A NATIONAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

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BOOKS IN CANADA

TELLING IT SLANT

A profile of Carol Shields

WAITING

New fiction by Guy Vanderhaeghe

An interview with Ronald Wright author of *TIME AMONG THE MAYA*

And reviews of *Marching to Armageddon*, by Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein; *Talking Back: Talking Black, Talking Feminist*, by bell hooks; *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, by John Irving; *Our Man in Moscow*, by R. A. D. Ford; *A Life in the Country*, by Bruce Hutchison, and more

BOOKS IN CANADA

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FIELDNOTES

Intense literary activity

*The Governor **General's** Awards seem to be **blissfully** ort of **touch** with a basic Canadian reality: people **just** don4 **buy** books* **in** *this country*

IT **WA8** business as usual at the 1988 Governor General's Literary Awards. **Having survived** more **than** half a century, Canada's top **writing prize** — which doubled to $10,000 this year — is still **trying,** perhaps harder now than ever, to be all **things** to **all** people. It is also trying, with mixed results so far, to **attract** the sort of hype and attention **that other** awards, like Britain's Booker Prize or France's **Prix Goncourt,** receive. As it turns out, these **two** goals **are** not **always** compatible.

There **were,** however, a few hopeful **signs this** year. The ceremony, held **recently in** Montreal at the Place des Arts, ran smoothly. Everyone **was** well behaved and well dressed **(with** tbe possible exception of the winner in the English fiction category, David Adams Richards, whose necktie was remarkably, **almost** controversially short). The only glitches proved to be trivial ones. (None of the winners knew exactly where to stand on stage.) In keeping **with** tradition, the choices in the 14 **categories** -the number expanded last year **from** elght to encompass every **conceivable literary endeavour** except comic books — were safe, predictable and even, on occasion, sensible. On the English side, **Erin Mouré** for poetry ***(Furious)*** and **Anne** Collins for non-fiction ***(In the*** Sleep Room) were popular choices with the audience.

Also encouraging was the fact that the ceremony attracted a crowd of some 600 people — people who either came because they-are, like **me,** genuinely concerned about the **future** of literature in **this** country or because they had heard, also **like** me, that the wine at tbe reception to follow was free. To quote **Allan** Gotlieb, the **event's** emcee and tbe new **chairman** of the **Canada** Council, we are **in "a** period of **intense** literary activity in tbis-country." Or in **the** words of David **Homel,** who was a runner-up to **Philip Stratford *(Second Chance)*** in tbe English translation category, "win or lose, it's **still** good booze."

Gotlieb began his opening address **with** what was, for a **literary** event, an **uncharacteristic** nod to current **affairs: "Recent** events have **shown** us here **in** Canada that **the** right to freedom of **expression cannot** be taken for granted. It is a **value** we cherish and **vigorously** defend **in** the face of the world." **Gotlieb** was careful not to mention **Salman Rushdie** by name but **all** tbe people sitting near me were pretty sure **that's** who he was talking about

Which made me wonder — when I stopped wondering why there was a French and English **category** for Children's Illustration — just how intense thii 'period of literary **activity"** really is?

You see. for all its good intentions and despite the annual official comments from bureaucrats about the vital role literature plays **in defining** Canada's national identity and making our **name** known **abroad,** the G.G. **Awards** seem to be as **blissfully** out of touch with a basic Canadian reality as the rest of the **literary** types, myself included, who attended **this year's** ceremony. People just don't buy books in this country.

Recently 1 overheard a literary agent, whose most **promising** property turned out to be the upcoming memoirs of Monika **Schnarre,** tbe teenage **supermodel, tell an** audience of aspiring writers that the potential market for their books was no more **than five** per cent of the Canadian population. I also recently read a newspaper article **stating** tbat 10 per cent of Canadians believe Elvis is still alive. Not only are tbe **literary** and mathematical implications of these two juxtaposed facts staggering. but it's probably **safe** to assume that a substantial part of Canada's book-buying public is buying books about Elvis.

While the Governor General's **Awards** can hardly be blamed for **this** situation, it hasn't made a lot of ground in changing it either. And it won't make much of a dent on an **indifferent** public and **media** as long as jurors and selection **committees** continue to play it safe. What was missing **from** this year's ceremony, in' keeping with its **51-year** tradition. was not controversy so much as tbe **possibility of it.**

This year's short list for English fiction, for example, seemed specifically designed to avoid hard choices and, at the same time, to **provide** a polite but puzzling **cross-section** of **CanLit** — from small presses to bii presses, from Mark Frutkin's ***Atmospheres Apollinaire*** to **Margaret** Atwood's ***Cat's Eye.*** It was the **usual attempt** to cover all bets, to encourage writers who need encouragement, like Joan Clark, **making** her **adult-**

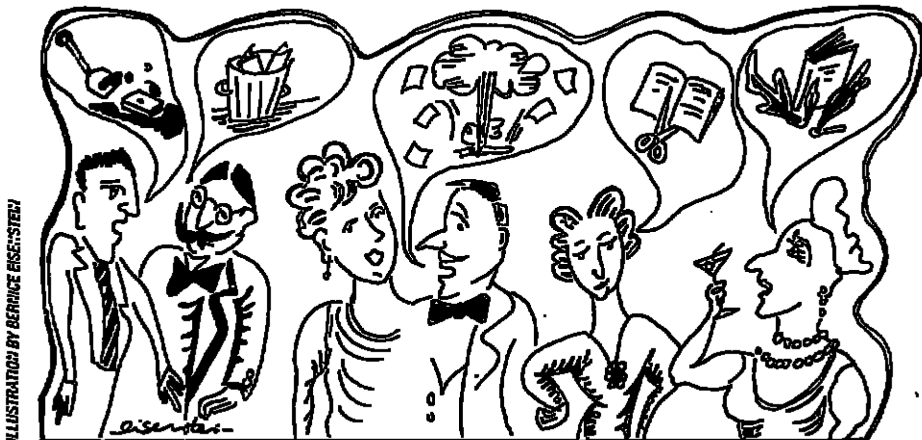


ILLUSTRATION BY BERNICE EISENSTEIN

fiction **debut, or Kenneth Radu, a first-time author, but to make it clear that Canadians — namely, Atwood — can make it onto the best-seller lists, too.**

When the name of the winner in the English fiction category was announced a small but audible gasp escaped from the large audience. But it was only a surprise to people who weren't paying attention. David Adams Richards represented the best possible compromise -the perfact Canadian middle ground. He's not a beginner but he's not a household name either. More important, it was his turn. The Governor General's Award is sup posed to go to the best book of the year, but in this case even the jury's citation seemed to take into account the author's 15-year career: 'The jury recognized in (Nights *Below Station Street*), as in the earlier works of (Richards), a celebration of the ability of the human spirit to survive. . ."

In the scramble to **be inclusive rather than discriminating, though, a lot of authors were conspicuously absent. Naming overlooked names — Robertson** Davies, **Timothy Findley, Mavis Gallant, Neil Bissoondath, Rick Salutin — was a popular pastime at the reception that followed the 90-minute ceremony.** As **promised, the wine was plentiful. So was** the sniping.

Of course, literary awards wouldn't be any fun at all if they didn't take themselves so seriously; and if they didn't inspire a certain amount of pettiness, cynicism, and even anger. It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that the history of literary awards — from the Nobel Prize on down **—** is made up of a **bewildering variety of personal, sentimental, and political motives. That** it is, in **short,** a history of strange choices,

Even **winning** authors have begun to realize this. Last year Philip Both accepted the National Book Critics Circle Award as if it were a practical joke. "Since it's the **experience** of most **writers** that prizes invariably go to the wrong people." he **said, "I take it that this year I am the wrong person. I** accept this predicament with the appropriate chagrin." **So** do we all. -JOEL **YANOFSKY**

We'll always have Paris

Isn't there something absurd about a longing backward glance at those wko so resolutely insisted on looking forward?

> We must make [art] ugly because that is creation, the intensity of creation, intensity like vomiting or orgasm or giving birth.

THAT passionate **polemic** was spoken by **Picasso, raving** in his Paris studio to his friend **Guillaume Apollinaire.** The **difficulty** of such revolutionary **art** is finding an appreciative public, and no doubt those **two avant-gardists** would have nodded their heads in agreement with these words of **Kurt Schwitters: "philistines be damned / give me an audience who understands!" The life of Schwitters, the German poet and collage artist (1887-1948) spanned** the great, incendiary **period** of avant-garde art, when (as **we** imagine now) poets and painters marched as brothers in arms, turning away from the art of **the** past toward a new vision of the future. It was a time when artists **saw** each great, new **structure** of industrialism, **from the Eiffel Tower to the steam engine, as a visionary poem, child's toy, and herald of a utopian future.**

I'm playing something of a trick here, for the words **I** quoted are not actually **Picasso's own,** but those of Mark **Frutkin** in ***Atmospheres Apollinaire,*** his fictional biography of the poet that reads like a prose poem. And Kurt **Schwitters's** rhyme comes from Colin Morton's ***The Merzbook: Kurt Schwitters Poems,*** *a sequence* that recreates the artist's life, using **his** and other voices. **Frutkin** and Morton perform a little stage magic, mixing historical fact and imagination to **create** intelligent, sympathetic accounts of **artists' lives.** Morton's book **in** particular **is an appealing** example **of what Stephen** Scobie in ***The Malahat Review*** has described as, a balance between "objective **fact** and subjective **interpretation."**

For a couple of decades now, poets, perhaps tired of writing short lyrics of the self ("the delicate ego smeared on canvas" as **Morton-as-Schwitters** puts **it),** have tried to enter a culturally and. historically larger world by **writing** in what Scobie calls **the** documentary tradition. **Writing** about artists-as opposed to pioneers, soldiers, or. gangsters **—** is not new but a recent spate of poetic **biographies** of **modernist** figures does raise **some** interesting questions.

If writing about a historical figure is an escape from the self, could it not also be a kind of hidden autobiography, a se **cret self-portrait** of the **artist?** This hidden text comes easily, since the **avant-garde** artists were the&elves descendants of **19th-century** Romantics, for whom **the** exploration of the self was a major preoccupation. And most of the artists of the modernist period, despite their ridicule of the bourgeoisie, were **products** of the middle class and could only have **thrived** in the atmosphere of a growing bourgeois liberal democracy. (Nothing could shut the 'decadent" avant-gardisk down faster than **either à** fascist or communist government.)

Why Mark **Frutkin** should be **drawn** to **Apollinaire rather** than, **say,** Alfred **Jarry,** who appears as a minor character in his bpok, I cannot say **— except** to speculate that something in **Apollinaire's life** and work strikes a resonant chord. The choice by Patricia Young, a Vancouver poet, of Jean **Rhys** for ***All I Ever*** Needed ***Was a Beautiful*** *Room* is more **explicit;** Young clearly **identifies with Rhys** as a woman **writer** and as a victim. But the reasons for drawing all these figures from the modernist period certainly **goes** beyond the **picturesque** possibilities of that age. Is it perhaps that in our own era of continning conservatism, a time when radical creations could **outrage the** public has ik attractions? And could it be that poets in this country, feeling isolated from other artists and from any discernible audience, are looking back **with longing** to a time when there was a **genuine** artistic **community?**

Artists of the modernist **period,** or so it seems to us now. **were** a real **community** set against the **larger society;** If not actual Futurists or Dadaists they were **signatories** of **collective manifestoes,** or simply frequenters of the same cafes. Many poets in this country still tind themselves psychologically separated both from the public and from other writers. If, for example, the authors of these new books were influenced by **Scobie's *McAlmon's Chinese Opera*** (a **poetic** account of an **expatriate American writer,** published in **1980)** they may **well not have expected ik influence** on anyone else. These biographies are a reaching out, an imaginative attempt to join **Apollinaire,** Henri Rousseau, and **Gertrude** Stein in a drunken **fest** at **Picasso's** studio. or Kurt **Schwitters** as he **sits** in a restaurant that is **willing** to **exchange** meals for **paintings.** They **can** be read not merely as **more-or-less accurate** biographical portraits, but as **extraordinarily** elaborate **fantasies, like** the **imaginary** friends **invented** by lonely children.

Because Patricia Young's approach to the modernist period is feminist it is radically different from **Frutkin's** or **Morton's.Young** dedicates her book to four other women. all "admirers of Jean **Rhys,"** thus creating around the novelist an imaginary, intimate coterie. A poet **who** does not find the support she needs around her to make her art reaches back into the past for kinship. for ancestral justification. Young's view of modernism is not of **some** golden age; she contends that **Rhys,** emotionally and physically exploited by Ford **Madox** Ford and his wife and long overlooked in **favour** of male writers. was a victim of an **authoritarian** avant-garde. The golden age was not **golden** for everyone.

And yet, even Young can't resist having **Rhys** say. 'When I **first** arrived in Paris / it was like coming home." Perhaps what is most remarkable about this rewriting of **artists'** lives is the number of striking ironies that go **virtually unexamined,** one of which is the dubious nature of this nostalgia. It seems we have been **left** on the dock with our trunks packed, **only to** watch the steamer grow **smaller** and smaller as it recedes into the past But was it really so much better in Paris? Has the reality not been altered by a **kind** of **myth-making** that began almost from the start? Doesn't our fictional eavesdropping on historical lives objectify and therefore **romanticize** their moment, turning it into **something** else? The act of recovering the past is neither simple nor without dangers.

Using **real figures** from the past raises another problem — the possibility of a **kind** of historical exploitation. Without doubt these poets have intended a genuine homage to their subjects. But the **artists** that society once despised it now loves, and the **suffering artist** after his or her **death** becomes a predictably popular and sentimental object Plays, films, pop songs, even television miniseries all use **now-sanctified** artists to attract a wider audience. Any work that participates in this exhumation may be implicitly reinforcing society's traditional use of the **artist.**

Eut there's **a** greater irony still. Mark **Frutkin's Picasso** may call for an art that is as ugly and intense as birth, but **Frutkin's,** Morton's, and Young's work is not remotely ugly or calculated to shock complacent sensibilities. These books are not likely to be misunderstood or despised, for neither **their** ideas nor their techniques are revolutionary. Their sub **jects** may be modernists, but none of these books can be called avant-garde. Perhaps it **is true that** the avant-garde is long dead, a victim of the capitalist marketplace. the **institutionalization** of culture, and inevitable disillusionment If so **(and** we ought not simply to accept the assertion) then a regret for its loss takes **on** a **very** real poignancy. Still, there is **something** absurd about a longing backward glance at those who so resolutely insisted on looking forward. These books may succeed to a greater or lesser degree on their own terms: **nevertheless,** in not exploring **their nostalgic** impulse and these other questions, the writers may have missed their most interesting subjects.

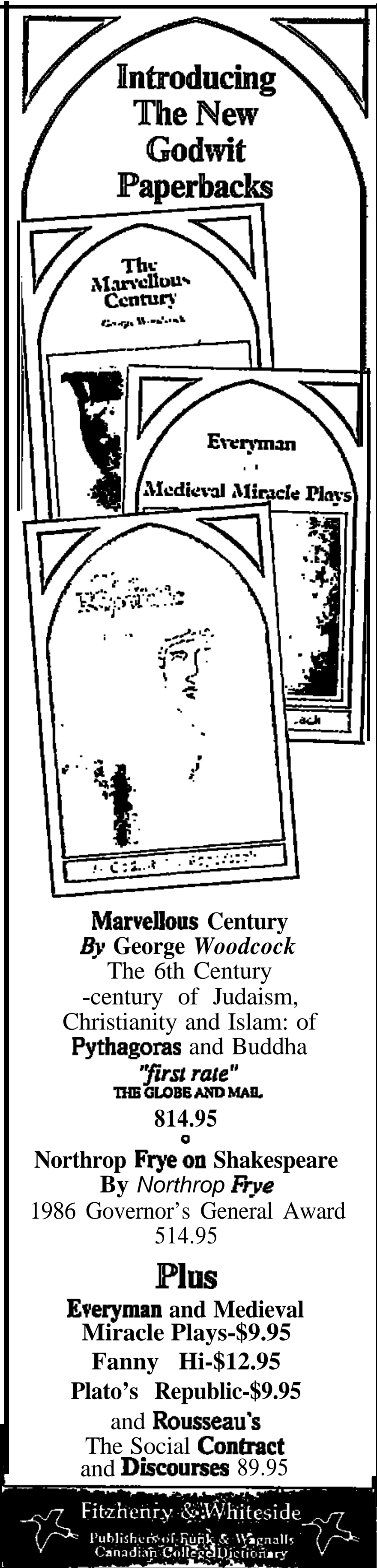
What separates two other recent poetry books about **avant-garde** artists from the rest, **D. G.** Jones's ***Balthazar*** and Don **Coles's** *K. in Love,* is an indifference to historical fact. Instead. these poets keep to a more strictly aesthetic interest in poetry-making. Although they could not be described as avant-garde, neither of them simply accepts as given that a historical figure can be reconstructed in language.

Jones's sequence on the painter **Balthus** may be playing with the notion of a **poet's** "secret self" behind a **historical** figure. Whether or not these disturbingly **erotic** lyrics about young girls **can** be read back to the poet, Jones himself may be daring us to try. Balthus. whose most **fruitful** period occurred over 50 years **ago,** is an example **of the reactionary** avant-garde, an artist who like T. S. **Eliot,** subsumed his self in tradition and allowed his personal obsessions only the most restricted play. By basing his invention of scenes of sexual **aggression** and impotence on **Balthus's** early canvases, Jones sidesteps the question of biographical truth.

