from such a guidebook) offers a wonderful array of talents to be watched in the future.

Much is made of teen-aged writers. Gordon Korman was launched in style by Scholastic in the 1970s: 17-year-old Nicole Luiken is the house's current young writer. Her first novel, *Unlocking the Doors* (Scholastic, 144 pages, \$3.95), was written when she was only 14. Like Korman, Nicole Luiken, according to promotional materials, writes "profusely." Unfortunately, she does not write professionally — yet.

There's lots of promise in Luiken's novel, the story of 16-year-old Mercedes Sable who is terrorized by a villainous ghost, Vivian. The concept of a ghost who cannot move into rooms added on to the house since her death is a fine one and Luiken uses it well and energetically. But the book reads like a creative-writing assignment or a mediocre television-movie script. The book needs more developed characterizations, fewer confusing scenes, and less reliance on descriptive words. There's nothing here that more writing experience and a darn good edit wouldn't help.

While young readers who enjoy anticipation will relish Luiken's imaginative qualities, those who love a good laugh will delight in Jim McGugan's *Project Egg* (Nelson, 110 pages \$3.95), a funny book about a school project in family education classes. The children are given eggs to carry around with them and care for — fragile, raw eggs to be protected from all possible danger of cracking or breakage — to teach them about parenthood and the fragility of an infant. This concept is enough to make one smirk. When coupled with McGugan's zany characters and observations, egg-sitting is a hysterical romp.

Randolf Dorksburly, a grade six student, doesn't take the project too seriously. Neither does anyone else in the class. The eggs are named Baby Yolcum, Omeletta, Benedict, and Soufflé, and the students quickly become attached to their "children." Randolph heads toward a parent-of-the-year award. There's plenty of humour to keep sixth-grade readers chuckling in recognition of classroom types and situations. Here and there, the transitions are awkward and scenes are played too long. Some of the serious reasons for taking care of the eggs get lost. *Project Egg* is part of the Nelson Novel series, aimed at the reluctant reader who needs help moving from picture books to novels. It is unfortunate that the books in this series, created for schools, are available only through special order. McGugan is a promising humorist whose work might well interest a trade publisher.

The Gage Jean Pac novels are another series that promotes juvenile fiction, this time for the mass market and classrooms. Unlike the Nelson Novels, the Jean Pac books are written for the young reader who has a better command of language and the sensibilities to understand a more complicated text. For many of the Jean Pac authors the books are their first publications for children. Such is the case for Sylvia McNicoll and Constance Horne.

At first glance, the cover of McNicoll's *Blueberries and Whipped Cream* (Gage, 109 pages, \$5.30) is off-putting. The blurb on the back talks about cancer, alcoholism, unexplained sibling anger and new-found love — what a load of misery and angst! The pastel cover, through both design and typeface, suggests a teen romance. Pleasant surprises, however, await the reader who doesn't judge by the covers.

Fifteen-year-old Christina Dzuba is confused, and understandably so. Her mother is dying of cancer, the rest of the family is suffering in various ways. What might seem gratuitous in the plot is saved by McNicoll's development of recurring motifs; the author understands the use of images to reinforce characters and themes and she also knows how to construct a sub-plot. As with any first novel, there are rough areas. The father's drinking problem is too quickly and unacceptably resolved: he is

otherwise a well-drawn character. Christina's one angry outburst directed towards her father is both awkward and out of character. The title's connection to the plot is tenuous: stronger, more appropriate images appear in the book. Yet McNicoll succeeds in making her reader cry and laugh at the proper moments and handles sensitive topics with a light touch.

Both the text and the superb cover design of Constance Horne's *Nykola and Granny* (Gage, 169 pages, \$5.30) promise much and deliver more. Here is a first novel with everything: strong plot, realistic, sympathetic characters, conflict, humour, and literary style. It is a celebration of the immigrant's determination to begin a new, better life; it is not a portrait of immigrants as superhuman heroes of a new land. Indeed, in every aspect of their story, they are quite human.

It is 1900, and young Nykola Ganczer, too ill to travel, is left behind by his family when they leave the Ukraine for Canada. His father sends money later so that Nykola and his young uncle can follow them, but the army grabs Uncle Stefan and another relative hoards the money. It appears that 10-year-old Nykola will never be with his family again. However, Granny wants the boy to go to Canada. Obviously he cannot go alone, and so, after stealing the transit money and packing a handful of Ukrainian earth to be buried with her in the new land, Granny begins the journey with her grandson. After difficulties with con men and unscrupulous landladies, and various other close calls, they are reunited with their family in Canada.

Horne avoids producing stereotypes. Her characters are interesting people whose lives seem real to the reader. The love between Granny and Nykola and the desperate action they must take provide a well-balanced story. The history is not intrusive and the story's resolution is satisfying. In *Writers on Writing*, in her essay on historical fiction, Barbara Smucker comments: "One learns to write by writing and one learns to be a better writer by reading the works of good writers." Anyone thinking of becoming a children's writer would do well to read Constance Horne's first book and believe that authors' and readers' dreams can come true. ☐

Ocean and sky

'The sun was out then and it looked like somebody had thrown dimes into the sea'

By Douglas Hill

IT WAS a first-novel year remarkable for diversity; this final gathering from 1988 offers a typical assortment. From fantasy to mystery, from Prairie girlhood to Maritime lighthouse-keeping, there's a genre, setting, subject, or character for every reader.

Linda Ghan's *A Gift of Sky* (Western Producer Prairie Books, 183 pages, \$22.95 cloth) is the latest entry in the growing-up-ethnic-in-the-West sweepstakes, and it's better than most. Ghan's heroine, Sara Schiller, is born into a family of Jewish-Canadian farmers in Saskatchewan in 1911. The novel follows her through childhood and adolescence to Regina Normal School then back to her first teaching job in the small community where she was reared. The unpleasant experiences — the worst of which derive from racial hatred — are offset by the accomplishments and rewards of an essentially inspiring experiment in brotherhood and cultural identity.

The most engaging parts of this episodic book, those recalling Sara's high school and teaching years, work well because of their humour, their light touch. They're free of the stereotyped characters and sticky-sweet chunks of wisdom that turn up elsewhere. There, the level of insight is "Little House on the Prairies" or "The Waltons"; someone's twanging your heartstrings, not delivering insights. Ghan's style is likewise susceptible to breathiness, affectation, and cloying lyricism. For example: "And then Nora was gone. Really gone. Not huddling in her coat crying, not walking with me beside the dead slough, not painting me a lipstick mouth, not lying naked and still on the snow. I was glad. I was glad she could never know, never know that there had been nothing to run away to. Nothing at all." I was glad the whole book wasn't written like this. Really glad.

From farther west comes

Helen Jameson's *Ten Dollars and a Dream* (Polestar, 244 pages, \$12.95 paper). Jameson and her husband homesteaded in the foothills of the Alberta Rockies in the 1930s; the novel sets out the adventures of Kate and Eric Morgan and their baby in the same locale, same era. Kate is an extremely attractive narrator, with an ability to speak simply, without exaggeration, of a young couple's demanding struggle, the determination and mutual respect needed to succeed, and the sweet joys of small victories. There are no surprises here, but this is a pleasurable, wholesome, often touching account. On any list of unpretentious, charming memoir-novels, Jameson's book would rank high.

Don't: A Woman's Word, by Elly Danica (gynergy books, 96 pages, \$12.95 paper) is also, the reader is warned, autobiographical. A first-person narrative by a survivor of incest and violent sexual abuse, it's filled with almost unspeakable horrors. It's to Danica's credit that she *can* speak, but her story is so shocking and personal I have trouble evaluating it as fiction; novels about the Holocaust affect me similarly. In technique, *Don't* is minimalist. The book proceeds by short prose paragraphs, a dozen or two per chapter, composed of short sentences; the narrator runs events and feelings back and forth through her mind, moving towards angry clarity. The subject of the novel is extremely painful; the style, though at moments irritatingly reductive, serves its purposes adequately.

Mizzly Fitch: The Light, the Sea, the Storm, by Murray Pura (Simon & Pierre, 135 pages, \$14.50 paper), tells a grim tale of death and denial along Nova Scotia's South Shore. As a boy, Caleb (later Mizzly) Fitch fishes with his father and brothers on the Grand Banks; he survives the shipwreck on Sable Island that kills the others. Subsequently cast

out by his mother (who in her grief tries to kill him), he becomes at 18 (the year is 1928) keeper of a lighthouse just off Lunenburg. When the light is destroyed by a violent storm 30 years later, he returns to his home island and eventually takes over a light there.

These are the bare bones on which Pura hangs the rhetoric of a battle between one man and the God he believes is both tricky and vengeful. Melville's Ahab piled his rage against an Old Testament God upon Moby Dick's hump; Fitch obsessively finds that same angry God's deceit in the sea's calm, His killing hand in the storm. In modern fiction, the neurotic excesses of fundamentalist Christianity (Protestant or Catholic) gone off the rails have been the property of writers from Quebec or the American South. *Mizzly Fitch* is rather like *As I Lay Dying* in a dory.

Pura does a fairly good job with the challenge of Mizzly's first-person voice. The dialect and speech rhythms are consistent, though now and then they come through more faintly than at others. Every so often there's a bit too much homely philoso-

phizing for my taste, and Pura doesn't quite have the how of trawling, as they say around here. But there's a lovely feeling for light and weather and water in the novel, and some memorable language. By the time Pura has his hero observe, halfway through the book, that "the sun was out then and it looked like somebody had thrown dimes into the sea," readers have long been aware of Mizzly's gift of phrase and image.

I'll admit at the top I'm no great fan of fantasy. So I approached *The Well of Time*, by Tom Henighan (Collins, 394 pages, \$24.95 cloth), in less than high spirits. With a few serious reservations, I'd call it a moderately successful exploration of the genre's possibilities. Set around 1000 A.D. in North America, the novel tells of a young Viking woman's quest to Iceland to find a sacred elixir that will save her people from destruction at the hands of the Grey Folk, a particularly scary species of the undead. The heroine, Ingrid, finds love and betrayal, but triumphs at last over the forces of darkness (primarily male) through tap-

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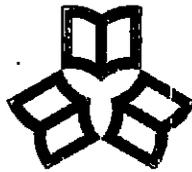
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CELEBRATING EXCELLENCE
 IN ONTARIO WRITING
 UN HOMMAGE À L'EXCELLENCE DE
 LA LITTÉRATURE ONTARIENNE



Ministry of
 Culture and
 Communications

Ministère de la
 Culture et des
 Communications

Lily Odette Munro
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ping into "the power of the mother."

Henighan's knowledge of history and myth gives his story, for most of its length, a compelling atmosphere. He's good, too, at picturing the otherness of the sorcerer's world, though this can (and does here) lead to a lot of explanatory writing, a lot of begats. Usually the narrative prose is powerful, if unremittently intense; at times Henighan slips into a kind of singsong rhythm. Sentence after sentence has the layered look: "These things she knew, and could endure — and even challenge, for she was determined to face out the old man, who was the embodiment of a god, and defeat/him." The last third of the novel runs out of steam somewhat; characterization, description, psychology all seem to go slack. *The Well of Time* has some good things in it, but its weaknesses prevent it from making the impact it might.

Jason Schoonover's *The Bangkok Collection* (Seal, 443 pages, \$24.95 cloth) is also a genre novel, this time of the high-stakes thriller variety. The narrator-hero, Lee Rivers, is a collector of East Asian art and archeological objects for museums, galleries, and connoisseurs; he's been known to bend laws to accomplish his ends. He becomes involved in a plot to get a stolen Buddhist relic of immense significance into the right hands. Before we're through, the KGB and the CIA, half a dozen other national intelligence services, extremist groups from most of the world's major religions, not to mention all of Rivers's larger-than-life friends, are into it, and bodies are collecting in heaps.