In the afterword to *K.* **in** ***Love,*** **Don** Coles has the modesty to deny any **"talent-kinship"** with **Franz** Kafka. These poems in the form of ***billets-doux*** make no mention of **Kafka's** fiction, his city of Prague, or his friendships **with** writers and actors. Any knowledge a reader might have of **Kafka's** complex relations with women deepens but does not dominate the text. When **Coles** as Kafka writes:

> ***Without you these lines***
> ***Wouldn't exist. Also, however,***
> ***Writing them is what allows me***
> ***To exist without you***

he is speaking not only to a woman. but tq us as readers and even to **the historical** Kafka. Paradoxically, K's own self only recedes further as his love and **the** beauty of his expression increases. **"I'm** as unknown as ever,' K sighs in one of the final poems. The struggle to know ourselves and to know others, to feel the **present and to sense the past, are among** the recurring obsessions of art. **Such** "knowledge" can never be taken for granted. **— CARY FAGAN**



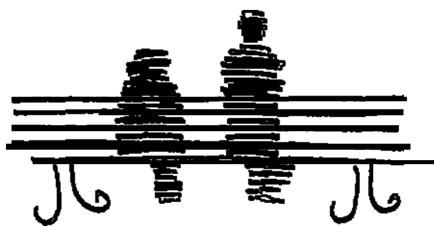
Decimated cohorts

If the Ontario Conservatives had been decimated in the 1987 election they would have lost only about five seats

By I. M. Owen

COHORT: ***Banting was** assisted by his **young** cohort, Dr. **Charles H. Best.*** This use of *cohort* is especially **favoured** by political and sports writers. Somehow the word looks as if it **ought** to mean a close colleague or friendly assistant In fact it originally meant a unit of the Roman **army:** a legion consisted of **10 cohorts,** each having 800 men when it was at full strength. The word should never, therefore, be used of an individual; but its meaning can be legitimately extended *to any* group. so long as that group is defined. Surprisingly, sociologists, normally the scourge of the English **language,** have established such a legitimate use: a group of people born in the same year.

DECIMATE: **While** we're talking of the Roman army. let's consider decimate. You'd think that in these metric days **any** writer would be conscious that ***decimation*** had **something** to do **with** the number 10. But Thomas Walkom wrote in the *Globe **and Mail*** *a* **few** months ago: ***In** Ontario,. . . **thanks to the** decimation **of** the **Conservatives in 1987,** Robert Rae's **NDP** has become tke **Official Opposition.*** *In* fact *decimation* **was** *a Roman* military custom: **if a** legion mutinied or disgraced itself in battle, the men were made to draw lots and every tenth one was sum **marily** executed. **Walkom** seems to be using the word to mean drastic **destruction,** close to annihilation. But if the Ontario Conservatives had been *decimated* in the 1987 election they would have lost **only** about five seats.



Similarly. the other day I rescued a business writer **from** saying that small businesses were afraid **that** hiih interest rates would *decimate* their **credit**-financed inventories. Many a small business would be delighted to have its inventory reduced by a tenth.

FACILITY: At a publishing function about a quarter of a century ago I was introduced to an official of the American Textbook Publishers Institute, who immediately said that he very much admired my new ***facility.*** *Somewhat taken* aback at what seemed at best a dubious compliment, I took a few moments to **realize** that he was **speaking** of the certainly admirable new building into which the **publishing** house I then **managed** had **lately moved.**

Since then ***facility*** for 'building" has spread like a rash over the newspapers. Not **all** current dictionaries have noticed this meaning. yet; and *Collins* gives it only as a military **term,** defining it rather cryptically as **"an** organization or **building** offering supporting capability."

It's a leading characteristic of English **that** it has very few exact synonyms **—** words that are interchangeable with each other in any **context.** The **introduction** of **this** new synonym is therefore not only unnecessary but totally unsuited to the genius of the language. **ha** at its worst it **forms** one of the most repellent of euphemisms, ***correctional facility.***

*LIKE We **are overrun** by committees, like the **Australians** were by the rabbits* **(Winston Churchill).** This use of ***like*** **as** a conjunction, instead of as, has been in the language a long time. Shakespeare, or whoever really wrote ***Pericles Prince*** *of* ***Tyre,*** *uses* it: *like **an arrow ..** hits the **mark.*** **And** it occurs often in the **Victorian** novelists. At the beginning of thii **century** the ***OED*** said of it: 'Now generally condemned as vulgar or slovenly, **though** examples may be found In **many** recent writers of standing."

It seems that there was at **first** a **conjunctive** phrase, *like **as;** some* shortened it to *like, some* **to *as. Like*** is **frequent** in speech, mostly but by no means **exclusively** among people who don't read much. It **seems to** come naturally. Are we then justified in rejecting it? **Fowler** declines to make a ruling:

> The reader who has no instinctive objection to the **construction can** now de **cide** for himself whether he shall con- **sent to use it in talk, in print, in both,** or in neither: he **knows** that he will be able to defend himself if he is condemned for it, but also that, **until** he has done so, he will be **condemned.**

All this is perfectly reasonable, and suggests that those of us who object to the conjunctive *like* do so from sheer prejudice **—** perhaps even mere snob bishness. Nevertheless, I still strongly object to it. **I** wince when I hear it **spoken.** and automatically change it to ***as*** **when** I meet it in a manuscript To me it's ugly and over-emphatic, while ***as*** is neat and unobtrusive. I'd **like to** know what readers think about this: should we **encourage** 'writers of **standing"** to use *like until it* becomes **indisputably standard** usage? Or may I be allowed to hold to my prejudice?

OWING TO/DUE **TO:** The use of owing to **as a preposition introducing an adverbial** phrase **is** relatively **recent;** the **earliest** citation in **the *OED*** is from Scott's ***Waverley*** (1814): ***Owing** to his **natural disposition** to **study**. . . **he*** had ***been*** bred *with a **view** to **the bar.*** Much more recently ***due*** *to* has been used in exactly **the** same **way:** Due to *inability to market* their *grain. **prairie farmers have for some time been faced with** a serious shortage **of funds** to meet their immediate needs* (Speech from the Throne, Ottawa. October 1957; the voice was the voice of Elizabeth II, but the hands were doubtless **the hands** of John **Diefenbaker).** According **to** the way I was brought up. *due to* would have been all right if tbe speech had said ***Prairie farmers'*** *lack **of funds . . . is due** to their **inability** to **market their grain,*** **because** ***due*** is an adjective and needs to be attached to a noun **(here,** *lack). I still ad*here to this distinction, according to which ***owing*** *to* would be acceptable in either sentence, *due to only in the* **sec**ond. But **once** again, as **with the conjunctive *like,*** *am I* being unreasonable? **After** all. ***owing*** is a participle, which is a kind of **adjective.** If **Sir** Walter could **introduce** ***owing*** *to.* why couldn't the Right Hon. John use *due to* in the same way? ■

BRIEF REVIEWS

CITIES

ESCELLENT layout. superb photographs. and a" artful combination of photography and the printed word make Saltwater **City** (Douglas **&** McIntyre. 208 pages, $29.95 cloth). by Paul **Yee,** resemble a good modern **textbook. There** are photographic **captions** in bold face, **sidebars** printed on **grey-tinted** paper that generally run along the bottom of the page and tell a story separate **from** the **main** narrative. photographic reproductions of documents and newspaper stories, italicized columns that give the **transcribed** voices of various members of Vancouver's Chinese-Canadian community. and a master text in wider columns that pins the whole thing together. The **disadvantage** of this textbook format is that it gives ***Saltwater City*** a **somewhat** impersonal tone: rhetoric and prose style have been subordinated to allow the quick comprehension of a huge mass of information. The photographs themselves, however. encourage reflectiveness: seen in sequence like this, they **tell** a story that is **both** wretched and triumphant. To compare the **Wongs** and Lees of contemporary Vancouver to tbe skinny young **labourers** dressed in nothing but loincloths that you see in one stunning picture is to experience the shocking force of historical change over a century. **— B.S.**

CRIME & PUNISHMENT

THE **SEEDS** of a potentially intriguing Canadian movie are in Undercover Agent **(McClelland &** Stewart, 176 pages, 822.95 cloth). In this case a family of Maritimers are forced to leave their Nova Scotia home for other parts of Canada, because the father. Leonard Mitchell, **acts** as undercover agent in a hvo-year RCMP operation that ends up

nabbing a" estimated $238 million **worth** of hashish. The story, co-written by Mitchell with Peter **Rehak,** the producer of **"W5,"** tells how Mitchell. a scrap dealer and Esb **wholesaler,** was approached by a group of mobsters to serve as **their** front ma". He was asked to buy a steel-hulled boat. which after establishing itself as a 'legitimate" fishing **vessel, would** be used to transfer **drugs from** a freighter waiting **offshore.**

The **tale** has suspense. comedy **(two** of **the mob** kingpins were vegetarians). and a good deal of that **classic** Canadian element, bureaucracy. Once Mitchell. in his guise as a dumb but venal **Bluenoser,** had successfully led the gang into a waiting posse of **Mounties**, he and his family began a" agonizing wait for the RCMP bureaucracy to come through with its part of the deal: a new identity and per **manent** relocation for them **and** compensation for the loss of his busiiiess. It was not until Mitchell appeared in **disguise** on **"W5" that** the Ottawa Horsemen finally moved on their **promises.** Although the book suffers from the flatness of most **"as** told to" accounts, it still **manages** to entertain **—** and to mystify. Given the sloppiness of our authorities **with** "witness protection," it's **amazing** that anyone **will** help them against organized crime. -J.O.

FICTION

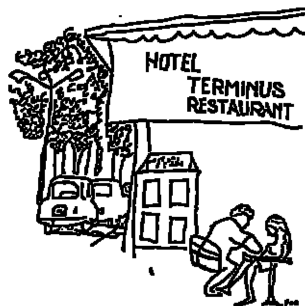
FEW NOVELS convey a more powerful **sense** of the immigrant **experience** than this third **instalment** in **Byrna** Barclay's **Livelong Quartet,** Win**ter of the White Wolf (NeWest, 288 pages, $9.95** paper). **Like** its predecessors ***The Last Echo*** and ***Summer of the Hunerv Pub. Winter*** **centres** around **the** Swedish **community** of **Livelong, Saskatchewan,** where Barclay spent childhood. summers on her grandparents' homestead. The story **flows** in **and** around the lives of **its** two heroines, Joanna Lundahl and her granddaughter Annika, as Barclay deftly manipulates 'story paintings" to depict them at various moments in time. Her starling point is the day of **Joanna's funeral.** From there she ranges back to **Joanna** as a young girl, **sailing** to Canada to join her faithless **lover,** and forward to **Annika's journey in reverse. to Sweden to** discover her roots.

With its reverberating blend of **family history,** myth. and realism, *Winter of the White Wolf* makes a remarkably vivid impression. In fact, after **Byrna** Barclay has finished **"exploding** the existing, framework" of the immigrant novel, it may "ever be the **same** again. **—** P.B.

THERE ARE some good stories in **Candas** Jane Dorsey's Machine Sex and Other **Stories (Porcépic,** 141 pages, $9.95 paper), but not much machinery or sex. Dorsey speaks, seemingly, straight out of her subconscious, evoking fantasies of fear or joy without the constrictive **form** of conscious experience. "Death and Morning." for instance, is a glittery little dream sequence equating love with death, and orgasm with the final consummation of life. A similar ironic fatalism is displayed in **"Columbus** Hits the Shoreline Rag" and "the white city." The title story, on the other band, is a bit of a cheat The **full** title is "(Learning **About)** Machine Sex" and it presents a young female hacker who likes to work naked and does not like men. She invents a **peculiarly** interesting laptop computer. But what does it do? Is it sup posed to **turn** *men on? The story is as* evasive as its **misanthropic** heroine.

In the sequence 'The Prairie Warriors" and "War and **Rumours** of War." the only war is the war between the sexes. The stories are feminist heroic **fantasy,** with three horsewomen (one the narrator) riding down from the mountains to enter a new Iii **on** the plains. Unfortunately there is **no** action **—** much is implied but nothing happens. The tale is too thinly stretched between Dorsey's dramatic, fatalistic inner world and something that fails to resemble a" outer reality. Yet her warriors **are central** to **Dorsey's mindset** and should be made **convincing.** She has style and sensitivity and command of language, but she is battling invisible adversaries who absorb and deaden **many of her efforts; her amorphous** foes are the **fragmented** consciousness, a fascination **with** sporadic impressions, and a" inability **—** as yet **—** to **synthesize** experience and produce **her pearl.** **— M.N.**

HERE AGAIN is that ultimate Canadian **cliché:** the survival story set in the **frozen** north. This time it's told in the **laboured** prose of James Michener, whose U.S. publishers cut the **earlier,** shorter version of Journey **(McClelland** and Stewart, 240 pages, $24.95 cloth) from his novel Alaska. In **an** afterword tilled 'Reflections," Michener **explains** he wrote his **tale** of five doomed **Brits** on a quest for Klondike gold "to acquaint



American readers with facts about Canadian existence, and to demonstrate to Canadian readers my respect for tbe history and achievements of their country." **What** he's actually produced is a forceful, elaboration of what **Robert Fulford,** writing as Marshall Delaney. once called the **"Stupidity** Problem."

Michener's stiff-necked hem. against all **informed** advice, wants to reach **the Klondike** without setting foot on American soil. His doubtful followers acquiesce, ultimately because he's a lard. and the frozen north shows them all who's. really boss. For Canadian readers. **Michener's** professionalism still might have pulled this **fitfully convincing novel** off, if we hadn't heard it all so many times before. — P.B.

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EDITED by **Beverley Daurio,** Love and Hunger **(Aya** Press. 125 pages, $9.95 paper) is a collection of 24 stories and prose pieces, mostly by younger writers and mostly very short. The writing collected here is characterized by a kind of intense, **up-close,** slow-motion examination of a **few** moments in time. These moments **are** often painful — but then young men and **women** experience a lot of pain — and the **consequence** of reading these stories **all** at once is a very strong sense of solipsism and self-involvement. Still. this is a worthwhile book if you want **to remember** how claustrophobic life can seem when you are in your **20s,** how little politics matter for indeed any sense of the larger world), how utterly important romantic love **is, how bored and frustrated you can be, and how horribly difficult it is to feel connected** to the society around you. The best **things** here **are two** careful stories about being and becoming a mother — "Black Tulips" by **Marg Wilson,** and "Delivery Room" by **Lesley** McAllister — but I would also mention Libby Scheier's humorous piece about a man with a tiny woman in his ear. **("** 'The **outer ear** is perfect. I like resting my shapely bum against **it.' ")** Many of these stories are 'avant-garde" in texture, but in most cases **this** seems to be a consequence of youthful **diffidence** combined with the sheer **desire** to get something **written down.** -B.S.

MEMOIR/BIOGRAPHY

THIS IS a strange book. **First** published **in** 1921, **The** Stairway, by Alice A. **Chown (University** of Toronto Press, 351 **pages, $10.95 paper) purports to** be selections from a **journal** kept behveen 1906 and 1919. **Chown tried to show how she** climbed her stairway to personal **freedom,** and **to** inspire others to do the same. But she couldn't stick with any of the radical causes she espoused long enough to achieve tangible results. Her very apparent sense of failure undermines the premise of her book. Diana **Chown,** whose interest is partly **familial** and partly feminist, provided the Introduction. She **relates** Me Stairway to Alice **Chown's** own **life** and to the intellectual ferment among her contemporaries, but she can't explain why her great aunt flitted from cause to cause and fell prey to **unspecific** illnesses whenever she tried **to** do more **than** observe and **comment.** These illnesses no **doubt** had a **psychological** component, but Alice's frustration with her own weakness and her knowledge of Freud's ideas both suggest that her problems were not wholly psychosomatic. Diana **Chown** has done women's history a **great** service **in reviving and introducing this complex,** though **imperfect,** work. — LB.

◊ ◊ ◊

THIS PROUDLY partial **book (Don Harron: A Parent Contradiction.** Collins, 323 pages, $26.95 cloth) came about after Martha Harron read the manuscript her father had been struggling with and persuaded him she could do better herself. This ls so humble it's sickening," she told him. "Stop being so bloody ***Canadian."*** Don **Harron's breezily** bumptious offspring sees her father as **"a Renaissance man in a typecast** world." On stage. **he's played everything** from **Shakespeare to *Spring Thaw*,** eve&here from London **to** Los Angeles, with everyone from Vivien **Leigh to** Shirley Temple. His **writing** career **began with college** reviews, blossomed **with** the BBC, branched into musicals, and boomed with his wise and **witty** books **(seven at** last count).

All this and Charlie **Farquharson** too. plus. three wives and **two** daughters, one of whom has done a **delightfully devastating** job **with** this book. Its bii weakness is that it ends too soon. But maybe tbat was Martha's intention all along — **to wake us up to the fact** that at 64. Don Harron is still an **underexploited** national resource. — P.B.

◊ ◊ ◊

THE AUTHOR of **Stoney** Creek Woman: The Story of Mary John (pulp Press, 142 pages, $9.95 paper) is **really** Mary John herself, a **75-**year-old elder of the Smney Creek **band** of the **Carrier** Indian tribe, although Bridget Moran, **Mary's** friend and a Brltish Columbia government social worker, is given. the author's credit. Moran wrote the introduction and apparently transcribed interviews **to** produce this valuable and moving autobiography.

Mary John's **life exemplifies** her band's history **since** 1913 to the extent that she sets her own experiences into the context **of** her community, but this is a **personal story.** Mary and her band suffered — and continue to suffer — from poverty aggravated by **government-sponsored** as well as volunteer racism. But there is no anger **in** Mary's voice, no **hatred,** no self-pity. **self-righteousness,** or **defensiveness,** just a firm intention **to** keep doing what **is right.** Mary has become a community leader, not out of ambition, but **because** her band reties on her strength, intelligence, **kindness,** and good **humour,** and because of her **quiet determination to** do what needs to be done. -LB.

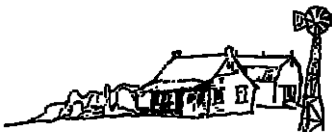
◊ ◊ ◊

FOR No **Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotia Women. 1771-1938 (Formac.** 306 pages, $19.95 **paper), the editors,** Margaret Conrad, Toni **Laidlaw,** and Donna **Smyth,** have selected from 15 of **their** collection of more **than** a **hundred diaries,** journals, and **series** of letters by Maritime women. Their principle of **selection** eludes me. Even **allowing** for **differences** of interest and taste, I still must ask why, when their scope was so small, the editors chose to publish the petty doings of Ella Llscombe and the commonplace **religious effusions** of **Eliza** Ann **Chipman,** when more ebullient, **comical** letters by **Bessie** Hall. or more **diary entries** by **the** energetic Louisa Collins, or selections from other **writers** of their **ilk** would serve **the historical** purpose equally well. The editors explain in **the** introductions to each selection that reading tbe personal jottings of uninteresting people is good for us. **Their** next volume — and I hope there will be at least one — will be more educational and more fun **if** it is more **unified.**

Formac's homemade style of using single and double quotation marks is **annoying** and cheapens **the** very considerable scholarly abilities of the **editors.** -LB.

CRITICISM

WHAT WA6 **intended** as a **celebration** and **exploration** of bp **Nichol's** major work ***The Martyrology*** is **now,** sadly, one of the first in-print memorials **to** its author. **Tracing the Paths: Reading≠Writing The Martyrology (Line/**



Talonbooks, 344 pages, $14.95 paper) was edited by Roy Mii to honour Nichol's epic poem, 10 books of which were written before his death last year. Launched by word play — the notion that words beginning with "st" enshrined various saints — *The Martyrology* gradually evolved into a consideration of Nichol's experience and language and writing itself.

The contents of *Tracing the Paths* range from ponderously academic critical articles to more playful glosses by Nichol's friends and accomplices. These are supplemented by short interviews with the author. a chronology, and a sampling of work from the as-yet unpublished books 7, 8, and 9. Taken together, these offer a variety of useful ways into Nichol's dense and mutable labyrinth. Many of the sources and choices that underlie the text are revealed. so it can serve both as helpful material to students working on *The Martyrology,* and as a stimulating companion to those reading and rereading Nichol's quirky, honest, and experimental work. — J.O

POLITICS/CULTURE

IN THIS short and unsatisfying book, Robin Mathews gives the reader an analysis of Canadian culture from what might be called a conserva-Live-left point of view. The essential idea of Canadian Identity (Steel Rail Publishing, 136 pages, $14.95 paper) is that Canadian culture is rooted in a "dialectic" — a word Mathews uses often — and that this dialectic involves "a process of tension and argument. a conflict of opposites which often stalemate" and which are unique to Canada. Mathews is intensely anti-American, which probably explains why the chief opposition he discusses is that between 'individualism" (bad) and "communitarianism" (good). This is an old story, of course. but the reader's interest is sparked when Mathews tries to describe this opposition in terms of religion. Borrowing freely from Max Weber, Mathews attempts to show the importance of Protestantism in the development of an entrepreneurial culture in English Canada; he contrasts Protestant culture to the "corporatism" of Catholic culture in Quebec (which he suggests is — or has been — somewhat fascist in its insistence that the whole community is "a single body, all parts of which contribute to and are part of the health and function of the whole"'); and he suggests that one of the main roots of the NDP is the Social Gospel movement that lasted from about 1865 to 1920. Unfortunately, all this is presented in a very hasty and abstract way, and the reader is left with the impression that Mathews has bravely waded into a cold, dark lake of thought that it is beyond his power to swim in. — B.S.

DAVID **KILGOUR,** a politician and writer. has written a detailed, comprehensive, and rather romantic book — Uneasy Patriots: Western Canadians in Confederation (Lone Pine Publishing, 127 pages, $12.95 paper) — about Western Canada and its "alienation" from Ottawa. He knows the West as few Canadians do, he knows federal politics, and he brings to both areas of knowledge an upper-middleclass sensibility that believes in 'service" and is eager to see the best in others rather than the worst. Western Canada — Canada itself — is a land of extreme complexity, and this complexity is mirrored in *Uneasy Patriots.* It is a history of the west that contains a great many detailed portraits of individuals. an extended and tough-minded essay on federal policy *vis-à-vis* the west, a memoir. and what might be described as a combination rhapsody-polemic, in which Kilgour sometimes comes close to the kind of sentimentality one associates with politicians. For Kilgour, Western Canada is the home of every kind of republican virtue. and in reading his book it is a good idea to keep in mind the sensibility behind it Kilgour's main thesis is probably exaggerated — we aren't so much alienated from Ottawa, it seems likely, as *distracted fmm* it by American television and our own concerns, not to mention sheer distance — hut his book is nonetheless a genuine contribution to our understanding of ourselves. — B.S.

TRAVEL

HART MASSEY'S second hook fits into two genres: that of travel by au unusual means, and that of a relaxing. undemanding read that seems best suited for summer holidays. Travels with 'Lionel': a Small Barge in France (Deneau, 192 pages, 621.95 cloth) recounts the year Massey, his wife, Melodie, and their Dalmation, Joss, spent navigating the canals of France in a 20-metre barge.

The challenges along the way included finding a suitable motorized barge, getting its equipment upgraded by slow-moving French workmen, and navigating the canals themselves. Some of the bridges the Masseys took their barge under were so. low that the wheelhouse had to be dismantled for the sake of clearance. The book manages to show a familiar landscape from a new perspective. although Massey, an architect by trade. does not have as sharp a pen as his fellow travel writers Jan Morris and Paul Theroux. Recommended reading for those thinking of a similar expedition, or for others whose idea of a pleasant reading experience moves at about ten knots. -J.O.

These brief reviews were prepared by Pat Barclay, Laurel Boone, Mercedès Nowak, John Oughton, and Bruce Serafin.

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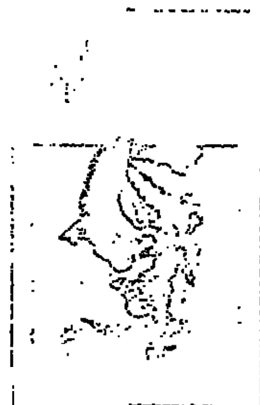

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Telling it slant

*Carol Shields's fiction approaches its truths obliquely. 'Sometimes it's better to let things be strange and represent **nothing but themselves**'*

By Eleanor Wachtel

FOUR YEARS ago, when Carol Shields **turned** 50, her writing turned a corner. The titles tell all. Before: Small ***Ceremonies***, The ***Box*** Garden, ***Happenstance***, and ***A Fairly Conventional Woman***. *After: Various **Miracles**, Swann: A **Mystery**,* and now, The ***Orange*** *Fish. "You get* older and braver," she says, "braver about what **you** can **say** and what can be understood."

Her **first** four novels presented reliable **pictures** of **middle-class** domestic **life. Shields** is expert at **evoking** the feelings **and** concerns of ordinary people — their ambivalence about their families, their jobs, and their mates. Her characters think They try to be nice. And **they** often get stock in boring situations — **with** 'spouses, parents, or colleagues. It's not the mad trapped housewife **that** Shields finds in suburbia, but relatively happy families coping **with** change, recognizing some uneasiness around the edges, but committed to the **safety** of the familiar. It's that world of dirty dishes, tired casseroles, and the acute desperation of school projects. The virtues, joys, and griefs of everyday **life** are cherished. Shields **doesn't** satirize: she reassures, but not in a smog or cloying way. Her style is **often** ironic, affection*ately* mocking — especially of academic **life** — lightly humorous, with a delicacy and subtlety of language that elicit (not entirely appropriate) comparisons with Jane Austen. These early books not only deal with prosaic subjects — which are, of course, the stuff of **life** — but they are "fairly conventionally" **written. There's** more attention to **language** and craft than is commonly recognized, but they're essentially **naturalistic**.

In ***Various Miracles***, Shields's 1995 **collection** of short fiction, tbe lid came **off.** Shields began to experiment with diierent **ways (and voices) to tell** stories. She flouted conventions against **literary** coincidence, building the **title** story on a series of "miraculous" circumstances, creating an imaginative interweaving of events that lead to a playful "trick" ending. A character in the story is also a character in a **manuscript** in the story — a **Russian-doll-like construction.** Shields takes a leaf from the postmodernist's book and writes, "Sometimes it's better to let things be strange and to represent nothing but themselves." The **stories** lift off the ground, take some sharp corners and find **their** own way, often at **curious angles.**

The book's epigraph is Emily **Dickinson's** 'Tell **the** truth but tell it **slant.**" Shields bends its meaning a little. In Dickinson's poem, the **truth is** so brilliant that if we look at it directly, we'll be blinded. Shields interprets this obliqueness as an invitation to experiment with a range of narrative approaches — omniscient, direct, fractured. Telling the story from the **slant,"** she says, "'can sometimes lead

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSSELL MONK

Carol Shields

you into the presence of an unreliable narrator, the narrator who understands everything, except what is central." This is what Shields developed in her next novel. *Swann: A Mystery* — a wonderful book, more adventurous than anything she'd ever done. Told from the point of view of four solitaries. each in search of a kind of family or connection, the book is a double mystery. about the missing manuscripts of a dead poet, and the profound mystery of human personality.

Carol Shields is sitting at a restaurant, looking like a character from one of her early novels. What used to be called sensibly dressed: a soft cream-coloured sweater fastened at the neck with a gold bow pin. Matching skirt, pumps. Simple stud earrings: pearl ring and gold bracelet on one hand; gold wedding band and diamond engagement ring on the other. Shields is thin, with short blond hair and clear blue eyes behind thick-lensed glasses, which she removes and folds on the table. She has a small, soft, sometimes hesitant voice. She admits to a certain passivity, a reticence. And then disarms by saying, "Okay, ask me something personal" But when you do, she becomes abstract or ducks behind a book she's read. "Print is her way of entering and escaping the world." *(Various Miracles)*

"It concerns me," she confesses, "that the hooks I've read have been a big part of the way I experience the world — maybe more than for other people. And I do wonder if there is maybe something substandard about that." Surprising from a woman who's raised five children, published ten books, and who's lived in the U.S., England, France, Toronto, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. But learning to read at four, she claims, "realizing that those symbols meant something that I could be part of," was the central mystical experience of her life. She speculates that her early fascination with language may have been related to her short-sightedness, that instead of engaging with visual images, she got hooked on language and the magic it contained.

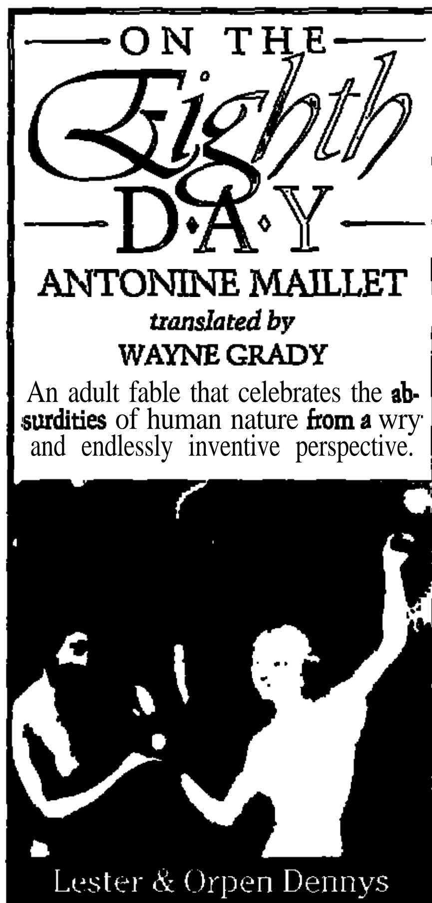
Carol Shields grew up in Dick-and-Jane-land. Oak Park is an older, stable suburb of Chicago, famous for its early 20th-century Frank Lloyd Wright houses. It was homogeneously white and middle class. Shields and her slightly older twin siblings lived with their parents in a large white shicco house. Her father managed a candy factory. Her mother, of Swedish stock and also a hvin, taught fourth grade until she had children of her own, and then, resumed after the war when there was a teacher shortage. While still a young woman, her mother boarded with Ernest Hemingway's parents, who lived. in Oak Park. Shields captured this incident in an early poem, and in greater detail in a new story called "Family Secrets" in The Orange Fisk. What amazed Shields was how her mother was never curious to read Hemingway despite living under his roof. In the story, the daughter speculates on her mother's life and its hidden corners, and ultimately treasures her own bundle of secrets.

The only books around Carol's house were her parents' childhood reading — Horatio Alger and *Anne* of *Green* Gables and Louisa May Alcott Her mother read to her a lot — even pedestrian series like The *Bobbsey Twins* — and until eighth grade, Carol attended the local library's story hour. "That combination of drama and narrative was somethll I loved," she says. Central to her recollection of this' time is her fondness for Dick and Jane — those school readers. "I *understood* Jane," she says almost ingenuously. "I suppose I imagined a life for her that wasn't really there in the reader, but she was someone I found interesting and related to. Jane was very sturdy and knew her own mind, I always thought. And I loved the way that Dick was so good to her, so protective of her, so unlike most brothers. Everyone was terribly good to everyone else; there were no bad intentions. They seemed like real people to me and their world seemed wonderfully safe and ordered. Probably even safer and more ordered than my own safe and ordered world. This sort of extraordinary goodness is very appealing to children."

She pauses. "what a place to grow up! Like growing up in a plastic bag is how I think of it-a very safe place to grow up." But surely a plastic bag is more suffocating than safe? "It's funny." she says. "I always knew that something was wrong with it, but I never knew what it was until I went away. What was wrong was that there wasn't enough: it was all very good, it just wasn't enough. Everyone went to church. I can't believe this, everyone went to church."

Shields recently went home for her high school's 35th reunion. She stood on a familiar corner and experienced "the opposite of nostalgia" — relief that she'd escaped. Her parents were timid people, so any intellectual expectations she sensed came from an affluent, kindly school system. "All my teachers at that time were unmarried. middle-aged and bosomy," she says, aware of the fulfilled stereotype. "They were wonderful women and very caring." But it was limited — or insulated. "Imagine growing up a few blocks from where James T. Farrell lived and not knowing it." Farrell, an early communist, is famous for the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, a powerful indictment of the American dream.

But Shields was locked into her own dreamy childhood. She was the class poet, turning out sonnets that she knew even then were infused with false rhetoric. She was encouraged by her parents and teachers, published in the school paper, and liked to write. Shields didn't actually think she could be a writer until much later — in her late 20s. The high school yearbook said she was the one who'd write the novel. "But I never believed that for a minute. I'd never met a writer. It was like wanting to be a movie star." Her parents wanted her to have a career



"to fall back on." This was the [illegible] "we all knew we would get married and have children."

Shields went to Hanover College, a small conservative school in Indiana [illegible] what most people did: I just sent off for all kinds of university catalogues and chose one that looked like a 'Father Knows Best' college."

[illegible] ironic. She regrets not being "brave?" and going to a bigger urban school. She even found herself sucked into a sorority, unable to buck convention.

"Education was wasted on me," she says. "I was much more interested in falling in love and going to dances." But she read. And one "lucky" thing was a junior year exchange program with Exeter University in England. It was a great revelation to encounter a truly academic atmosphere where people took their subjects seriously. Carol thrived. She also met Donald Shields, a Canadian engineering grad student, whom she married when she graduated. By this time, she'd forgotten about being a writer. 'I was just interested in being in love and having a house — the whole *Ladies' Home Journal* thing." In fact, when her mother first met Don, she told hi she hoped he'd encourage Carol to keep on writing, and Don looked blank. They were engaged to be married and Carol had "ever mentioned to him that she wrote. It wasn't until they were settled in Toronto, with the first of their five children, that Don suggested she take a University of Toronto course in magazine writing.

'I can't remember much about it except that a woman lectured to us once a week. She wore a big hat and she, never took it off. There were about 40 of us and she said, 'When you send in a manuscript, you should use a paperclip and not a staple.' " At the end of the term, students were expected to write something, so Carol wrote a short story. A few months later, the teacher called. She'd sold her story to CBC Radio — the old John Drainie program, 15 minutes narrated by Drainie. But eve" this success didn't galvanize Shields. She figured she'd write stories when she had the chance. And about once a year she'd "stir her stumps" and write a story and sell it to the CBC or BBC. She was busy. full of energy. She still read a lot and there was never a year when she wasn't taking "some course or other" in law or English. By the time she was 25, she had three children and was living [illegible] where Don got his Ph.D. Yet Shields feels that she had a prolonged childhood, that she stayed in a sort of infancy, and didn't really wake up until [illegible] pedestrian series like *The Bobbsey* [illegible] *line* in her fourth novel, A Fairly *Conventional Woman,* about a housewife on the verge of artistic recognition: "What a dumb sap she was, detained too long in girlhood, an abstainer from adult li." And although Shields clearly has done a lot in her life, it fits her self-perception as a passive observer, able to mediate with life primarily through books — her own and others'. Intrigued by history and biography, she lives these interests vicariously, through her characters: the biographer Judith Gill of her first novel, Small *Ceremonies,* and the historian Jack Bowman of her third, *Happenstance.* Of all her characters, it is with Jack the observer that Shields says she most identifies.

Suddenly, as if to underline her position as bystander, she leans across the table and says, *sotto voce,* "I've just been to New York and it's a great place to eavesdrop because they talk so loud and about such interesting things. Can you hear what they're saying at the next table? I think she's a writer because she was talking about writing hooks, but now she's talking about cooking so maybe she writes cookbooks." Shields smiles, resumes eating and demurely waits for another question.

On the boat home from England, Shields read Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique.* She thought about going to law school. She joined a 'Great Books" discussion group and she had another baby. She also started reading the English poet, Philip Larkin. Excited by the honesty of his writing, she started writing poetry again. At that time, CBC Radio had a Young Writers' Competition. The cutoff was SO; Shields was 29. She wrote seven poems. It was the first time in her life that she took her writing seriously. She won.

That led me into a period, of about five years, writing poetry,!' she explains. "It was an enormously happy writing time. I was very strict with myself. I followed Larkin's set of rules: no pretty language. If anything was pretty, out it went. Unfortunately, I also borrowed some of his despair, I think, in my first few poems. I can remember my friends being a little worried about me."