The novel has its problems. There's too much detail at the start and a dreadfully slow explanation and coda that goes on for 50 pages after the book should properly have ended. The voice Schoonover chooses for Rivers is show-off crude, somewhere between Cheech and Chong and vintage Richard Pryor. The sex is hot and graphic, the story is as implausible as anything you could imagine (and still you'll guess what's coming next), but everything manages to be good fun anyway. I resisted this one at first, then got sucked in for more hours than I care to admit, then was bored and grumpy at the finish.

The *Tasmanian Tiger*, by

Jane Barker Wright (Polestar, 155 pages, \$12.95 paper), is a tightly worked novel in what we might call the neo-Atwoodian manner. Her unhappy couple, Joe and Anna (there must indeed be life after *Surfacing*) have moved from Vancouver to Tasmania in the early 1970s where he, a zoologist, will search for a supposedly extinct tiger and she, formerly a television personality, will have a baby. Anna, the central character, is quickly befriended by a trio of forceful women: Betty, a writer who narrates part of the story, Sylvia, an eccentric free spirit, and Sylvia's teen-aged daughter Paula, a dancer. Men play fairly minor and fairly stereotypical roles in the drama. Anna has her baby; Sylvia's baby dies mysteriously, and Sylvia is blamed; Anna's marriage rapidly begins to crumble. The novel ends, with a kind of reprise, in Vancouver at the close of the 1980s.

Wright develops her subject, the permutations and consequences of motherhood, stylishly, and creates a tense mood of anxiety and foreboding. Her prose is spare, carefully pruned, epigrammatic; less, here, is definitely more. There are good lines aplenty: "Raising children is like cleaning your teeth. You never quite do it properly." Short chapters, quick cuts, flashbacks and flashforwards — the book seems calculated to push the reader around, keep him or her slightly off-balance, thumbing back and forth to check connections, implications, clues (and occasional inconsistencies). The novel is a trifle over-designed; often I felt Wright was more concerned with word structures and sound effects than meaning. But on balance, the intellectual energy of *The Tasmanian Tiger*, keeps it from being merely an exercise in stylistic ingenuity, and gives it a solid underpinning of thought-provoking substance.

The final three installments of Bryan Moon's four-part novel, *The Grapefruit Tree*, have arrived; we reviewed Part One, *Seeds*, last May. The new books, *The Western Kingdom*, *Union Day*, and *Harvest* (Oberon, each \$25.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper) continue the adventures of young Jonathan Corning, his grandfather Caldwell, and his friends during a Prairie summer in the small town of Union two decades ago. There is fine writing here, though it verges at times on the

precious; for me there isn't enough substance to justify it all. Not much more occurs in these three volumes than in the first, which I thought spun out a thin tale excessively, repetitively. Look at it as a potential book-buyer: 528 pages total, \$103.80 cloth, \$51.80 paper; for that money I don't want a grapefruit tree, I want an orchard.

To conclude on a familiar note of disappointment. Nazneen Sadiq's *Ice Bangles* (Lorimer, 192 pages, \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper) is an interesting novel that, with firmer editorial control, might have been first-rate. Sadiq's account of the experiences of Naila Siraj, who comes to Toronto from Pakistan as a young bride in 1964, is intelligent and lively, with numerous insights into such matters as immigration, assimilation, and racism. Naila is a forceful, good-humoured woman, who struggles hard for everything she earns: she has three children (the first severely handicapped and institutionalized); she loves, respects, and argues with her husband (whom the author treats fairly); she becomes a successful journalist, works at her poetry, and as the novel ends is trying to publish her own first novel. Naila's significant victory is to force new roots into Canadian soil, not lament the old ones; this is one very determined, clear-eyed New Canadian.

There is much to like in *Ice Bangles*, obviously, so it's irritating that the novel is full of flaws that should have been corrected somewhere along the line. For one thing, the book's energies are scattered, not concentrated; the narrative line isn't focused tightly enough. The prose is too often cluttered with adjectives and tags, there's some stodgy dialogue, there are far too many errors in punctuation, mechanics, word choice (what, for example, does "the silent ferocity of a Pompano bull" mean? — could we be aiming at "Pamplona" here?). And the editors who let such clunkers as "for the first time she felt there had been an exchange of sorts which had taken place" or "it was the last time she ever spoke to her brother again" remain on the page should be sentenced to teach Remedial for a year. I had begun to hope we were through with shoddy productions such as this; Nazneen Sadiq deserves much, much better, and so does the reader. ■

The short list

THE YEAR 1988 was a remarkable one for Canadian first novelists, in number, accomplishment, and range. The six books in competition for the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award are *A Casual Brutality* (Macmillan), by Neil Bissoondath; *The Victory of Geraldine Gull* (Macmillan), by Joan Clark; *Electrical Storms* (Random House), by David Homel; *Constellations* (Random House), by Janice Kulyk Keefer; *January, February, June or July* (Breakwater), by Helen Fogwill Porter; and *A Man of Little Faith* (McClelland & Stewart), by Rick Salutin.



Neil Bissoondath

Neil Bissoondath immigrated to Canada from Trinidad in 1973, and earned a degree in French from York University. He comes from a literary family — V. S. Naipaul and the late Shiva Naipaul are his uncles. In 1985, Bissoondath published a collection of short fiction, *Digging up the Mountains*, which met with critical acclaim. *A Casual Brutality* is the story of Raj Ramsingh, a Toronto doctor who returns to his native island of Casaquemada in the Caribbean, and is drawn into a society torn by racial strife and corruption.

The Victory of Geraldine Gull, the story of a remarkable Ojibwa woman, was written by Joan Clark while she was living in Winisk, a Cree village on Hudson Bay. Clark grew up in the Maritimes, has lived in Ottawa and Edmonton, and now resides in St. John's, Newfoundland, with her husband and three children. She is the author of six books for children, and *From a Thin High Wire*, a col-



Joan Clark

lection of short fiction.

David Homel is a freelance writer and award-winning translator who lives in Montreal with his wife and two children. He was born in Chicago and lived in Europe for a period of time before moving to Toronto in 1975. He has worked extensively in film and television, and won the 1984 Bronze Medal at



David Homel

the Hemisfilm Festival for "Visions," a 13-part documentary on Canadian art and artists that he wrote for TV Ontario. His novel, *Electrical Storms*, is told from the point of view of Vinnie Rabb, a teenager growing up in a working-class suburb of Chicago in the late 1960s.

Janice Kulyk Keefer was born in Toronto and educated at the University of Toronto and Sussex University in England. She is the author of two collections of short fiction (*The Paris-Napoli Express* and *Transfigurations*), a book of poetry (*White of the Lesser Angels*), and critical work (*Under Eastern Eyes; A Critical Reading of Maritime*

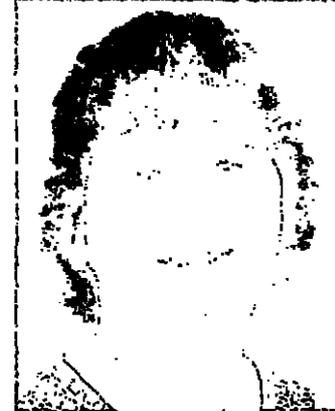
Fiction). She was twice the winner of the CBC Literary Competition in the category of short fiction, and her poetry was awarded the third prize in last year's competition. Kulyk Keefer currently is spending a year in England with her husband and two children. Her novel, *Constellations*, is set in the small Nova Scotian town of Spruce Harbour and examines



Janice Kulyk Keefer

the relationships between a small group of people whose lives are transformed by the arrival of a stranger in their midst.

Helen Fogwill Porter was born and raised on the south side of St. John's, Newfoundland, which is the setting for *January, February, June or July*, her novel about the coming of



Helen Fogwill Porter

age of a young girl, Heather Novak. Since 1962, Porter has been writing full time; her essays, fiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous Canadian magazines, including *Saturday Night* and *Atlantic Insight*. She continues to make her home in St. John's.



Rick Salutin

Rick Salutin is a journalist and playwright who lives in Toronto. He has won Chalmers awards for two of his plays — *1837: The Farmers' Revolt* and *Les Canadiens*. He is also an editor and columnist of *This*

Magazine, which he helped found in 1973. He has won two National Magazine Awards for his journalism, and a collection of his essays, *Marginal Notes: Challenges to the Mainstream*, was published in 1984. *A Man of Little Faith* tells the story of Oskar, a Jew who escapes from Nazi Germany and emigrates to Canada.

The judges for this year's competition are Nigel Berrisford, the vice president and book marketing director of W. H. Smith; the short-story writer Elisabeth Harvor; Jack McClelland, an author's agent and former publisher; and Leon Rooke, a critic and novelist. The prize for the competition is \$5,000; the winner will be announced in the April issue of *Books in Canada*. □

LETTERS

MATA HARI

CAROLYN SMART'S criticism of my book, *Mata Hari's Last Words*, struck me as exemplary of a review written with an agenda, a set of criteria which may have little connection with the book's objectives, but by which the book is measured and found wanting. Specifically, Ms. Smart thought that I should have taken the poems "beyond the dead-end idea of victimization and into the realm of the empowering." I sympathize with the movement to empower historical women, but think that truth should not be overlooked in the process. I stuck to the facts as far as possible in interpreting Mata Hari's life, and the fact that she was convicted and executed on flimsy evidence and had her own version of the story locked up for 100 years make it hard to view her *end* as anything but a victimization. Like most of us, Mata Hari was both victor and victim, empowered and oppressed, during her life, and the poems represent her as such. Does a woman who says "with my beauty and these teachings/ I hold a superior hand in any game?" sound like a true victim?

Ms. Smart also argues that I shouldn't have tried to write from a woman's point of view, and supports this by praising one poem "written partially from a man's point of view." I expected to fail in some ways at the difficult task of writing from the other sex's point of view, but, for the record, that particular poem is clearly presented as

Mata Hari's parody of a certain male point of view. So, if it succeeds, it is as a woman's view of a man's view. And I don't agree that my confession of inability to understand the source of my fascination with Mata Hari is an example of "muddy thinking." It's an example of an obsession, which seldom has a clearly explicable source; was Joyce guilty of muddy thinking because he never told us why he was so obsessed with Dublin?

John Oughton
Toronto

SEALING WAX

DOUGLAS HILL, who reviewed my novel, *Black Light*, in the December issue of *Books in Canada*, was unnecessarily unkind in beginning his review article with an insult to Newfoundland writers. My main complaint, however, is that he greatly misrepresented my work.

He not only made factual errors but wrongly identified racism as the theme of the novel. At a literal level, the book presents an interweaving of two themes — the search for respectability and for identity. In moving from one society or class to another of superior standing, one has to come to terms with the issue of who one is. In the novel the two quests are linked in that the encounter with obstacles posed — often in subtle ways — by racism prompts Khan eventually to re-examine his conception of who he is. But the real theme of the novel is the ubiquity of human

blindness, particularly that generated by irrationality, and even Khan comes "close to substituting one blindness for another."

Many of Hill's specific comments are quite puzzling. He finds the prose "slow-moving," but the most frequent reaction I have had from readers in the real world, both within and outside Newfoundland, is: "Once I started the book I couldn't put it down." No irony in the novel? A truly incredible remark! Surely it is ironic that such highly educated people as academics display a persistent irrationality, or that Khan leaves a colonial society that is racist and ends up in another which again makes him a victim of racism. Regarding the matter of colonialism, the parallels between Trinidad and Newfoundland assume the form not only of economic privilege and intellectual arrogance but also of cultural penetration. I think Hill wrong in saying the author fails to achieve "distance": virtually all the characters have flaws (though generally they also possess redeeming qualities), and both black and white are guilty of limited vision. I am indeed disappointed that your reviewer ignores most of the complexities and subtleties of the novel — the growth shown by characters, the irony, the symbolism, the imagery, and the seduction of the reader until close to the very end to perceive the world the way Khan does — and then claims that the work does not transmute into art!

It is normal for a first novel to have flaws. The new writer typically hopes the reviewers will read his/her work carefully and provide critiques helpful to both reader and author. From this perspective, Hill's commentary is woefully deficient.