She published in *The Canadian* [illegible], turning out sonnets that she [illegible] Shields didn't actually think [illegible] novel. But I never believed that for a

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. Forum and a few other magazines. Then the family moved to Ottawa, where her husband was associated with the University of Ottawa. This meant free tuition for Carol. "Being very thrifty about these things, I decided I'd better take advantage of it" She enrolled in a master's program in English and discovered Susanna Moodie. "First I was going to do a thesis on P. K Page because I liked her poetry. I even interviewed her when she was in Ottawa. I spoke to her about her work and asked what one of her poems meant She said, 'I haven't the faintest idea.' At this time I was rather severe about these things, and I thought, 'If she doesn't know what it means, why am I going to try and figure it out? Since then, I've met all sorts of poets who don't understand their writing and I've even written things I don't quite understand."

Shields was drawn to Moodie's trashy English novels and what they revealed about her Canadian work, *Roughing it in the Bush* and *Life in the Clearings.* She was surprised by the sibling rivalry that surfaced beheen Moodie and her sister, Catharine Parr Trail, who was a little older and more beautiful. She was also struck by tbe male-female relations in those books. Moodie paid lip service to the supremacy of men and then' depicted weak men and strong women. There was a recurring tableau of the recumbent male being nursed back to health by the upright female. Shields wrote her thesis in the early '70s when feminism was in the air, but "being out of things is sort of my hobby," she jokes. Like her socialism — she describes herself as "an instinctive pink" — Shields's feminism is latent. She values the lives of women, especially the women friends she's kept all her life. But, she says, "I never went through those consciousness-raising sessions. A lot of my experience of what a woman's life could be — seeing other patterns of being — came from reading American and British fiction, not from reality." At the same time, Shields was annoyed that most women were portrayed as bitches or bubbleheads in fiction, a lot less kind and dumber than the women she knew. She started to think about writing a novel.

'Our own lives aren't quite enough for us, we have to live some of our lives vicariously, or it's just too narrow. Who we bum.. up against and what they mean to us is what's really interesting'

While still in graduate school, however, she published two small books of poetry, *Others* and *Intersect.* "Portraits" is how she thinks about those poems. They're about friends, parents, children: a married couple's bedtime rituals, a family dinner, anniversaries, a child learning to talk — the furniture of her novels.

During work on her thesis, she also got her first job — editorial assistant for a scholarly quarterly, Canadian *Slavonic Papers.* A "jobette" she calls it, conscious of its relative insignificance. But it was important, not only because she passed it on to Charleen, heroine of her second novel, *The Box Garden,* but because "all those years I was at home with children, I never thought I would haye a job." Now she teaches part-time at the University of Manitoba.

Shields dropped out of university for one term to try to write a novel, a literary whodunit, perhaps foreshadowing *Swann: A Mystery.* It was rejected by three publishers. "But they wrote very nice letters so I thought I would try again." Thii time she had more confidence, having written one book and a thesis. She wrote two pages a day, every day, and at the end of nine months, she had a novel. *Small Ceremonies.* Although the book isn't programmatic, there were several things she wanted it to feature: a heroine with a reflective side to her life; a woman who had friends; a context in which there were children; and some of the "leftover" Susanna Moodie material that was too conjectural for her thesis. The result was an intelligent; quiet book about Judith Gill, a biographer of Susanna Moodie, who also tries to write a novel while on sabbatical in England with her husband. The book signposted some recurring themes: an academic environment with a satirical edge; a middle-class woman who's not entirely content; and a fascination with biography coexistent with an awareness of its limitations. Drawn by her feeling of connection with the past, Shields wanted to fill in the spaces, the silences of Susanna Moodie's life. The things Moodie left out of her own writing were the authentic parts: what's there is less so. It's like reading a negative. "How do you retrieve someone who is dead and try to build up with the nib of your pen that personality who was, in a sense, voiceless about things that mattered?" This is a question she poses again in *Swann: A Mystery,* in which a quartet of characters try to resurrect the silent, dead poet, Mary Swann, who was brutally murdered by her husband 15 years before the novel begins. Shields's answer is to turn to fiction rather than biography because it can delve into the place where "nine-tenths" of our lives occurs: in out heads. 'The only story with a nice firm shape to it is the story of a human life," she says, "but so much of it is unknowable." Invention can fill in those gaps. And it can record those small rituals that give ordinary life its continuity. Although the title was serendipitous (chosen by her publisher), a

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sense of the ceremonial -small ceremonies — is very important to Shields. It's how we keep ourselves glued together and hold emptiness at hay. "Habit is the flywheel of society, conserving and preserving and dishing up tidy, edible slices of the cosmos." ***(Swann: A Mystery)***

It's a philosophy present in all of **Shields's** writing. **"Dailiness** to be sure has its hard deposits of ennui, but it is also, as **Mary Swann** suggests. **redemptive."**

Carol Shields's 40th birthday was another **turning point** in her **life.** After three rejection<,-a publisher accepted Small Ceremonies, her **thesis** on **Susanna Moodie** was **also** to be published (as ***Voice and Vision*),** and she was off for a year in France **during** her husband's sabbatical. The day **after** she arrived in **Brittany,** she started her next novel. The ***Box Garden,*** which takes up **the** story of Judith **Gill's sister, Charleen.** "I wanted to get back into a novel quickly." she says. 'There is a kind of **post-partum feeling** after a book." She missed her characters and decided to pick up another thread in the same family. The writing went **easily** and it too was finished in nine months. In some ways less successful than ***Small Ceremonies,*** it suffered from her susceptibility to her editor's advice. ***Small Ceremonies,*** she was told, didn't have a lot happening. So Shields added **plot,** a **pseudo-kidnapping** and police, to ***The Box Garden.*** ***"You*** can imagine how I much I know about these things," she says. "I should have listened to my doubts."

Shields looks back on those novels, (soon to he reissued in paperback), and is surprised by how stingy she was witb detail. **"I** think I wrote very thinly. Part of it had to do with only writing for an hour a day and not having time to think over what I was **doing.** I seemed to **write** in spare little scenes where you're supposed to pick up the interior sense from exterior de **tails.** Now I'm interested in interior details — going really where film and television can't go. I **like** a **dense** texture, even in short stories."

In "Collision," an odd story in the new collection, ***The Orange Fisk,*** Shields describes **the** accidental collision of two people in a **tiny** eastern European country. An indigenous **filmmaker** and an American tourist development consultant face a downpour outside a restaurant, where each has been **dining** with others. Neither can speak the other's language. They share an umbrella for a **kilometre** to the town square This linking in time is an example of a recurrent motif in Shields's work — what might be called numinous moments. Fifteen minutes and it's over. But "sacredness attaches itself invisibly to certain **rare** moments." ***(The Orange Fish)***

Naturally, this is based on Shields's own experience. She was in Tokyo, not Europe, but she walked under a stranger's umbrella, rhythmically in step, and felt that she could have gone on like that forever. **"I** believe in these moments," she says, **"when** we do feel or sense **the** order of the universe **beneath *the*** daily chaos. They're like a great **gift** of happiness that comes unexpectedly."

Shields also recognizes their obverse. Days when she senses the **fragility** of all our arrangements and how vulnerable we are to loss and **tragic** reversal. "It doesn't matter how insulated you are," she says, "you have these frightening glimpses of the utter meaninglessness of your life. It's a kind of angst when you suddenly feel that you're alone and **powerless** and nothing makes any sense. **It's** the **opposite** of those transcendental moments when you perceive **the** pattern of the universe." **Shields** is interested in capturing both those extremes and finding a language to express them. In ***Swann:*** A ***Mystery, these*** flashes occur back to back when the **80-year-old retired** editor, Frederick **Cruzzi,** is **first** blissfully happy **with** his wife and their simple meal together, and then **horror-stricken** when he thinks she has inadvertently destroyed Mary **Swann's** poems. **It's** not simply alternate joy and despair — each comes **with** the **certainty** of revelation.

Swann explores that gap between appearance and reality. What is really at the core of a person? How much do we actually see? The poet Mary **Swann** herself is a complete unknown, a woman who lived virtually without record. Shields creates four sympathetic characters who appropriate her life, and reconstruct it to fit their needs — and as Shields sees it, their desire to connect with someone. **It's** Shields's first novel **without** children, something she only **realized after it was finished. Her own children have grown,** left home. It's given her greater freedom, but even **after** four years, she misses them. **"It's** very hard to sit down at the dinner table with just two people," she says.

There are no conspicuous children

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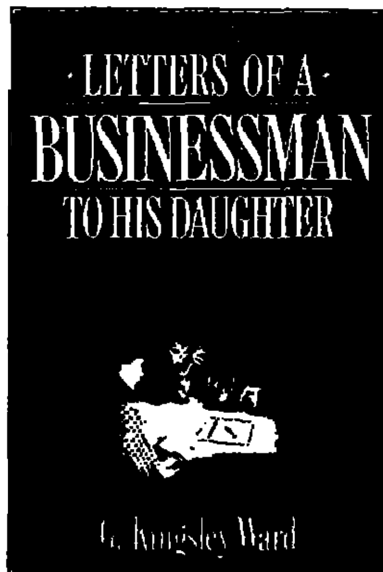
G. KINGSLEY WARD



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in *The Orange Fish* — except for the occasional childhood flashback of the narrator. Shields likes to play with time. History orders the past, arranging events on a time line. She also projects forward into a future from which to look back on this moment in the present Sometimes, as in the end of the story, "Hinterland," it's a flattened future, jike the images in a pop-up book., recognizable and folded inside each other.

The exoerimentation that was unleashed in *Various* Miracles is only partly present in *The Orange Fish. There* is eve* a story totally without irony — "not a scrap," she says. "I felt I was so ironic I was getting lockjaw." Shields isn't interested in postmodernism per *se,* but in the kinds of freedom she can get working out a narrative idea. She figures these kinds of styles are in the air and acquired by osmosis, One friend suggested it came from living in Manitoba, Bob Kroetsch-land, but Shields says no. like most things, it's from reading. Her work has struck responsive chords in other writers — from Kent Thompson's "postcard fiction" to Aritha van Herk, who recently wrote: "I have an image of Carol Shields. ...I do not know the real woman, at least not well enough to count, but I do know this floating and powerful florentine engraving on air who nets fictions as turned and strange as brass rubbings, the articulate spines of fish, slender piles of knuckle bones"

Donna Smyth, a Halifax writer, was dazzled by the virtuosity of *Swann.* "The writing is superb," she says. "And as always with a Carol Shields book, you come away with this reverence for the way we are able to celebrate together what we are and what we don't know about each other. It's a real mystery, that."

Why isn't Shields better known? Is it because quiet books are tagged for quiet promotion? That women's lives and a "domestic" circumference are of only marginal interest? Or that her changing publishers over the years has meant a limited commitment to her as an author? *Swann* is only now coming out in paperback, a year and a half after publication, (and its nomination for a Governor General's Award). But surely the cumulative impact of *The Orange Fish* and *Swann* and *Various Miracles* within four years, plus the American release of *Swann* and *Various Miracles* this spring (by Viking/Penguin) will change that Or is it the old regional conundrum? Shields hasn't lived in Toronto since she started publishing. She's moved a lot so she hasn't even been identified with a particular "region" and her books are set in France or Chicago or Scarborough — not Winnipeg.

In that last-named city, her spacious apartment overlooks the curve of the Assiniboine River. It's the first time she's ever not lived in a large Victorian house. and she wasn't sure about it at first The place is on the seventh floor and there are trees that come as high as the windows, lots of light and no curtains. The living mom has a fireplace and a wall of books. Shields boasts of only two things — "excellent reading lamps everywhere" and art that she and her husband have been collecting since they first lived in England. Her favorite is a Joe Fafard litho called 'Bird's Eye" with an egg-shaped world floating in space and his bade mark cows. In her kitchen is a print called 'The Orange Fish." Now you feel as if you're inside one of her clever stories; the title story of the new book is about a couple who hang a litho called 'The Orange Fish" in their kitchen.

Shields is fascinated by the way we share memories: how even people who are very close will remember things differently. And *also, the* silences between people, the acceptable silences. Of her early *A Fairly Conventional Woman* (her favourite of all her novels), she says "I wanted to write about two people who were more or less happily married, but who were, in fact, strangers to each other and always would be. and the value of that strangeness."

Shields's next novel, Bodies of *Water,* is about love and the search for the other, 'or maybe not." Shields feels the need for an other. "Our own lives really aren't quite enough for us, we have to live some of our lives vicariously or it's just too narrow. Who we bump up against, what they mean to us, is what3 interesting."

She recalls an image by the 8th-century historian, the Venerable Bede. How our actual life is such a little thing that it's like a bird in the darkness suddenly finding a way into the banquet hall and flying through, looking down at all the banqueters, and then flying out the other side. Shields says what a wonderful image that is. then adds, 'I always thought how much better it would be if there were two birds flying together." ❑

INTERVIEW

A man on the road

'Of all the peoples of the Americas, the Maya are possibly the most successful, simply for having been around for a very long time. They have been culturally Maya for three or four thousand years. And they are still there'

By **Barbara Carey**

RONALD WRIGHT has travelled widely in the Americas, Africa, and the South Pacific. His books on Peru (Cut *Stones* and *Crossroads*, 1984) and Fiji (*On Fiji* Islands, 1986) were highly acclaimed; his most recent work, *Time among the Maya, was* published last month by Viking (Penguin). When not on the road, Wright makes his home in Port Hope, Ontario. He was interviewed in Toronto by Barbara Carey.

BiC: *Yos studied archeology and anthropology at university. How did that lead you to travel writing?*

Wright: Actually, I haven't been in university since the early '70s, and I've done a lot of other things. I lived in Alberta and was a trucker for several years: I also had a go at farming, without any success at all, although I learned a lot the hard way. But I always wanted m write. About 10 years ago, I had been travelling a lot in South America, which was an interest that went back to my childhood in. England. and I got hepatitis. I came back to Canada to convalesce and was stuck at home, not really sick but not really well. I read Paul Theroux's *Old Patagonia Express,* and although it was a nicely written book, it wasn't the South America that I knew. So I thought, "Maybe this is a kind of writing I should by." Cut *Stones and Cross-*

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRAHAM LAW

Ronald Wright

roads was tbe result. There's quite a lot of archeology and anthropology in that book; the travel writing is a framework for talking about those things. But I felt it would appeal to people who weren't specialists.

BiC: I was *intrigued by a remark you made in On* Fiji Islands: *"A culture's tallest buildings reveal its deepest obsessions." What did you mean by that?*

Wright: It struck me as an aphorism, but there's a lot of truth in it. If you look at the tallest buildings produced by any culture, and we're talking here about cultures that have architecture, they reflect what is most important to that society. In the case of the ancient Egyptians, tbe pyramids represent the death cults surrounding the Pharaohs. Temples are ahvays the biggest buildings in Mesoamerican and South American cultures. And in Fiji, what had bean tbe tallest building reflected the war and 'cannibalism cult, which was tied up with ancient Fijian politics and society.

BiC: So *what does that say about oar own culture?*

Wright: Well, exactly. We've got these big communication towers and revolving restaurants, and office towers. And that really reflects what makes our culture tick.

BiC: Temples *to commerce?*

Wright: And to conspicuous consumption and communications. If you go back a century, churches and cathedrals were our tallest buildings, but we've become secularized, and our tall buildings are secular temples.

BiC: *Two oat of your three books involve Amerindian cultures. On* Fiji Islands is *the odd one out. What took you there?*

Wright: It was partly chance. I'd just finished the book on Peru, which is somewhat melancholy because it laments the collapse of the indigenous Inca society and its replacement by a society that has not been nearly as successful in providing a decent way of life for the people, apart from a small elite. So in Peru I was looking at the disintegration of a society that I think is valuable, but which is unable to fulfil itself in the modem world because the country is ruled by a Westernized elite that simply exploits it for its resources.

A friend who had been working in Fiji for a year told me that the indigenous Fijians, who number about half tbe population, have managed to hold on to their culture and to modernize it. Their language is very much alive and recognized at a national level: they have newspapers and radio programs in the indigenous tongue: and they've maintained a traditional system of landholding that does not allow private ownership. This of course is a bone of contention with others who live in Fiji. but leaving that issue aside, what impressed me is that the Fiiians had avoided tbe kind of disaster that usually happened to native peoples when European countries expanded in the colonial period.

BiC: So *Fiji offered a contrast?*

Wright: With Peru and other places. My interest is not only Amerindian societies — it's really the interaction between cultures, especially cultures that have been victims of colonization. Fiji seemed to be the other side of the coin, tbe way things could turn out. I found that this was indeed partly true. There was a price paid for that, not by the Fijians themselves, but by immigrant labour of East Indian origin, brought to Fiji by the British. But tbe indigenous Fijians are an example of a society that was able to modernize without losing its sense of identity, and that's rare.

BiC: *In your new book,* Time *among the* Maya, *you seem to hold in high regard not only the intellectual achievemeals of the Maya civilization, but also its cultural values.*

Wright: That's true of my writing about most places I've been. We have to remember that the cultural values of the indigenous peoples evolved over thousands of years and were usually well suited to the environment in which they lived. In other words, they had a wisdom that had developed through trial and error. When Europeans came and tried to impose their concepts of economics, of agriculture, of social organization and religion, it was deleterious. Very often they were completely unsuited to that part of the world.

Of all the peoples in the Americas, the Maya are possibly the most successful, simply for having been around a very long time. They have been culturally Maya for three or four thousand years. And they arc still there. This is something everyone forgets. We think of the Maya as a lost civilization, but there arc a good five million people who still speak Mayan languages, and most of those people preserve a lot of the intellectual traditions of their ancestors. They still use their calendar for ritual purposes, and they still practise traditional farming methods. It was a tremendously impressive culture, and therefore I value what's left of it, and would like to see the Maya, like the Fijians, have more autonomy.

BiC: *The resilience of the Maya cultare, despite centuries of Spanish domination, is striking. I'm thinking particularly of how the Maya have adapted aspects of Christian faith to suit their own ancient beliefs.*

Wright: That goes back to the fact that they've been around so long. Even before tbe Spaniards came to the New World, the Maya had experienced being colonized by other peoples, highland Mexicans who were culturally quite different from them. They had worked out a way of dealing with having foreign concepts imposed upon them: they resisted in a subtle way. They were very eclectic and interested in what these other people brought If you read the early books the Maya wrote soon after the Spanish Conquest, you rind them ransacking the sources the Spanish brought with them. They went through the Bible, the *Thousand and One Nights,* and almanacs. Even after the terrible consequences of the Conquest the population collapse. tbe destruction of their rulers, aod the burning of their books, they were still interested in European civilization, and they were still trying to find a way to make sense of it within their own structure.

BiC: *In your book you emphasize the importance of their conception of time.*

Wright: Yes. One of the things that gives tbe Maya a sense of who they are, and keeps them going, is that they have an enormously large sense of time. This is unusual for a pre-modem society that does not have any scientific evidence of the age of the world. Tbe Maya have always understood tbe idea of infinity in the temporal dimension. In their ancient calendar they made huge calculations going backwards and forwards over millions and sometimes billions of years, in an attempt to understand the scale of the universe in terms of arithmetic and time. They never thought the world had been created not that long ago; they never would have written anything like Genesis. They knew the world was of infinite age and the universe of infinite scale, and they had a perspective on themselves as a people journeying through time. There's a Mays riddle that says, "What is a man on the road?" — the answer is, "lime."

Part of their way of dealing with in-

vading cultures, such as ours, is that they incorporate them into their own idea of time. History and **prophecy were** two sides of **the same coin for** the Maya. Because their calendar was both **linear** and cyclical, the same periods with the same names would recur, and they believed that similar events would take place in eras that had similar names or **similar** structures. It's a very clever and subversive idea. By **saying** they had foreseen the Spanish invasion, it meant they weren't powerless against it, and that they would deal **with** it

BiC: *And that the age* ***of the Maya*** *will* ***return?***

Wright: Well, they're **still** there. And who knows how long our civilization will last? They also experienced the collapse of their society 500 **years** before the Spaniards came. They know that things pass, and of course, if the day comes when the weight of our civilization that presses on them is ever lied, you would certainly see a revival **of the Maya.** I would **confidently predict that.**

BE: *Do* ***you think*** *the Maya* ***can resist the tourist invasion? There's a certain amount*** *of* ***cultural penetration*** *already,* ***isn't*** *there?*

Wright: As a preamble, I should say that unlike the Inca **and** the Aztec, the Maya were never a unified empire, so it's **difficult** to talk about them as if they were all the same. There were always many **different** groups of Maya, speaking related but different languages, and living in small **city** states, much like those of ancient Greece or Renaissance Italy.

I found that in Belize, a lot of the Maya are learning English and moving into occupations that are not **traditional** to them, and some of them are. **having** a problem holding on to their **culture.** In Guatemala, where I'd feared the culture was probably being destroyed by the terrible. civil war that had been going on there for many years, the Maya's traditional culture seems to have **been** strengthened. The Maya **in** Guatemala have always used their traditional culture to resist disintegration, even in the early '80s when hundreds of Maya villages were destroyed and up to a million people **displaced from** their homes.

BiC: ***You*** *refer to Guatemala as a "white settler colony"* ***and describe*** *it* ***as "worse than*** *South* ***Africa"?***

Wright: I think it's much worse, though I'd have to qualify that It's wrong to make those sorts of simple comparisons. but having said that — in South Africa, they have an **institutionalized** racism **called** apartheid that everyone can look at and recognize and say is bad. In Guatemala, there isn't much institutionalized racism, but there's a defacto racism **that's** much worse. Indians are treated like **second**-class citizens, and **suffer** an enormous amount of nasty prejudice. **And** when they try to organize for their rights, they're literally just killed by **death** squads. In Guatemala, a man like Nelson Mandela would have been dead long ago. There are no political prisoners because they've all been killed. When I say that, I'm relying on what I've been told, **both** by the **left and** the right The **prisoners** involved in the recent incident at El **Pavón,** where inmates were demanding to be flown to Cuba, appear to be ordinary criminals. But it's difficult to know. In Guatemala, ordinary crimes are **passed** off as **political** crimes. and vice **versa.**

BiC: *Do* ***you*** *have* ***any sense*** *of whether* ***the*** *situation under* ***the*** *elected* ***government*** *of* ***Cerezo*** *has improved?*

Wright: I've heard mixed reports. Guatemala's always gone through a cycle of brutal repression followed by a period of relative calm. If the **repression** is lifted, people start organizing again, a leadership emerges, and then a new cycle of repression starts **five** or 10 years later, and **those** people are wiped out What we're seeing is a period of quiet between storms, quiet by **Guatemalan** standards. I don't think it will last

BiC: *What* ***is*** *tie position of* ***writers in*** *Guatemala?*

Wright: Most of Guatemala's dissident writers have had to leave the country and are **living in exile.** A few have been killed. Some are with the guerrillas. In fact, the son of Guatemala's Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Miguel Angel Aaturias, is a leader of one of the guerrilla groups.

BE: In ***North*** *America,* ***there's*** *a* ***significant*** *movement* ***among*** *some* ***native groups*** *to* ***recover sacred*** *objects, such* ***as wampum belts, from*** *museum collections.* ***Is anything comparable happening*** *in* ***Central America*** *or the* ***Andean countries?***

Wright: Not really. In the case of Guatemala, the Maya's position is so bad that if they make any **kind** of organized protest about anything they become the victims of repression. In **Yucatán,** there's an academy of the Maya language, but I'm not aware of them

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trying to get artifacts out of museums. The museum might he the best place for them at the moment. They just don't have the basic physical security in their villages, and there's a terrible problem with looting and stealing of antiquities.

BiC: *You deal extensively in your book witk tke Mayo's reverence for the land.*

Wright: This is something common to almost all American Indian societies. They all have *a* feeling that human existence costs the earth something. It's an ecological awareness, but it's also a moral awareness. They feel an obligation to repay that cost in some way. This occasionally takes grotesque forms, like the massive human sacrifices practised by the Aztecs. That was an extreme example of the idea that you repaid the earth for making human life possible, with a gift of human life, and that the blood shed by the sacrificial victims kept the world going. The rituals sometimes took the form of offerings of food, or in the case of the Maya, it's mainly the burning of incense. But it's still part of this complex of blood, because incense is made from the sap of certain trees.

BiC: *Which is considered the blood of the trees?*

Wright: Exactly. Burning thii incense returns that life essence to the nods. and to the world, which are one and the same thing to the Maya. So they all feel that mankind has an obligation to the earth. I think that's something we can learn from.

BiC: *In a sense, we make our own human sacrifices, because of environmental pollution.*

Wright: Yes. Instead of having our hearts ripped out, we're going to die of cancer.

BiC: *In* Cut Stones and Crossroads *you say tkat "tourism creates a nation of bellboys." The tourists in your books often seem culturally insensitive and even exploitive. But isn't it possible to argue tkat archeologists and anthropologists are also, in their own way, exploitive?*

Wright: I don't see archeologists as being particularly exploitive as long as they don't *steal* things; but good archeologists with any kind of professional reputation don't keep the artifacts they dii up. The only problem you run into is that the authorities in these countries often don't represent the local people, so that even if you're complying with the rules of the country, you may still be impinging on the local people. But little of that goes on, because it's very difficult to dig in those countries now.

Archeology is less of a moral problem than cultural anthropology. Anthropologists certainly worry about that; they wonder, "Are we being exploitive by going into a culture, living very intimately with people for a year or two, then writing about them and their culture?" They change names to protect people's privacy, of course, but the truth is that many of them don't return very much to the place they worked, and they themselves just forther their careers.

BiC: You *came up against people wko were reluctant to talk to you for that very reason, didn't you? I'm thinking of the Lacandón tribe in Mexico, for example.*

Wright: The Lacandón are like the Inuit — every family has an anthropologist. They've had enough of anthropologists, but luckily they're in a position to say so. I think the crucial thing is that indigenous people have enough control over their lives that they can say yes or no to tourists or to anthropologists. Because they do derive benefits from them. Anthropologists can bring their problems to the attention of the outside world, and enable the outside world to understand that culture and become sympathetic to it. In Brazil. for instance, anthropologists are working very hard to help people like the Kayapó and the Yanomamo. A darker side to that is that missionaries often read anthropologists' work and use their insights to go in and destroy a culture, which is a very serious problem.

BiC: Your *background is academic, but you're working in a genre that demands a certain amount of impressionistic writing. How do you reconcile tks need to be accurate with the necessity for a more subjective approach that involves taking liberties with strict reporting?*

Wright: I allow myself a certain amount of liberty with things about which I feel accuracy doesn't matter that much. For example, in the everyday narrative of my travels. I occasionally change things around to create a structure —

BiC: *You create a narrative?*

Wright: Yes. The journey in the narrative may not be exactly the same as the original journey. There's nothing as boring as reading a blow-by-blow description of someone's travels. So obviously, I shape it, I exclude things — I very seldom invent things out of whole cloth, but I will change them. For instance, when I'm writing about a conversation in a bar. I *may allow a* certain amount of imagination and characterization to take over in order to shape it into an anecdote witb the unity that a fictional anecdote would have. But when I'm dealing with the history, politics, or anthropology of a country or the people, I adhere to my training and try to be rigorous. I put footnotes in my book so that people can go back to the original sources and check what I've said. Because I don't want anybody to say, Well, you can't trust a travel writer. He might have just invented that because it makes a good story."

BiC: *Are you working on anything now?*

Wright: At the moment I've got two things on the go. One is a novel, but it's a long project that will probably take a number of years to bear fruit. I'm also involved in developing a television series to be broadcast in 1992. the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. It's just in the initial stages — nothing's been finalized — but 1 hope it will come together. The idea of the series is to look at the Spanish invasion from the viewpoint of the people. who were invaded. I did something along the same lines for CBC radio a few years ago, and I'm now working with CBC television on developing it into a series covering all of the Americas, from Canada right down to the tip of South America.

BiC: So *this* will *give an alternative view to tke celebrations* tknt will be *taking place in Spain and the US?*

Wright: Yes. There's going to be all this stuff about tbe great saga of the discovery. how wonderful Columbus was and how great of Europeans to discover the rest of the world. I'll be talking about what happened to the people who were here. The groat thing is that they wrote a tremendous number of chronicles, letters, and documents, either in their own languages, using the Spanish alphabet, or in Spanish, describing what happened to them. And complaining about it. There's a Peruvian who wrote a long book to the King of Spain, saying, you shouldn't have done this, it's a complete mess, and the only way to settle it now is to let us govern ourselves. This was probably one of the first attempts by any colonized people to articulate that sort of thing. It's not as though we have to imagine how they reacted — it's all there in their own words. □

Waiting

'Martha had seen hats worn in the home as the height of ignorance, boorishness beyond belief

By Guy Vanderhaeghe

ALEC MONKMAN sat at his kitchen table wearing a straw fedora with a striped hatband of grey and burgundy. The hat was clean and neat and obviously new; he had purchased it in honour of Vera's coming a week before at Kleimer's Men's Wear, one of the stores he didn't own. Strangers might have assumed that Monkman didn't own it because of its name — Kleimer's — but they did not know that names did not signify much in Connaught When Monkman had bought a business he had never bothered to change its name. His garage, which he had been proprietor of for fourteen years, was still Collier's Auto; his hotel was still known as Simpson's Hotel. Whatever vanity he possessed did not assert itself in a wish to see his name painted on a sign board, or even more luxuriantly spelled out in gaudy neon light Alec Monkman seemed immune to the desire to commemorate his success. The house he lived in, shabby and cramped, with long hairlike fractures creeping and fingering their way across the plaster walls of all the rooms, was the same house his daughter Vera had walked away from seventeen years before and today was returning to. It was just as it had been then, with this exception. Two years before the room off the kitchen, which had always been the baby's room, the place where they had put the youngest child's cot because it was warm there near the old, black, nickel-plated stove, had been turned into an indoor bathroom.

He wondered what Vera would think of that Perhaps it was an odd thing to wonder, since he had not seen his daughter in seventeen years, or ever seen the grandson she was bringing home with her. But he was an old

ILLUSTRATION BY JAY BELMORE

man now, seventy-three, and of all the alterations in his circumstances and surroundings he had made in nearly twenty years, it was the most recent he was likely to recall and seize upon. There had been a misunderstanding with the plumber and he had come home to find himself the owner of a pink toilet He had let it pass. He had even found it funny, laughed about it with Mr. Stutz, inviting him to step in and try on the new facility for size. Now he was worried Vera might think him gone foolish in the head with a pink toilet

Mr. Stutz was at the STC stop at present, waiting for Vera's bus. He could imagine slow, solid, patient Stutz under the tin sign emblazoned with a boundii antelope which was the symbol of the bus company. The sign was fastened to the wall of his,, Alec Monkman's, hotel. In the last year he had earned the government contract to peddle bus tickets and sell coffee and sandwiches to travellers. Won it, he supposed, on the strength of clean washrooms. He had Mr. Stutz to thank for that, the cleanliness of the public washrooms in his hotel.

Well, they were both waiting, he and Mr. Stutz. Mr. Stuk there and he in his kitchen. He had resolved not to go to them, but instead have them brought to him. He was making a point It might be a good idea too, if he wasn't discovered in the kitchen hovering by the window when they were brought to the door, but in his bedroom, so relaxed and easy that it was possible for him to snooze minutes be fore their arrival. Showing eagerness over her return would not be wise. If Vera ever felt she had the upper hand she would not hesitate to use it He'd seen her operate before.

So for the time being he sat'by the window in a many-times-painted captain's chair whose every scratch and chip, depending on the depth of the wound, revealed a different layer of colour, green or yellow or blue, which, like the rings of a tree, offered testimony to the chair's age. He was occupying himself with solitaire, laying out the cards in a welter of overlapping coffee rings and a scattering of toast crumbs, playing every one with an old man's maddening deliberation, each card held poised and quivering in sympathy with the slight current of tremor in his hands, his lips pursed judicious ly and his attention divided between the game and the dirt street that ran past hi house.

It was July and pressing on to noon. Already the sun had driven Lawyer McDougal's spaniel underneath his master's caragana hedge, a hedge badly in need of a trimming. The sight of the caraganas stretching up to touch the eaves of the lawyer's house, ragged and wild and infested with sparrows, always irritated Monkman. Several weeks before, when he had met McDougal on the steps of the post office, he had said, "You ever get it in mind to cut that hedge of yours, Bob, you'll have to get the loan of the Fire Brigade ladder truck." McDougal hadn't liked that. But then McDougal wasn't obliged to. No more than he, Monkman, had to like that flock of shining sparrows which roosted there and crossed over from McDougal's property to settle in his garden every afternoon and peck among his vegetables.

'He stared at the dog lying there in the shade. His eyes were still sharp, no trouble there, thank God. Prom clear across the street he could make out the slight flutter of the spaniel's flanks as it panted in the heat Nothing else moved. The dusty leaves of the wilting elm in Monkman's front yard hung limp and still, white in the hard glare of the sun.

There was no' doubt that the day would be a scorcher. The garden would need water by tomorrow. He would have to take the truck and tank out to the creek, fire up the five horsepower Briggs & Stratton gas engine he had left there and pump another tank of water. Lately he had been having trouble getting the engine to catch; his arthritis made it difficult to grip the toggle and he was no longer able to put the kick in a pull cord he once could. Just another one of the annoyances that came with growing old, but one it was impossible to avoid without resigning himself to the death of his garden. The extended dry spell had led the Town Council to ration water and those who wanted more than their allotment had to find it themselves.

Monkman was not sure how a garden had come to be so important to him, more important even than his businesses. His businesses he scarcely paid heed to anymore. He was content to let Mr. Stutz oversee his interests. But the garden was different Perhaps it was experience teaching him, teaching the man who had embarked on a new career late in life and out of despair, that there was more challenge to keeping life in cabbages and onions than in keeping it in a movie theatre or hardware store. Over the years he had learned that in a small place like Connaught it was hard to go badly wrong in business. Because if it had been easy, he would have been finished long ago. No, all that was necessary was to see that the rook of an enterprise were firmly set. That done, in the absence of any real competition it could hardly fail to survive. Maybe not flourish, none of his businesses had really flourished. but they had all survived and that was enough for him. Unlike a plant, a shop or store needed no strong encouragement to live: once established it took a fool or an act of God to kill it. But gardens he had found were a different matter. A man had to breathe some of his own life into a garden. A garden knew no other aid or kindness in this hard place of shattering hail and scorching heat, uprooting wind and early killing frost except that which a man could offer..

When his wife was alive the garden had been no business of his. Monkman had spent no time in it be yond digging the potatoes in the fall if the ground was heavy and wet. Martha had kept a garden so she could eat her own canned vegetables during the long winter, all put up to her taste. She had always complained there was no flavour in anything bought in a store.

For years and years now there had been nobody to preserve the carrots and beets and peas and beans. Alec Monkman ate what he could fresh and gave the rest to his customers and neighbours. (He had begun this custom ten years before, keeping ten-pound sacks of potatoes heaped beside the gas pumps at his garage so that people were free to help themselves.) Although at first this oddity of his was remarked upon, with time the town's folk became accustomed to the sight of a mound of orange pumpkins in the lobby of his theatre, the boxes of carrots and onions and ripe tomatoes stacked by the front desk of hi hotel. All of it was there for the taking. Monkman made no distinction between those too old or too ill to tend to their own plots and those too shiftless to bother to. All he wished was to be relieved of an old man's embarrassing and prodigal surplus.

There had never been a surplus when Martha was alive. Of course, there had been the children too. more

mouths to feed. Everything had gone into jars, she had been a demon among the steaming pots, ladling and scalding and sealing with hot wax. God knew that thirty years later there were likely still dusty stores of canned fruit and vegetables in the cellar because after her death he had not been able to bring himself to go down there and clear the shelves. It was more than he could do to set a foot on those stairs. For months his heart had hurt him at the thought, closed up on him like a fist. So he and Earl and Vera had eaten out of tins.