Ishmael J. Baksh
St. John's

I FIND the opening sentence of Douglas Hill's December "First Novels" column singularly offensive. Such would-be witty remarks as "To begin, a pair from Newfoundland, where writing novels seems to have replaced chasing seals as a supplementary occupation" suggests more of twit than of wit.

If all you know of Newfoundland is that we used to have a seal hunt, then may I make so bold as to suggest that a book-review column is not the place to expose your ignorance?

Douglas Cuff
St. John's, Nfld.

Douglas Hill replies
(from Newfoundland):

UNTIL THE RECENT ban on sealing, many Newfoundlanders added to their family income by going to the Ice in the spring of the year. In 1988 five first novels (of a Canadian total of 45) were written in or set in Newfoundland. These facts led me to try a modest, perhaps not wildly funny joke. It was not an insult to anybody, and should not be construed as one.

WHERE HE'S COMING FROM

I RECEIVED the November issue of *Books in Canada* late, so I hope you have room for a belated addition to what I expect will be a number of angry responses to John Metcalf's "What is a Canadian Literature?"

Metcalf essentially argues against a "Canadian tradition" in literature, and attacks particularly Sam Solecki's essay in *The Bumper Book* for suggesting that there is such a thing. "Culture has been international for centuries," raves Metcalf, and haven't we all hoped sometimes that it could be? No more messing around with current events, local customs, and the peculiarities of a time, a place, a language. What's good enough for Westminster ought to be good enough for New Westminster. "I read literature as literature," says Metcalf. "I wouldn't read a book of Brazilian stories to see what it was like to be Brazilian; I'd read it to see what pleasures of the form good Brazilian practitioners could give me."

I understand the distinction that Metcalf is making in that statement, but I don't read that way. Neither do the Canadian readers who have insisted on enjoying authors such as Alice Munro (whom Metcalf admires) for their "sociology, history, (and) anthropology" as well as for their "international" style.

Neither our literature nor our reading is as simple as Metcalf might wish, and he is fortunate in that. I enjoyed his *General Ludd*, though the narrator-hero, Jim Wells "from Vancouver," sounds throughout the novel as if he just got off the boat from Britain. That needed to be explained, just as Metcalf himself should, as Solecki argues in *The Bumper Book*, say where he's coming from.

Mike Matthews
Nanaimo, B.C.

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.

After Native Claims?, by Frank Cassidy and Norman Dale, Institute for Research on Public Policy/Oalickan.
Art History: Its Use and Abuse, by W. McAllister Johnson, U of T.
As For Me and My House, by Sinclair Ross, M & S.
At the House on Pine Street, by Shaun Heron, Macmillan.
Back Door to the Klondike, by Joan Weir, by Don Mills.
Balloon Race Mystery and Other Stories, by Joan Weir, Overlea.
Balthazar and Other Poems, by D. G. Jones, Coach House.
Becoming My Father, by Claude Liman, Callin.
Beginning Again: Further Adventures of a Loyalist Family, by Mary Beacock Fryer, Dundurn.
A Bird in the House, by Margaret Laurence, M & S.
The Book of Grey Owl: Selected Wildlife Stories, edited by E. E. Reynolds, Macmillan.
The Book of the Heart, by Loy Ching-Yuan, translated by Traber Carolan and Bill Chen, Heyon Press.
Borrowed Blood: A Labrador Fantasy, by Ella a Bryan Onda, illustrated by Jan Morrison, Breakwater.
Bourgeois Explorer of the Missouri, 1698-1725, by Frank Norall, U of Alberta.
Broken English, by David Thompson, Collins.
The Brundland Challenge and the Cost of Inaction, edited by Alex Davidson and Michael D. Nece, The Royal Society of Canada.
A Buddha Named Baudelaire, by Ron Smith, Sono Nis.
Buy, Rent, Sell: A Step-by-Step Guide to Making a Fortune in Canadian Real Estate, edited by Donald Needleman, Collins.
Canada: The State of the Federation 1987-88, edited by Peter M. Leslie and Ronald L. Watts, Queen's Institute of International Relations.
Canadian-American Free Trade: The Sequel, edited by A. R. Riggs and Tom Volk, Institute for Research on Public Policy.
Cape Breton Lives, edited by Ronald Caplan, Breakwater.
Cathedral of Science: The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums During the Late Nineteenth Century, by Susan Shree-Fyenson, McGill-Queen's.
Celebrating Canadian Women: Prose and Poetry By and About Women, edited by Gracia Holmann Nemiroff, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
The Centralization-Decentralization Conundrum, by Peter Aucoin and Herman Bakvis, Institute for Research on Public Policy.
A City in the Making: Progress, People & Profit in Victorian Toronto, by Frederick H. Armstrong, Dundurn.
Cottage Crazy, by Paul Kropp, Scholastic.
Cross-currents, by Marjorie Cronk, Overlea.
Dear Gladys: The Survival Papers, by Darjishup, Inner City Books.
Dickinbaker's World, by H. Basil Robinson, U of T.
Diversions, by Seymour Mayne, Noovo Masheen Press.
Down by Jim Long's Stage: Rhymes for Children and Young Fish, by Al Funnell, illustrated by Pam Hall, Breakwater.
The Edge of Beulah, by David Elliott, Breakwater.
Election, by Gerald Caplan, Michael Kirby, and Hugh Segal, Porcupine-Hall.
Emily Climbs, by L. M. Montgomery, M & S.
Emily of New Moon, by L. M. Montgomery, M & S.
Emily's Quest, by L. M. Montgomery, M & S.
Ex Primicer, by Tom Konyves, Callin.
Franky Can, by Gerard Thivener, Breakwater.
Frost in the Mortar, by Frank Manley, Noovo Masheen.
Giving Birth is Just the Beginning: Women Speak about Mothering, by Judith Lunn & Crayley, Book Project.
Gold Diggers of 1929, by Douglas Fether-