He thought of how she had lain all crooked at the bottom of those stabs. The naked bulb swinging to and fro at tbe end of the cord nailed to tbe beam overhead had made liiht and shadow play across her body in such a way that he had been-tricked into thinking she was moving there on the floor. But that was all there was to that, a hick of the light.

Now, whenever he caught himself thinking of his dead wife Martha, Alec Monkman gave a start and his hand sprang to his head. It encountered a hat The hat was there. He pulled it off and swore. "Goddamn it to hell!" He was angry. What was he doing, wearing a hat in the house again, after all those years? What was happening to him?

He sat staring at the hat, his large hands holding it delicately by its brim as If he were balancing a plate of raw eggs in the shell, intent on keeping them from rolling off the edge and smashing at his feet Monkman sat like this for some time, lost in reverie, then suddenly, with a disgruntled gesture, he dropped the hat on the table.

Hi fine white hair, thick for a man his age, had been disturbed when he had jerked off his hat in disgust It stood ruffled up around the crown of his head, making hbn look like a caricature of shock. He was not shocked, only tired. Fatigue confused him. He scratched one bristling eyebrow and then the other with the thick nail of a forefinger: then pinched the long, fleshy blade of his nose between his two tbumbs, a characteristic mannerism whenever he was perplexed. His large, clumsy body, shaped by years of heavy labour and finally corseted in the fat of subsequent indolence, sprawled a little more in his chair, an elbow carelessly disarranging the cards laid out for solitaire. He had forgotten about the game.

His wife had stormed against his habit of wearing a hat in the house. He had seen nothing wrong in it, having trouble remembering what his own father had looked like without a hat. When his father bad been in his seventies he had taken a picture of him standing in Round Lake, water up to his armpits, a cigarette in his mouth. and one of those salt and pepper tweed caps on his head. That was what the old boy called going for a swim.

But Martha had seen hats worn in the house as the height of ignorance, boorishness beyond belief. "Where were you born? In a barn?" she would ask sardonically when he neglected to remove his. It developed into a test of wills. Her will, her opinion, had remained unshakable right up until the day nearly twenty years ago when she toppled backward down the cellar stairs with a clutch of canned preserves pressed to her breast, falling dead of a stroke amid the crash of breaking mason jars. The shock of that had come close to entirely undoing Alec Monkman. Martha was only forty-four. Women of tbat age did not keel over dead of strokes. Where was the sense in such a thing?

After, he gave up wearing hats In the house. It was the surrender of a long, stubborn resistance. There w not a time that his children could

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remember him eating his dinner in- a sweat-stained fedora tipped back on his head, or listening to his favourite radio program in a cap pulled down over his left eye. Now they saw him sit bareheaded by a silent radio, the ribbon of untanned skin beneath his hairline that had always been hidden by his hats exposed on his forehead like the brand of the biblical outcast. And for twenty years after Martha's funeral he had never entered their house without at once removing his hat and hanging it on the hook by the door.

But recently, as if by magic, he was finding hats appear on his head. He did not know how it happened. Coming up his street, as far away from home as Kruger's yard, he began to mumble to himself as he ran his fingers lightly over the fleur-de-lis topping Kruger's iron fence, calling him self to attention, reminding himself to hang his fedora on the hook by the door. People who saw his moving lips assumed he was having a chat or argument with himself, as lonely old men do. He was really chanting, over and over again, "Hat on the hook. Hat on the hook. Hat on the hook.'! Monkman had no idea what went wrong. An hour after going indoors he would pass a mirror, or reach up to scratch an itch lurking in his widow's peak and discoyer — a hat! He struggled to puzzle out an explanation. Could it be that he had intended to go out, put on his hat. and then distracted by a ringing phone, or the crying of the cat to be fed, lost track of his original intention, only to wander his house in a hat? Or had he, despite his precautions, despite his chant, simply not remembered to take it off? Was that possible? It was @range. Often he could recall in vivid detail the hat swaying slightly from side to side on the hook before coming to rest. He could see it all, plain as hls hand held before his face. Then a doubt Was that today, or yesterday? Maybe it was yesterday he had watched the gentle rocking of the hat on the hook. He could not be sure.

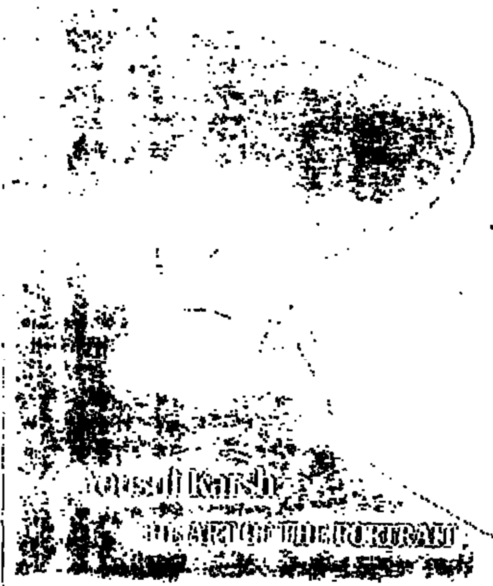
Sitting in the hot sun that poured upon hlm through a dusty pane spotted with the marks of a rain stillborn a week ago, he told himself: Vera is coming today and I have a pink toilet and wear my hat in the house. He understood how he had been saddled with the toilet but the hat he was not certain about.

Years ago Monkman had heard someone say — a minister maybe, although he wondered how, since he didn't attend church, although it could have been at a funeral, or an occasion' that demanded an address at the school — that man's thoughts of the past are largely made up of regret and his thoughts of the future largely of fear. It was one of the few true things he had ever heard a preacher say and he had chosen to remember it In the past few months he had taken to reminding himself that with so little future left to him, surely he had less to fear, more to regret. But what about the dreams?

He sensed that the business with the hat was linked to the fact that recently Martha was often in his thoughts and those thoughts were sweet. Something or someone was trying to speak to him. He was certain of it. Did they both want the past? Alec his Martha and Martha her Alec in a hat?

Considering that, it slipped his mind who he was really waiting for that hot July morning. ❑

This is an excerpt from Homesick, *a novel in progress, to be published in the fall by McClelland & Stewart. Copyright © 1989 by Guy Vanderhaeghe.*



Grey Owl (Archibald Belaney), 1937

Yousuf Karsh: The Art of the Portrait
by *James Borcoman, with Estelle Jussim, Philip Pocock, Lilly Koltun*

ISBN 088884-591-X
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Like the snow geese

An anthology of writings from the first generation of Inuit to be fully at home in the English language

By Pat Barclay

PHOTOGRAPH BY REV. JEAN-CLAUDE PHILIPPE

An Inuit schoolchild with her baby brother

NORTHERN VOICES: INUIT WRITING IN ENGLISH
edited by Penny Petrone
University of Toronto Press, 314 pages, $27.50 cloth (ISBN 0 8020 5772 1)

HOW DOES a professor of English education at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. become the editor of a landmark collection of Inuit writing? In 1975, Dr. Serafina (Penny) Petrone became involved in the newly developed Native Teacher Education Program at Lakehead. Searching for suitable textbooks, Petrone won discovered that although there was no shortage of books written *about* Indians, primary material — which would surely mean more to her native students -was virtually nonexistent. She decided to compile *First People, First Voices,* a collection of Canadian Indian writings (published by the University of Toronto Press in 1983). While working on First *People.* however, Petrone "stumbled across" Knud Rasmussen's *Across Arctic America: Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition from Melville Bay to Caps Morris Jesup.* 'I liked some of the [Inuit] poetry in it so much I had to tell myself, 'Don't get distracted,' " she says enthusiastically. "But as soon as I finished the first collection, I began looking into the second."

Petrone's four-year search for Inuit writings took her from the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England, to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington and north to Aklavik, Eskimo Point, Frobisher Bay (now Iqaluit), and Greenland. 'Most of the modern writing in the book is by people under 40." she points out "They are the first generation of Inuit to be fully at home in the English language. 1 met or phoned or corresponded with nearly all of them, though sometimes they were hard to track down. They'd be in one place one year and in another place the next. but I was persistent."

The collection "traces the evolution in Canada of Inuit writing in English from an oral literature . to its modem expression .. its scope is as wide as possible in content, form. regional coverage, and authorship." As a result. the variation in literary quality is wide as well. with profound reflections by gifted poets sitting side by side with pedestrian dii excerpts included for their sociological content.

The book opens with a group of traditional poems and stories. In the Iglulik legend of the origin of the sun and the moon, a young woman discovers that her brother has tricked her into an incestuous relationship. Grasping a torch, she runs angrily outside, pursued by her brother who is also holding a torch. As they run round and round the igloo, he tips over a snowblock and his torch is extinguished. Still running, they suddenly rise into the sky and become the son and the moon "circling round the dome of heaven," she with her burning torch as the sun and he, with little light and no warmth, as the moon.

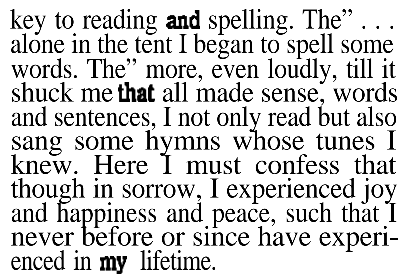
Traditional selections (which. as Petrone points out, "are of great interest because they take us into a world where the basic assumptions about the universe and mankind's place in it are alien concepts to non-Inuit thought,") are followed by 'early contact literature . . . the first recorded reactions of the Inuit to the white intruders." In 1898, for example, Admiral Robert E. Peary took Uisakassak of Greenland to New York "for scientific study." Meanwhile, Uisakassak was evidently making his own study, as in this impression of New York:

> The ships sailed in and out there, like eiders on the brooding cliffs when their young begin to swim. There weren't many free drops of water in the harbor itself; it was tilled with ships. You'd risk your life if you tried to go out there in a *kayak,* you'd simply not be noticed. and you'd be run down unmercifully. People lived up in the air like auks on a bird cliff. there are so many of them that when smoke rises from the chimneys and the women are about to make break-

fast, clouds fill the sky and the sun is **eclipsed.**

The **first** missionaries to the Inuit were the **Moravian** Brethren, who built permanent missions in Greenland in 1721 and in Labrador **in** 1771. **With** these **and** future missionaries came the knowledge of reading and writing that the Inuit had lacked. Gradually, they began to express themselves in letters, personal narratives, diaries, and novels. **Petrone** points out that although the earliest extant Inuit diary was penned in Labrador in 1880. thii was "a society **that** relied on a totally **oral form** of communication until a few decades ago in some regions." One example is this **recollection** by **Bessie** Andreason, who was left alone at 14 "in the middle of nowhere with **two** dead people near me" when her parents died of measles en mute to winter camp on Kent Peninsula in 1937:

> Another thought or inspiration suddenly infiltrated my mind — what about **my** prayer book? .... At that time, I didn't know how to read yet, and being alone I thought **that** I should give it a try. An attempt that proved to be a **trying** experience, but not without some **success** — one word here, one word there, and I found **the** key to reading **and** spelling. The" . . . alone in the tent I began to spell some words. The" more, even loudly, till it shuck me **that** all made sense, words and sentences, I not only read but also sang some hymns whose tunes I knew. Here I must confess that though in sorrow, I experienced joy and happiness and peace, such that I never before or since have experienced in **my** lifetime.


Peter Ernerk

According to Petrone, young Inuit writers today are "articulating the feelings of a. generation caught in a crisis of identity. .. **As... [they]...** plead for their **rights** and opportunities, they are also protesting. . for the peoples of **the circumpolar** world and indigenous peoples everywhere. This is a remarkable achievement for a people who, just three decades ago. were still the most isolated and widely dispersed in the world." Writers such as John **Amagoalik ("we** must teach **. [our** children] **... our** philosophies, which go **back beyond the memory of man")** and Peter **Ernerk ("... we native people will not** apologize to anyone in the international community for being aboriginal people. We will never apologize to anyone for being sub sistence hunters, fishermen and trap **pers")** express the Inuit **commitment** to cultural survival, which was so aptly summed up by Abe Okpik in his essay 'What Does it Mea" to Be **an Eskimo?"** in 1962:

> There are only very few **Eskimos,** but millions of **whites, just like mosquitoes. It is something very spe cial and wonderful to be an Eskimo — they are** like the snow geese. II **an Eskimo forgets his language and Eskimo ways, he will be nothing** but just another **mosquito.** □

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BOOK REVIEWS

The war

By C. P. Stacey

MARCHING TO ARMAGEDDON: CANADIANS AND THE GREAT WAR 1914-1919

by Desmond Morton and J. L. Granatstein

Lester & Orpen Dennys, 288 pages, $35.00 cloth (ISBN 0 88619 209 9)

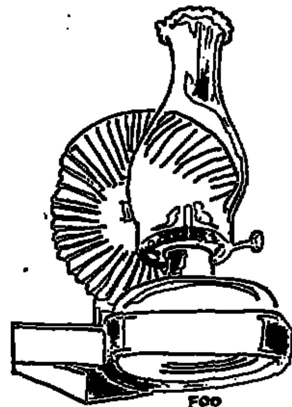
EVEN ONLY moderately assiduous readers are aware that one of the remarkable publishing phenomena of this generation has been the flood of books about war. Not by any means a purely Canadian happening. it is common to all the English-writing countries. Canada. however. has bad her full share. Pierre Berton, whose nose for a topic, and a buck, is unerring, has done two books on the War of 1812 and one on the First World War. Lesser operators have been active in the field. Both world wars have attracted numerous writers and, one assumes, numerous readers. One of the most striking examples of the trend is now before us. The year 1989 is the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War and the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second. Two eminent and remarkably prolific Canadian historians are observing this perhaps not particularly auspicious occasion by publishing between them hvo books, one on each war. *Marching to Armageddon*, which has just been published, deals with the first war. A *Nation Forged in Fire*, coming in September, will cover the second We are told that Desmond Morton is the 'principal author" of the present book, so it may be assumed that J. L. Granatstein has the main responsibility for the next one.

The title *Marching to Armageddon* is perhaps a bit strange. The book's topic is Armageddon, not the approach march to it But it may be said at once that it is a good book, clearly the product of profound knowledge of the subject. It is true that the authors have not chosen to afford the reader specific evidence of their scholarship; that there are no references' to sources and not the slightest fragment of bibliography is a great pity. Not one other book on the war is anywhere mentioned. Yet the reader cannot fail to be impressed by the authors' sure grasp of the subject. Nor can he miss the excellence of the style.

In the matter of illustrations the publishers have gone to town. There are over two dozen colour plates, chiefly the work of Lord Beaverbrook's war artists (on the dust cover we meet yet once more Alfred Bastien's "Over the Top," with its prominent French-pattern bayonet, which so far as I know no Canadian ever used). The many photographs are well selected, though inevitably some of them are familiar. The maps might be better.

Some of the authors' judgements will not meet universal approval. Is it true that 'Germany was not beaten" in November 1918? It has been said before, but is still at least dubious. There are fewer nits for critics to pick than in many war books, but some are there. One in particular forces itself on the eye. Why persist in ennobling General Erich Ludendorff? Since his name occurs many. many times, that illegitimate "von" is inescapable. Why call Civic Holiday "the Bank Holiday week-end?" The 4.5 howitzer was not considered a heavy gun; every Geld brigade of artillery had some of them. These are not important things.

There is, however, an unavoidable question. How long can this inundation of war books continue? Good as the present one is, it really adds little or no knowledge of the events of 1914-18. Authors now are retelling a story that has often been told before. Morton and Granatstein have temporarily given up widening our view of our history in favour of contributing to the prosperity of Lester & Orpen Dennys (who have, they assure us. "a reputation as Canada's best publisher") while also doing a little for two excellent historians. And who can blame them? The present vein of gold is not going to last for ever. ❑



Rude girls

By Marlene Nourbese Philip

TALKING BACK: TALKING BLACK, TALKING FEMINIST

by bell hooks

Between-the-lines, 184 pages, $12.95 paper (ISBN 0 921284 09 8)

WHERE I come from, talking back to adults meant you were rude. It was proof that you weren't well brought up; this in turn was a reflection on your parents and their ability to raise clean, quiet, tidy children. In the Caribbean (which is where I am from), this tradition was a hangover from Victorian times; it was also an essential part of the baggage our patents carried with them from the time of slavery, when the ultimate sin was talking back to massa. It could result in severe punishment, if not death. And so. if they were able to keep their children quiet and could successfully instill in them the taboo against talking back, African parents were, in fact, carrying out that oldest and most fundamental of parental duties — keeping their offspring safe.

Talking back as a metaphor for the empowerment of the oppressed is. therefore, a powerful one, and like all good metaphors resonates with a multiplicity of meanings. Talking back means the breaking of proscriptions and taboos against coming to speech, against coming to voice, against, in many respects. coming to life. One of the strongest themes running through bell hooks's *Talking Bock, a collection* of 25 essays, is the need to talk back, or come to voice, as an act of resistance for individuals and groups that have traditionally been oppressed or silenced.

An equally strong theme in this work, and one thaf is closely related to the process of coming to voice, is 'education as the practice of freedom" as Paolo Freire articulates it in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed, a* work from which hooks quotes frequently. She argues persuasively that unless and until education at all levels becomes the practice of freedom, it remains yet another system of domination.

Talking Back covers a multitude of important topics. Suffice it to mention a few: the need to dismantle all systems of domination: the need for dialogue between black and white feminists; the need for theory written by black women; racism in academe; changing class as a consequence of education; white supremacy; and homophobia in black communities. Hooks engages virtually every issue of concern to individuals interested in profound and revolutionary change within society. *Talking Back* ought to be read.

Of particular interest to me. in the light of a current de bate among writers in Toronto, was an essay entitled "fem-

inist scholarship: ethical questions." In this essay hooks concerns herself **with what** she describes as the **abdication** of responsibility by white women **"for responding [analytically** and **critically]** to work by 'different others.' **"** Hooks considers this failure to respond to **such** work to be **a** retreat to a passive position, and states tbat she would like to hear what white women have to say ***as white women.***

> Such **a** position would allow white women scholars to share their ideas about black women's writing **(or** any group of women's writing) without assuming that their **thoughts would** be seen as "definitive" or that tbey would **be trying** to be **"the authority."**

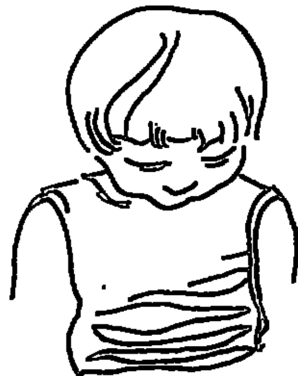
While I **agree** with hooks's **position,** I **would** add that white writers, **academics,** and scholars **have** always had the privilege of engaging with **all aspects** of any culture; this has certainly not been the case with their black counterparts. Often the only time **a** black **writer** has an opportunity to do reviews is on work by other black writers. While this is a welcome change from having only whites review work by blacks, **this** practice, of blacks writing only about blacks, could serve. as hooks points **out,** to shore up differences and eve", in **some** instances, **racism.**

Hooks admits she had difficulty putting this work together: in her introductory essay she describes her problems **in** trying to **bring** together idea. theory, and personal experience in one essay or article. When they came together, she writes, that **"was** the **moment** when the abstract became concrete, tangible, something people could hold and carry away with them." She found **that** she could be open about "personal **stuff"** in her speeches but not in her **writing;** her struggle was to bring the personal into her writing, to achieve in writing **what** she did in **orality.** And herein lies the problem I have with this collection of essays: **they often** read **like speeches,** but without **all** that goes to enliven a talk. This impression is further borne out by the repetition of the **same** quotations in many of **the** essays. There is, however, no **acknowledgement that** these are speeches, beyond what **hooks** writes **in** the introduction:

> Often I stopped myself **from** editing. from working to construct the politically correct feminist thinker **with** my words, so that I would just be there **vulnerable.** as I feel I **am** at **times.**

"Translation" from **orality** to the page has not, in **my** opinion, been completely success**ful** in ***Talking Back.*** In talk we are 'allowed" to be far more **expansive** and anecdotal **than** we **can** successfully be **in** writing. **This,** of course, raises the **very** issue hooks talks about in her introduction — that what is acceptable in one **forum** is inappropriate or unacceptable in another. While **each** essay yields some **valuable** nugget of information or 'some **new** idea, I found that 'individual essays **often** lacked **a centre** or appeared to change focus midway. The collection as a whole has a rambling quality, and while the overall usefulness of the work may not be lessened, the reader's enjoyment certainly **is.** The repetition df quotations, for instance. becomes somewhat irritating and **encourages the** reader to skip in **a work that** ought to be read closely.

Hooks's desire to marry **form and** content has bee", to my mind. best fulfilled in 'writing autobiography" and 'to **gloria,** whb is she: on using **a** pseudonym." Less rambling and more focused, these **two essays** deal less with theory and more with personal experience and ideas. Content and **form** are less at odds **with** each other than in many of the other **pieces.** If hooks intended **us** to **think** about how and why we accept information, and how important a part **form** or **the manner** of delivery plays in this process. she has, however, succeeded. □



History lessons

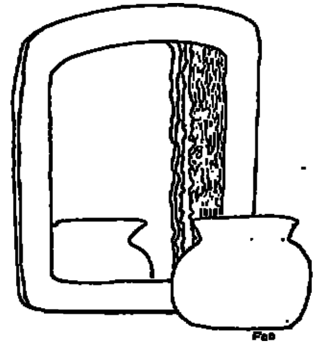
By Desmond Morton

OUR MAN IN MOSCOW A **DIPLOMAT'S REFLECTIONS ON** THE **SOVIET UNION**
by Robert A. D. Ford
University of Toronto Press, 356 pages, $29.95 cloth (ISBN 0 8020 5805 1)

AN AMBASSADOR, in Sir Henry **Wotton's** most memorable phrase, is "an honest **man** sent to lie abroad for **the** good of his country." It is **an** old-fashioned function and one that Pierre Elliott **Trudeau, among** others, considered obsolete in the age of jet travel, **telecommunications** and the New York ***Times.***

As Canada's ambassador to Moscow **through most** of the **Trudeau** years. **R.A.D.** Ford has provided an eloquent **rebuttal.** If Canada's leaders were give" as much wisdom as Ford's readers, 'Our man in Moscow" did a" excellent job of contradicting Churchill's famous **description** of the Soviet Union, **"a** riddle wrapped in **a** mystery inside **an** enigma."

Prepared by graduate studies in French-Russian relations, rare **gifts** as **a linguist,** and **two** short postings to Stalin's Moscow. Ford spent 16 years as ambassador to the Soviet Union. and **the** experience **confirmed** his early COD**viction** that **understanding** Russia was not impossible, merely difficult and **time-consuming.** A" enlightened government and perhaps Ford's **own** increasing physical **disability** left him in Moscow from **the** late Khrushchev era



to the last years of **Leonid** Brezhnev. Ford **became a resource** of wisdom and knowledge not just for Ottawa but for the more enlightened allied policy-makers.

The old argument against allowing diplomats to **learn** a **difficult language** and leaving them for **long** periods in **a** posting is **that** they will **"go** native," unconsciously **forgetting** their **allegiance.** In **Moscow,** that **process** could be hurried along, sometimes **with** brutal speed. **Ford's successor** in 1954. John Watkins, another literary **diplomat,** was trapped by **the** KGB as **a practising** homosexual and spent tbe rest of his career as a **Soviet** agent until he was unmasked by a defector. **Anatoli Gorsky,** case officer for **Watkins.** (and for **the** more **notorious** British traitors, Burgess and **Maclean)** was also assigned to Ford. Hard **common** sense, a strong marriage, and memories of Moscow under Stalin helped save Ford **from temptation.** So too did affinity with those **other** victims of the KGB, Soviet poets. Ford had translated Boris **Pasternak's** poetry long before ***Dr. Zhivago*** became **a** world classic and **his** association **with Soviet writers** helped make the years in Moscow endurable.

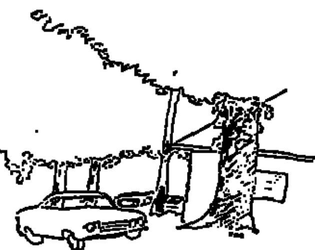
Far from "going native," Ford developed **a** sophisticated understanding of Soviet **respect** for strength and a shrewd awareness of how lib**eral** messages only confused and annoyed the Kremlin. Ford reflects the professional diplomat's frustration at the parade of national leaders, sometimes from Ottawa and more **often** from Washington. applying home-grown **illu-**

sions or dilettante wisdom in hurried efforts to end **East-**West **conflict.** Trudeau was an occasional offender though Ford thought his **prime** minister had gone too far when, **travelling** in the Crimea, he was stopped by police to be told: **"Your** great leader has just been here." **The** leader turned out to be William Kashtan, head of Canada's Communists.

Russian **officialdom** showed no great affection for Ford's knowledge of **their** country. **Pleading,** as dean of the **diplomatic** corps, for Soviet influence on behalf of captive U.S. embassy personnel in Teheran, Ford reminded **Andrei** Gromyko of the great Russian poet and ambassador, Griboyedov, murdered by Persian fanatics a century a half before. "He looked at me with his steely **grey** eyes and said: 'Please don't give me lessons in Russian **history.'"**

Ford has saved those lessons for us. Readers will learn a great deal about **détente** in the **'70s, Afghanistan** in the **'80s,** and **the** prospects for ***glasnost*** and ***perestroika* in** the **'90s.** They will see Mikhail Gorbachev, not as a displaced **free-enterpriser** but as the latest in a long line of Russian reformers, struggling to modernize his society **without** unleashing anarchy. Ford offers no cheer to **those** who believe that economic liberalism could lead to democracy or even that it is possible on its own. "It is a **highly** debatable proposition," he warns, "that **the majority** of **the** Rue sian people want freedom, freedom of any **kind."**

Those who want to debate **that** proposition **with** Ford **will** face a **man** of experience, emdition, and tested liberal **credentials.** Canadians can be proud of their "man in **Moscow."** □



The body politic

By Barbara MacKay

SECOND OPINION: WHAT'S WRONG WITH CANADA'S HEALTH-CARE SYSTEM AND HOW TO FIX IT

by Michael Rachlis and Carol Kushner

Harper & Collins, 371 pages, $26.95 cloth (ISBN 00 215441 2)

NURSES ARE **quitting** their jobs in **protest** at **low** pay, lousy work conditions, and lack of recognition; many **doctors** resent the end of extra-billing; **patients awaiting** heart surgery are piling up in **the halls** of overcrowded hospitals and there's a desperate shortage of spaces in nursing homes.

These are just some of the **stories** about Canada's **health-**care problems that we see daily in **the** media. And, as distasteful a concept as it may be for most Canadians, this litany of ill tidings is loudly proclaiming that **some** things are definitely wrong with Canada's **favourite social** system **—** universal **health** care.

But, as Michael Rachlis and Carol Kushner point out in ***Second Opinion,*** just what is **ailing our system is not immediately clear from** these numerous **and** often contradictory news reports. One day we hear that **health-**care costs are **spiralling** out of control, and the next, that hospitals are dangerously underfunded. How can **both** of **these** be **true?**

In **exploring the** causes of this contradictory conundrum, **the** authors **—** Racblis is a general practitioner **with** a degree in community medicine and **Kushner** a writer and researcher **in the** field of public policy **—** make convincing and thoughtful **arguments** that indicate our health-care system is **inefficient,** unscientific, inattentive to prevention. bedazzled by **high-tech** "cures," and **generally** unaccountable. The book is lively, readable, well **re-**searched **and** documented **(it** includes a helpful appendix **on interpreting** scientbic testing and **detailed endnotes** for reference), and sometimes downright surprising **—** who would ever have suspected that examples of **efficient** and affordable health care could be drawn from **the U.S.A.?**

Second Opinion does offer up some tales of government inefficiency and medical incompetence, but the examples are not overwhelming **and are countered with exam-**ples of solutions offering workable, efficient. and **effective** health-care models. For instance. a non-profit **home-**care service for **frail** seniors in San Francisco is a marvel of near-perfection. Indeed, as **the** authors build **their careful** argument, beginning **with** the existing **flaws** in our system, followed by **facts** about what makes up a healthy population, the solutions seem to fall Into place.

Despite the ease with **which the** pieces tit together. this book is not simplistic in either its identification of the problems or its development of **the** solutions. For example, **the** authors **don't** doctor-bash by simply blaming the practitioners for poor health care. But they don't back away from calling attention to those areas where doctors do fail **—** such as in over-prescribing some drugs, tests, and **operations.** Nor do they simply point a **finger** of accusation at Canada's **so-called** 'socialized medicine."

The authors argue that a healthy population is achieved and maintained by much more than mere medicine and **they** discuss **the** connections **between** health and other social factors, such as employment and housing. Indeed. one of the most Interesting suggestions for fostering healthy public policy is **with** a 'health impact assessment" that would review all proposed legislation for its impact on health.

Rachlis and Kushner show where money is spent **—** and misspent **—** in the system and offer their own alternative budget for how our **health-care** dollars should be **allocat-**ed. Their suggestions for improvements **in** our **health-care** system are drawn **from** diverse models -Japanese corporations, Swedish government, and **health** maintenance organizations **(HMOs)** in the U.S. (interestingly, not one example comes from the USSR or **Cuba).** Of course the American examples are the most **startling — if** there's one thing. we like to hold over Americans it's the **superiority** of our equitable-access **health** care. But the authors show that competition between health-care plans purchased by consumers (or employers) can be healthy. **producing** Information on hospital costs and efficiency ratings that aren't available in Canada. **Does this** mean a **private fee-**for-service system is better than ours? Not necessarily, as the authors also look to **American HMOs —** organizations of salaried doctors **that** offer **efficient** low-cost health service to **subscribers** who pay a **fixed** periodic payment **—** as glowing examples from which to learn.

That this book is highly readable is a bonus. because it deals with a topic that should have wide appeal, not just for the thousands of people **directly employed in the health-care system — doctors, hospital administrators, nurses, health ministry officials, medical technicians — but also for those of us who fund the system, and trust it, sometimes with our** lives □

Cree power

By Daniel David Moses

CHIEF: THE FEARLESS VISION OF BILLY DIAMOND

by Roy MacGregor

Viking (Penguin), 356 pages, $24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 670 82735 5)

DESPITE its **title, this** is not a **comic book, but the biography of one Billy Diamond who. despite his colourful name. is not at all a Tonto but a living man. a Cree Indian who at the age of 40 is already assured of a prominent place** in the histories of the **Cree** and of Canada.

Diamond was born in the

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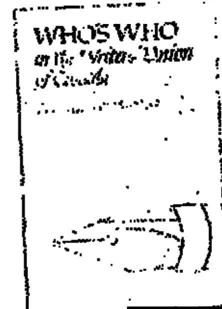

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between the lines

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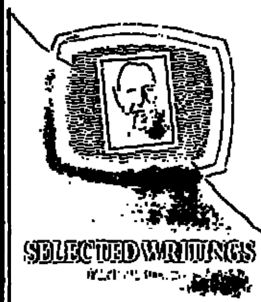

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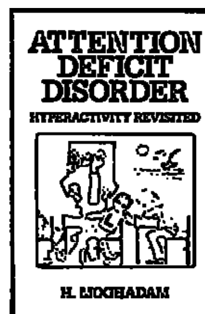

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proverbial humble surroundings, at the Last Creek camp outside **Rupert** House (now **Waskaganish)** in the spring of 1949. the son of a trapper. **His** most recent accomplishments have been as a businessman, a mover and maker of both the airline **Air Creebec** and the joint venture **Cree** Yamaha company that manufactures the **contemporary version** of the Hudson's Bay canoe.

It is the story of Diamond's life in the meantime — as a politician and as the Grand Chief of the **Cree** of James Bay — **that** makes up most of this book and gives it its weight. The story of how Diamond and his peers were able to protect his people's lives and help preserve their way of life from the flooding waters of Robert **Bourassa's** James Bay **hydro-electric** project provides the good reading here, both for **those** Native people who continue their own versions **of** the struggle for **self**-determination across the country and for **those** non-Natives **who want** to know what all the **fuss** is **about.**

The book sketches the his **torical** context of Diamond's story. It reminds us, for instance, that **when** Robert Bourassa came to power in **1971** the Indians of Quebec did not even have the right to vote in **provincial** elections. It reminds us **that** Prime **Minister** John A **Macdonald considered** starving Indians charity cases ("beggars should not be choosers"). It reminds us that. most **simply put,** the Indian Act **of 1880** stated 'the term person means an individual other than an Indian."

This book documents for us in great. almost **overwhelming** detail Diamond's struggles with the likes of Bourassa. Jean **Chrétien,** Pierre Trudeau, John **Turner,** and **Bill McKnight.** It shows us how he gained intimate knowledge of the workings of the provincial and federal court systems. It shows us a man aware of the importance of **the media,** a man who for instance got an audience **and** an endorsement from the Pope. (One wonders if Diamond's cooperation in the **creation** of this volume itself is not **further** evidence of this awareness.)

Diamond's accomplishments have been great: not only the material **benefits** he has acquired for the **Cree but** also **the** acknowledgements he **has** managed to force from the mainstream. a mainstream for **the** most part smugly ignorant of its own history of **systematic** racism. **(For** instance, Diamond was made a **Knight** of the Order of Quebec at a ceremony presided **over** by "his old enemy." **Robert Bourassa.)** It is as a document of this accomplishment that this book will have its greatest use and most lasting value.

The book's prose is usually as clear and useful as cliche **can** make it:

> At such meetings, Diamond was **at his** very best, sure of his facts. aware of the jugular and possessed of a wicked **humour and stinging tongue that soon wilted those that took him on.**

This approach lacks a sense of the individuality of **its** sub **ject.** On the rare occasions that a more ambitious use of language is attempted. the reader is usually **thrown** by inadvertent **humour** or **horror** ("Billy **Diamond rolled** along **the** shore, a fleshy, banging **wave of a man. . .").**

This **weakness** in **the** writing is most telling in sections of the book dealing **with** Diamond's personal life. The damage **his** obsessive political work inflicted on his marriage, his family, and his **health (he** is prone **to** an **irritating** double vision when he **is overtired: is this** the fearless **vision** of the **title?),** his suffering **through** alcoholism. loneliness, and self-loathing. his **rebirth** as a Pentecostal preacher, **are** all at best only reported, at **worst melodramatized.**

> He **stood** for a long moment, scowling up at John Whiskeychan, who had been preaching, then yanked **his coat off** his back. **threw** it angrily **down** onto **the** floor and stormed **out,** slamming the door behind.

Diamond is a complex and mysterious personality and one hopes that the next biography will serve him, and us. better. □

Justice delayed

By Lenore Keeshig-Tobias

CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE
by Lisa Priest
McClelland & Stewart, 220 pages, $5.95 paper (ISBN 0 7710 7152 3)

ON THE MORNING of November 13.1971. in **Le** Pas, Manitoba, a Cree teenager was picked up by four **white** men in a **car.** She was sexually **assaulted** and then murdered. **Sixteen** years later, hvo of **the** men stood **trial** for her **brutal** murder, but only one was COD **victed.** Conspiracy ***of*** Silence begins **with** the **gruesome discovery,** by some **fishermen,** of the badly mutilated body of Helen Betty Osborne lying in the snow near Clearwater Lake.

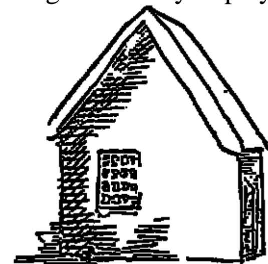
Shortly after the murder, the four men sought **the advice** of an eccentric lawyer. **D'Archy Bancroft.** He **advised** them to swear a pact of silence. Had that pact been **kept,** the murder would have remained unsolved. But **Colgan,** one of the men involved, the son *of* a high-profile figure in The Pas. could not shut up. **Rumours** of **the** murder soon circulated throughout the town, but not one word was mentioned to the police. **Why** did it take police 16 years to solve the case when almost **everyone** in town knew who bad been involved?