ling, Macmillan.
Governing Bodies, by Laurie Block, Turnstone Press.
Heroes, Bums and Ordinary Men: Profiles in Canadian Baseball, by Dan Turner, Doubleday.
High Crimes, by William Dewar, Seal.
History of Greece, by Hermann Bengston, translated by Edmund F. Bloedow, U of Ottawa.
Human Rights and the Protection of Refugees under International Law, edited by Alan E. Nash, Canadian Human Rights Foundation.
The Hundred Old Names, by David Helwig, Oberon.
If I Had a Camel, by Colleen Archer et al., Mayapple.
Inner Visions, Outer Voices: An Anthology of Cape Breton Poetry, edited by Clay Warren, University College of Cape Breton.
The Insiders: Power, Money and Secrets in Ottawa, by John Sawatsky, M & S.
Ishbel and the Empire: A Biography of Lady Aberdeen, by Doris French, Dundurn.
Jeremy Smith, by David Burnett, Dundurn.
Kenji and the Cricket, by Adele Wiseman, illustrated by Shizuye Takashima, Porcupine's Quill.
The Kinkajou, by Trevor Ferguson, Macmillan.
The Life of a River, by Andy Russell, M & S.
Like a Child of the Earth, by Jovette Marchessault, translated by Yvonne M. Klein, Talonbooks.
Literature and Commitment: A Commonwealth Perspective, edited by Govind Narain Sharma, TSAR.
The Loved and the Lost, by Morley Callaghan, Macmillan.
Machine Sex and Other Stories, by Candace Jane Dorsey, Porcupine Books.
Making Your Money Grow, by Henry B. Zimmer, Collins.
The Men of the Last Frontier, by Grey Owl, Macmillan.
Murgers, Corporate Concentration and Power in Canada, edited by R. S. Klemm et al., Institute for Research on Public Policy.
Mimosa, by Bill Scherbrucker, Talonbooks.
Mirrors on Uncertain Mornings, by Grant Johnston, Talonbooks.
More Advice from the Back Doctor, by Hamilton Hall, M & S.
Museum Mayhem, by Mary Blakeslee, Overlea.
Needles, by William Deverell, Seal.
Negotiating Control: A Study of News Sources, by R. V. Erickson et al., U of T.
Nightmare Mountain, by Myra Fopery, Overlea.
No Kidding: Inside the World of Teenage Girls, by Myra Kostash, M & S.
Ontario's Wildlife, by Dave Taylor, Boston Mills.
Ottawa River Canals and the Defence of British North America, by Robert Legget, U of T.
Our Man in Moscow, by Robert A. D. Ford, U of T.
Patterns of the Past: Interpreting Ontario's History, edited by Roger Hall et al., Dundurn.
The Penguin Guide to Canada, by Steve Veale et al., Penguin.
Political Economy of Development in Atlantic Canada, edited by Masudul Alam Choudhury, University College of Cape Breton.
Political Wives: Wifetypes of the Rich and Infamous, by Susan Riley, M & S.
Politics of Nova Scotia: Volume Two 1986-1988, by J. Murray Beck, Four East.
Private Property, by Margaret Sweatman, Turnstone.
Raymond Williams on Television, edited by Alan O'Connor, between the lines.
Ritas, by Brenda Riches, Porcupine's Quill.
Rodeo Rescue, by Mary Blakeslee, Overlea.
Sense of Season, by David Manicom, Porcupine.
Settlers of the Marsh, by Frederick Philip Grove, M & S.
The Silent City, by Elisabeth Vonarburg, translated by Jane Brierley, Porcupine.
Soosheyan, Child of the Beothuk, by Donald Gale, illustrated by Shawn Steffer, Breakwater.
The Stairway, by Alice A. Chown, U of T.
Steam at Oakville: A Day at the Oakville Subdivision, by Alan Paterson and Dick George, Boston Mills.
Street of Three Directions, by Vaneq Kasper, Overlea.

Stress for Success, by Peter G. Hanson, Collins.
Tales of an Empty Cabin, by Grey Owl, Macmillan.
Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, by bell hooks, between the lines.
The Theory and History of Ocean Boundary-Making, by Douglas M. Johnston, McGill-Queen's.
Thirty Acres, by Ringue, M & S.
Tight Shorts: Halku & Other Short Poems, by Jeff Selinger, Hamilton Halku.
Tracing the Paths: Reading & Writing One Martyrology, edited by Roy Milk, Line/Talonbooks.
The Ultimate RRSP Book, by David Ingram, Prentice-Hall.
Under God's Beard, by Claude Paradox, Noovo Masheen.
Understanding the Free Trade Agreement, edited by Donald M. McKee and Debra P. Steger, Institute for Research on

Public Policy.
The Vexed Question: Denominational Education in a Secular Age, edited by William A. McKim, Breakwater.
The Violent Years of Maggie MacDonald, by Maggie MacDonald and Allan Gould, Seal.
The Waterfily Pickers, by Barbara Schott, Turnstone Press.
What We Have, by Bill Bissett, Talonbooks.
Where the Rivers Meet, by Don Sawyer, Peacock.
Who Do You Think You Are?, by Alice Munro, Macmillan.
Wild Geese, by Martha Ostenso, M & S.
Wilderness Man: The Strange Story of Grey Owl, by Lovat Dickson, Macmillan.
Winter of the Black Weasel, by Tom Dave, illustrated by Anne MacLeod, Breakwater.
The Wire in Fences, by Stephen Brockwell, Baumnir.
Yes, Mama, by Helen Forrester, Collins.

CanWit No. 136

By Barry Baldwin

WE HAVE HAD many snappily titled books on Canadian politicians, but so far no movies. It is time that competitors rectified this by providing up to six eye-catching titles for film biographies of any Canadian leader, living or dead (e.g., Brian Mulroney—The Greatest Tory Ever Sold). The prize is \$25, and the deadline is March 25. Entries should be sent to CanWit no. 136, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide St. E., Ste. 432, Toronto, Ontario M5A 3X9.

RESULTS OF CANWIT NO. 134

OUR REQUEST for extracts from the secret diaries of political spouses brought us many sensational revelations about the private lives of such public men as John Turner, Robert Bourassa, and John Crosbie. The winner is Alec McEwen of Ottawa, for the following two diary entries:

Well, John has done it again! He told me he had taken up classical dancing because it would improve his fancy footwork during Question Period. Yet even he can see that wearing a leotard is just too ridiculous for a political heavyweight like him. But when I objected to his tutu, all he could say was, "Jane, a skirt's more comfortable; it's better adapted to the ballroom, so to speak." Besides, he thinks a "too-too" will suit his role as principal soloist in that new production about the loss of our railway, *The Newfie Ballet Ballet*.

Mon Dieu! I do wish Robert would stop humming that old tune, "Laughing on the outside, crying on the inside." Just last night he said to me, "Andrée, I was never much good at sports, but when it comes to linguistics I have the perfect backflip." It makes me so mad; one of my companies was all set to become the sole manufacturer of outdoor signs, and now Robert has ruined everything. Can't he understand that the business of Québec is my business? But he insists the only thing that matters in politics is winning, no matter what the judges say. Why, he even claims that in the streets his supporters keep chanting, "Won, oh, won."

SOLUTION TO ACROSTIC NO. 17

"... I really wondered whether anything I did made any difference at all. The call to politics makes you open to the pursuit of power. You ask "How can I gain?" The call to the priesthood is to service. You ask "How can I give?" As a priest, you know you are making a contribution."

Sean O'Sullivan, *Both My Houses*, Key Porter Books

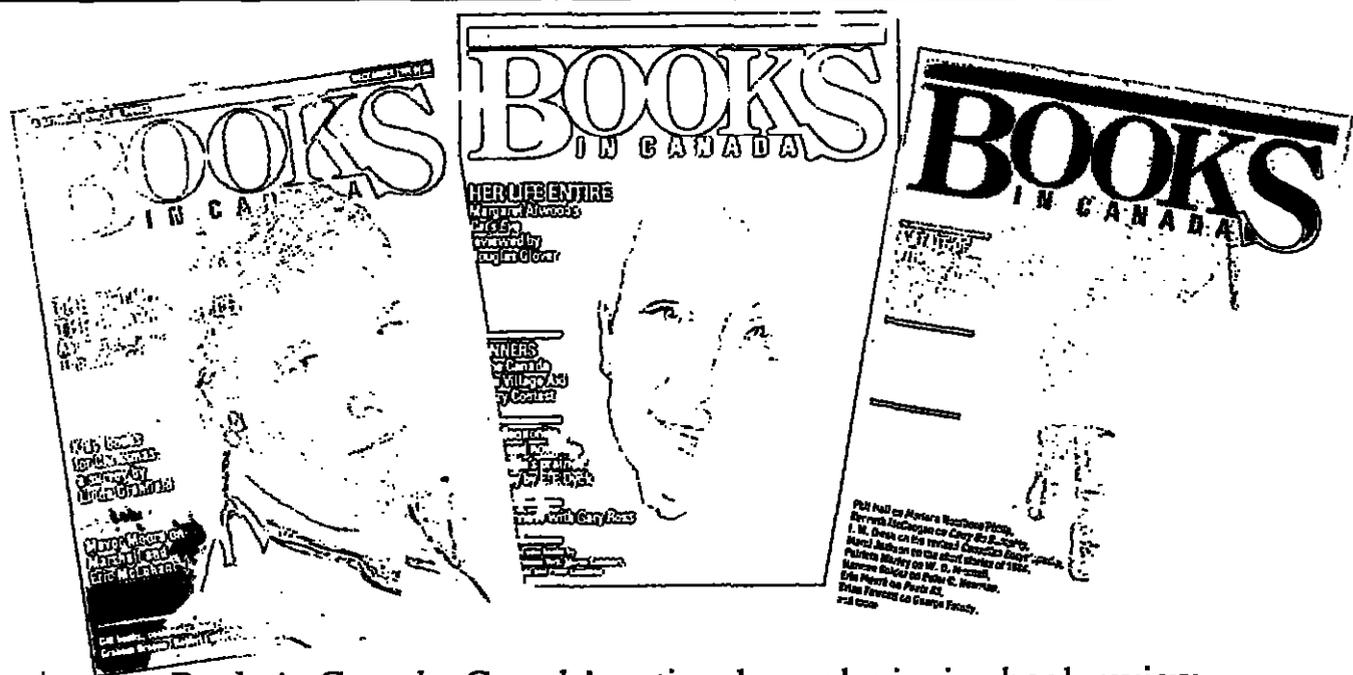
CanLit acrostic no. 18 *By Mary D. Trainer*

1	E	2	N	3	P	4	T	5	B	6	O	7	Z	8	G	9	Y	10	K	11	L	12	D	13	V	14	R	15	S	16	J	17	N	18	M				
19	D	20	I	21	E	22	B	23	L	24	H	25	A	26	W	27	K	28	F	29	R	30	P	31	U	32	O	33	Z	34	D	35	S	36	A	37	AA		
38	W	39	L	40	E	41	G	42	X	43	R	44	U	45	M	46	Z	47	O	48	Y	49	N	50	V	51	E	52	C	53	J	54	B						
55	T	56	F	57	D	58	K	59	I	60	E	61	Y	62	L	63	X	64	R	65	W	66	AA	67	Z	68	J	69	K	70	U	71	V						
72	B	73	C	74	W	75	K	76	O	77	L	78	I	79	R	80	Z	81	P	82	A	83	N	84	C	85	M	86	W	87	D	88	O	89	S	90	J	91	X
92	Z	93	T	94	D	95	U	96	N	97	R	98	F	99	H	100	Z	101	J	102	X	103	U	104	B	105	C	106	AA	107	K	108	A	109	F	110	W		
111	X	112	R	113	J	114	N	115	V	116	U	117	L	118	Y	119	E	120	B	121	Z	122	G	123	O	124	D	125	S	126	R	127	E	128	W				
129	Q	130	B	131	C	132	N	133	L	134	P	135	F	136	G	137	I	138	AA	139	J	140	B	141	F	142	K	143	X	144	O	145	C	146	H	147	S		
148	L	149	Y	150	A	151	O	152	V	153	Q	154	I	155	U	156	N	157	P	158	Y	159	K	160	D	161	G	162	B	163	Z	164	U	165	I	166	L	167	R
168	T	169	G	170	U	171	K	172	E	173	F	174	S	175	J	176	B	177	R	178	W	179	A	180	O	181	D	182	X	183	H	184	J	185	B				
186	Q	187	R	188	L	189	V	190	G	191	T	192	D	193	I	194	K	195	O	196	T	197	L	198	E	199	AA	200	V	201	C	202	G	203	B				
204	T	205	P	206	A	207	L	208	F	209	Z	210	I	211	C	212	U	213	M	214	W	215	X	216	J	217	R	218	D	219	E	220	K						

When properly filled in, the letters in the box form a quotation from a Canadian book. Find the letters by solving the clues below and writing the answers in the numbered spaces provided. Then transfer the letters from the spaces to the appropriate squares in the box. The first letters of each answered clue form the name of the author and the title of the book. (Solution next month.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>A. "The medium is the message" theorist</p> <p>B. "The Sacrifice" author: 2 wds.</p> <p>C. "The-----," Pinsent film</p> <p>D. Northwest coast Indian supernatural creation</p> <p>E. "Chicken Little" character: 2 wds.</p> <p>F. Semi-precious stone found at Cape Blomidon</p> <p>G. Major world religion</p> <p>H. Ceremonial act</p> <p>I. Secretly: 3 wds.</p> <p>J. Indians' clothing decoration: 2 wds.</p> <p>K. 1935 Liberal Party campaign slogan: 3 wds.</p> <p>L. Agricultural soil practice: 2 wds.</p> <p>AA. Alberta premier</p> | <p>M. Like a pretentious painter</p> <p>N. Nfld. offshore oilfield</p> <p>O. New France administrator</p> <p>P. Abundant Northern Canadian organism</p> <p>Q. Rob or plunder</p> <p>R. Pub fare: 3 wds.</p> <p>S. Peculiar thing</p> <p>T. Reprimanded</p> <p>U. Fishing trap: 2 wds.</p> <p>V. Veteran: 2 wds.</p> <p>W. Product made by Trappist monks: 2 wds.</p> <p>X. Northern Vancouver Island Indians</p> <p>Y. Hinder</p> <p>Z. Poisonous plant</p> |
|--|---|

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1949



David French

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MOTHER OF THE GRASS

Jovette Marchessault



Translated by Yvonne M. Klein



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088922-269-X; Fiction; \$11.95 paper.

The Burden of Office or Agamemnon and Other Losers

by Joseph Tussman
Lucid observations on classical paradigms of political life from a civil libertarian's point of view make *The Burden of Office* both a work of literature and philosophy.

088922-265-7; Issues; \$10.95 paper.



DRAMA IN PRINT

ALBERTINE IN FIVETIMES
Michel Tremblay
ASHES FOR EASTER
David Wamsough
BALCONVILLE
David Fennario
BATTERING RAM
David Freeman
BETHUNE
Rod Langley
BILLY BISHOP GOES TO WAR
John Gray with Eric Peterson
BOILER ROOM SUITE
Rex Devenell
BONJOUR, LA, BONJOUR (rev)
Michel Tremblay
BURIED CHILD & OTHER PLAYS
Sam Shepard
CAN YOU SEE ME YET?
Timothy Findley
CANADIAN DRAMA & THE CRIT. 9
L.W. Conolly
CAPTIVES OF THE FACELESS
DRELMNER
George Ryga
COLOURS IN THE DARK
James Reaney
THE CON MAN
Ken Mitchell
CRABDANCE
Beverly Simons

CRUEL TEARS
Ken Mitchell
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Michel Tremblay
DURER'S ANGEL
Marie-Claire Blais
THE ECSTASY OF RITA JOE
George Ryga
EN PIECES DETACHEES
Michel Tremblay
ESKER MIKE & HIS WIFE, AGILUK
Herschel Hardin
THE EXECUTION
Marie-Claire Blais
FACTORY LAB ANTILOGY
Carmie Brissenden
THE FAIRIES ARE THIRSTY
Denise Boucher
FIFTEEN MILES OF BROKEN GLASS
Tom Hendry
THE FIGHTING DAYS
Wendy Lill
FOREVER YOURS MARIE-LOU
Michel Tremblay
GOODNIGHT DISGRACE
Michael Mercer
GREAT WAVE OF CIVILIZATION
Herschel Hardin
HOSANNA
Michel Tremblay

THE IMPROMPTU OF OUTREMONT
Michel Tremblay
JACOB'S WAKE
Michael Cook
JITTERS (rev)
David French
LA DUCHESSE DE LANGEAIS & OTHER PLAYS
Michel Tremblay
LES BELLES SOEURS
Rick Salatin
LES CANADIENS
Michel Tremblay
LOCAL BOY MAKES GOOD
John Gray
MAGGIE & PIERRE
Linda Griffiths
A MIRROR OF OUR DREAMS
Joyce Doolittle with Zina Barnich
MODERN CANADIAN PLAYS (rev)
Jenny Wassenman
1949
David French
NOTHING TO LOSE
David Fennario
ON THE JOB
David Fennario
PLOUGHMEN OF THE GLACIER
George Ryga

THE REAL WORLD?
Michel Tremblay
REMEMBER ME
Michel Tremblay
SAGA OF THE WET HENS
Jovette Marchessault
SAINTE-CARMEN OF THE MAIN
Michel Tremblay
SAINTE MARIE AMONG THE HURONS
James W. Nichol
SALT-WATER MOON
David French
SEVEN HOURS TO SUNDOWN
George Ryga
SPRATT
Joe Wissensfeld
SORIEUX-DE-DIEU
Betty Lambert
THREE PLAYS
Eric Nicol
TILN & OTHER PLAYS,
Michael Cook
TWO PLAYS
George Woodcock
WAITING FOR THE PARADE
John Murrell
WALSH (rev)
Sharon Pollock
YOU'RE GONNA BE ALRIGHT JAMIE BOY
David Freeman