Lisa Priest. an investigative journalist who covered the story for the Winnipeg ***Free Press,*** does a thorough job of profiling the victim and the men involved — **Colgan,** Houghton, Manger, and Johnston. She interviewed the **victim's** family, the convicted **man,** his wife. and many others familiar **with** the facts and the **rumours** about the **crime.** She **also** analyses the communities of Norway House and The Pas during the late **'60s** and early **'70s.**

Conspiracy of Silence puts **the** town on **trial** too. **The people** of The Pas complained that newspaper and television **coverage** was biased and sensational; their knowledge of **the** crime, they said, **was** only hearsay. But as one resident said to **Lisa** Priest. 'People still ask me. **'Come** on, did everyone in town really know **who** the killers were? and I say. 'Yeah, we all knew but we didn't say anything.' "

Spouses and girlfriends stood by their men. **The wife** of one *of the* men involved is quoted — "And I didn't want to talk about it — I know my husband's **innocent."** But he was **certainly** there during the assault, **and** he breathed not a word of **the** murder during those 16 years. All those involved tell their side of the matter. The epilogue then takes care of the review — the immunity of **Colgan** as **Crown** witness, the inconsistencies in the **trial, and** the police **investigation.**

In the case of the murder at The Pas justice was neither sought nor seen to be done. It was **a** matter of playing **the** game, a game like blind man's bluff. or may-l? And as **with** any game, it doesn't matter whether you're right *or* wrong. but how you play —



the **cunning of the players wins.**

The **story** is **fairly and thoroughly presented. Native people across the country felt betrayed again by white man's justice. (The Marshall inquiry *is* another case in point. Had the victim been white. Native people believe, the case** would have bee" **solved** long ago.) Demanding to know why **three** men were freed by the system. and why **they** escaped arrest for 16 years, Native leaders called for a **full public** inquiry. We **shall soon know the results of the inquiry into Manitoba's justice system.** Eve" then it is not going to **tell us anything we didn't already know.** ☐

Border ballad

By Anne Denoon

VOICES ON THE BRINK

by Tom Marshall

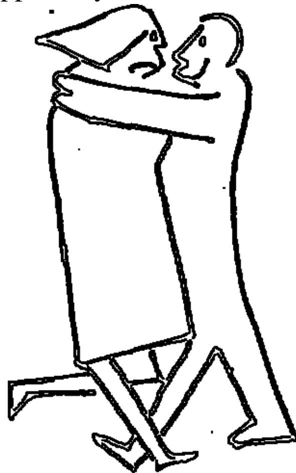
Macmillan, 195 pages, $14.95 paper

(ISBN 0 7715 9913 7)

I IMAGINE **that many southern Ontarians now past their early 40s will remember, at least dimly,** Marilyn **Monroe's visit** to *our* side **of the** falls to shoot the movie ***Niagara*. Monroe was,** of course, to **become (much later, and posthumously) the chief pop-cultural icon of the America" '50s,** ending up **as** a fixture of almost every version ***of*** the **period.** So. although Marilyn's early appearance **in *Voices on the Brink*, which** is set in Niagara Falls in the 1950s. may not come as a great surprise, it *is* refreshingly plausible. For once, she's present very much in the **flesh,** ogled by a trio of **pubescent** boys, one of whom **is the** book's protagonist, Ron Benson. Alas. his instant, and somewhat unpubescent insight into the goddess's psyche ("He had a" image, quite unbidden, of a **small** girl weeping uncontrollably. . . .") ***soon* alerts readers that she's once again** about to shoulder all the usual **symbolic** baggage, **in** addition to a tragic **affinity,** much later revealed, with the novel's **main female character.**

Although other figures from American mass culture occasionally pop up **(including Ozzie** and Harriet, hi a rather mischievous fashion). Tom Marshall's **view** of postwar, bordertown adolescence is **anything** but nostalgic. Ron and his friends inhabit a joyless world. dominated by the omnipresent sound of the falls and tainted by the tawdry collection of 'highways and motels and honeymooners and wax museums and hydm and chemical plants" clustered around them. **Sex,** naturally, is the boys' main preoccupation. but initiation by the town's obliging but despised apprentice **"hoo-ers"** is grim and mechanical. **hardly** a" improvement upon convivial masturbation down by the Shredded Wheat factory. In this "place where sullen youths dream of. **, spurious** glamour.' the river is a gateway to **"fulfilment** of one's **vaguest** and most deceptive adolescent wishes" **—** in short, to America itself. On a night's excursion to Buffalo, "city of darkness," Ron becomes involved with a girl **who** proves to be. like the falls, 'dangerous as well as beautiful," leading him **through** a **scenario** of incest, murder, **sexual** betrayal, drug addiction. suicide, and **madness.**

The **book's** structure is 'complex, **shifting** in alternating chapters back and forth between the first-&son **commentary** of the now **middle**-aged, "not always sane," and apparently institutionalized



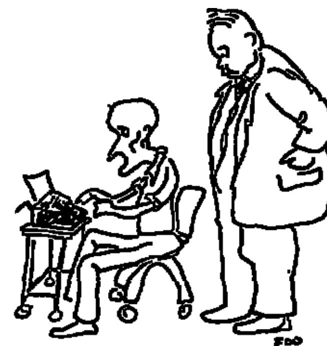
Ron, and a third-person "am tive that reflects the more simplistic viewpoint **of his younger** self. The falls once seemed to promise escape and excitement **"over** the river." but to the older ma" they represent all the ills of American civilization, epitomizing mankind's seemingly uncontrollable **urge** to pillage and destroy natural beauty and power. The **massive,** carcinogenic pollution of the river has transformed the falls, once the symbol of **the** New World itself, into a **roaring** testament to **transnational** greed, arrogance, and folly, and to the **irrational** allure of **self-destruction.**

As the story progresses through disillusionment to tragedy, the first- and **third**-person narratives begin to **merge, as** if the pain of remembrance *is* driving the two Rons closer together. Other 'voices" also begin to make themselves heard. bringing to life the narrator's vision of his adolescent **self:**

> My own apparent **stolidity . . . . was** a **mask or** lid to **keep** down the numerous people I could **sense agitating** within me. I had **wanted to *be* everyone, and this had frightened me. Or else** I was **nobody, a blank** mirror **that reflected those around me.**

Four characters step forward to deliver their own theatrical monologues, complete with stage directions: Steve and Carl. the young **Ron's best friends, who represent the two extremes of stolidity and nihilism: Larry. a" outcast from their circle, victim turned victimizer; and Angelo. a demonic figure who remains mysterious, but seems to personify the death-impulse** in his rage to humiliate, exploit, **and** destroy.

Tom Marshall is an accomplished writer, **and the poetic connections he creates between the degradation of nature, cultural, economic and technological imperialism, and the individual urge to self-destruct are haunting, if exceedingly difficult to paraphrase.** However. **the plot mechanics of the young Ron's**



coming-of-age story, coupled with the matter-of-fact way in which it is told, often don't allow the necessary suspension of disbelief. For example, **the fatal encounter that sets everything in motion requires that some typical** male **adolescents, not particularly sophis**ticated or ready to **acknowledge the homoemtic undercurrents within their own group, would casually drop in to a "queer bar" in late 1950s** Buffalo, **feeling "not uneasy or embarrassed at all." One pivotal character is a mid-level Mafioso,** in the same city and **era, who** happens to be openly, and aggressively, **homosexual. Neither situation is inconceivable, merely unlikely, and the narrator-Ron indicates from time to time that his own recollections should not be taken as fact, that "pure inventions will partly erase whatever might really have happened." So perhaps the young Ron's adventures are only a projection, or maybe a" exorcism, of the narrator's own obsessions.** But eve" **nightmares and hallucinations must convince. at least momentarily, in order to tighten and enthrall.** ☐

Knight of faith

By David **Helwig**

A PRAYER FOR OWEN MEANY

by John Irving

Lester & Orpen Dennys, 543 pages, $24.95 cloth

(ISBN 0 88619 226 9)

IN SPITE of the great public **success** of ***The** World According to Garp* **and** The *Hotel New **Hampshire*,** I hadn't read **a novel** by **John Irving until I was asked to review *A Prayer***

for Owen Meany. Irving now lives part of the year in Toronto, and this is his first novel to be published separately in Canada. Its narrator, John Wheelwright, has lived in Toronto for 20 years at the time he is telling the storv. He teaches English at Bishop Strachan School. and through him, Irving offers compliments to a number of Canadian fiction writers. The one he mentions first, and most significantly, is Robertson Davies.

However deliberate it may be (and I suspect it is quite deliberate) *A Prayer for Owen Meany* has a feeling of Davies's world; certainly Irving's Canada is Davies's Canada. His narrator is a lifelong bachelor. a teacher in a private school. haunted by the bizarre and magical ghosts of hi past, serious to a fault, and perhaps not much understood by those around him. That could, of course, be a description of Dunstan Ramsay.

I don't wish to make too uch of this. but even before the first mention of Davies in the book, it had struck me that there are novelists — they include Davies and, at least on the evidence of this book, Irving — who are entertainers, no matter how serious their themes, while other. equally readable figures, let's say Alice Munro or Raymond Carver, are not Davies is a comfortable writer; Alice Munm isn't.

A *Prayer for Owen Meany* is a high-spirited comic entertainment on the subject of Christian martyrdom. No, you didn't read that sentence wrong, though I have phrased it in its extreme form. The central character is a tiny, odd-looking. beleaguered boy — then man — with a "ruined" voice, a voice that is locked in a falsetto scream.

EVERYTHING THAT OWEN MEANY SAYS IS WRITTEN IN CAPITAL LETTERS. THE DE VICE WORKS. YOU CAN HEAR THAT LOCKED VOICE HE ALWAYS SOUNDS AS IF HE'S ABOUT TO EXPLODE. ANY MINUTE EVERYTHING IS UNDER PRESSURE.

Early in the book, there are a couple of fine comic scenes, more or less simultaneous productions of an Episcopalian Christmas pageant and a little-theatre version of A *Christmas Carol. Owen* Meany plays the Christ Child in one, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come in the other. Exhausted and feverish, Owen sees hi own name and date of death on Scrooge's tombstone. He believes that he has been given a divine vision of what will be. Later, he begins to have a recurrent dream that shows him the manner of his heroic death.

While Owen waits faithfully for martyrdom, he moves through life as a wisecracking sage and a moral litmus test for the town of Gravesend. New Hampshire, loved by the wise and good and hated by the slick and evil. Irving's book shows us a world in which we can know good from evil, and where they both reside. There is a powerful moment, in a scene at Gravesend Academy, when the Rev. Mr. Merrill, the school chaplain and a man of limited moral courage, finds it within himself to offer a long silent prayer for Owen Meany, after Owen's dismissal from the school. It is by means of this prayer that the vulgar and conniving new headmaster is defeated. Thii is one of those scenes (like the one where Mr. Knightley dances with Harriet Smith in Jane Austen's *Emma*) in which the reader is relieved and cheered by observing the defeat of thoughtless evil by determined goodness.

Owen Meany is a fine creation, a hard-nosed, skeptical Knight of Faith, and his voice embodies the book's best energies. Apart from him, most of the characters are functional rather than deeply resonant The somewhat intricate structure of plot and metaphor is well articulated, and the large set-pieces are hilarious. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* is an intelligent and well-formed entertainment, kindly and thoughtful, confident and comforting.

Should martyrdom be com-

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forting? Well. the book presents itself as a **defence** of Christian faith, and in that **context,** perhaps **so.**

And do we, if we have our wits about us. know good from evil, and where they both reside?

Maybe. And maybe not. □

Going swimmingly

By Bronwen Wallace

THE ORANGE FISH
by Carol Shields
Random House, 176 pages, $18.95 paper (ISBN 0 394 22100 1)

THERE'S something deceptively easy-going about Carol Shields's prose. You sit in your **favourite chair** with her newest book and a good cop of coffee, sipping the rich, dark liquid. drinking in the carefully balanced, **smoothly** constructed sentences. It's all of a piece: **gently,** effortlessly **so — the** chair in the sunlight. a story, **another** cup of coffee, another story.

It's only after you've read **two** or three that you realize that another process **—** a deeper, magical one **—** is going on in your brain, **transforming** how you look at **the** world and the people in it. The **straight-ahead-*Globe-and-Mail*** reality has vanished, and you're swimming dreamily along in a totally different **landscape.** carefree as an **orange fish.**

Some of **this atmosphere** is achieved by the **way Shields** yokes together the oddest adjectives **—** and gives you a description that is just right. 'Music so cool and **muffled** it **seems** smoothed into place **by** a thumb" is one of my particular **favourites,** but there are many, many others: "a **muzzy,** joyless adolescence": "a **sinus** infection coming on. a **mosquit0 army";** 'a suspicion that **confirms** itself by a muttering inattention." Tentative hugs are "our **swiftly** applied poultice **of** human flesh." One character's girlhood is described as **"a** time of **gulped** confusion in a place called Porcupine Falls."

The characters to whom these descriptions apply are people **like Hazel, the** central character in a story by the same name. **Recently widowed.** Hazel is a woman who

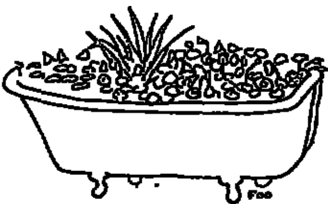
> understood nothing of **the national** debt or the **situation** in Nicaragua. **nothing.** At ten-thirty most mornings she was still in her dressing gown and had tbe sense to know this was shameful. She possessed a softened, tired body and rubbed looking eyes. Her posture was **only** moderate**ly good. She often touched her mouth with the back of** her hand. Yet someone. some person with a downtown commercial address and an official letterhead and a firm telephone manner had **seen fit** to **offer** her **a job.**

Hazel's job **—** demonstrating **Kitchen Kult's** Jiffy Sure Slicer in supermarkets **—** is not likely to lead her to the **centre** of the meaning of life. And yet **— this** being a **Carol** Shields story **—** that is exactly what happens. although (and **this** again is characteristic of Shields) the journey is a slow. unsteady one and what Hazel discovers about herself is not easy **for** her to articulate:

> **Everything** is a" accident. Hazel would be willing to say if asked. Her whole life is a" accident and by **accident** she has blundered into the heart of it.

Like Hazel. most of Shields's characters are "ordinary," unassuming, blundering, inarticulate. And it is to them **that** the most extraordinary things happen. A lithograph of an orange fish changes **the** lives of an **unhappily** married couple. A few weeks of recorder lessons in a drab room in a Montreal **"Y"** connects seven unlikely people to each other forever.

The Orange Fish picks up where Shields's last book of short stories, ***Various Miracks*** (1985). left off. Most of the stories here are denser, more sophisticated, more thickly layered than the earlier pieces. The ones that fail do so because they end too abruptly or, rather, fade off as ii the author suddenly lost interest. "Hazel" suffers a little from this, as does "Block Out" and, to a lesser extent, the title story itself. But most of the pieces **—** in particular "Collision,**"** 'Fuel for the Fire." and "Milk Bread **Beer** Ice" **—** are so **skilfully** shaded as to be almost **luminescent.**



In placing her ordinary characters in the not so matter-of-fact world of the late 20th century, **where** anything CM happen **and** usually does, Shields manages to explore the nature of language. the nature of story **in a** humorous, whimsical way. The very structure of her stories attests to the fragmentation of **narrative,** but **this** is presented as a shared joke **—** something the reader understands ***from*** his or her lived experience **—** rather **than** a" **abstract** theory with which the reader must be constantly **assaulted.**

My favourite story, "Collision," is constructed totally on the assumption that the reader shares this sense of the **absurdity** of language: It begins witti (for Shields) **ca** reasonably **straightforward description** of a setting and some characters. But **then:**

> But take **another** look. The washed clarity is deceiving, the yawning transparency is fake. Wbat we observe belies the real nature of the earth's atmosphere which ***is adrift, today as any day,*** with biographical debris. It is everywhere. a thick **swimmy blizzard** of it, more ubiquitous by far than earthly salt or sand or humming electrons. . The continents and oceans are engulfed. We are, to speak figuratively. as we more and more do. as we more and more ***must*** do. smothering in our **own narrative** litter-bag.

What grows from this sense of shared recognition **is a hilarious** story, rather than a theoretical **construct.**

I" the same way, the final story "Milk Bread Beer Ice" explores

> the **real** death of words. . . these homely products **reduced** to husks. tbeir tme sense drained purely away. Ice beer bread milk. **Rumblings** in the **throats, syllables** strung on an old **clothesline,** electronic buzzing.

Yet in a **Carol** Shields story, author, reader, character all know. to the extent that is possible, how we are placed **— in** our lives, **in** the larger history of our time **—** and out of that shared knowledge grows **the vision** that enables us to get on **with** it.

> Another. lesser world is brought forward. distorted and freshly provisioned. She loves it **—** its weather and **depth,** its exact chambers, its lost circuits. its covered pleasures, its sub merged patter" of **communication.**

These are wonderful stories. Enjoy them. □

Sisters of mercy

By Barbara Novak

AT THE HOUSE ON PINE STREET
by **Shaun Herron**
Macmillan, 201 pages, $19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7715 9650 2)

***THE* KINKAJOU**
by Trevor Ferguson
Macmillan, 292 pages, $19.95 cloth (ISBN 6 7715 9916 1)

BY SOME quirk of fate both these novels are **written in** tbe first person by male **narrators** whose lives are disrupted by their respective romantic entanglements with a nun. The nuns are young and **beautiful and** privy to secrets that they are unable or unwilling to share with their would-be lovers, thus **providing** plenty of mystery and moving the plots along quite splendidly. The contemporary writer is **hard pressed to come up with** a **better** symbol of **idealized** purity than those cloistered

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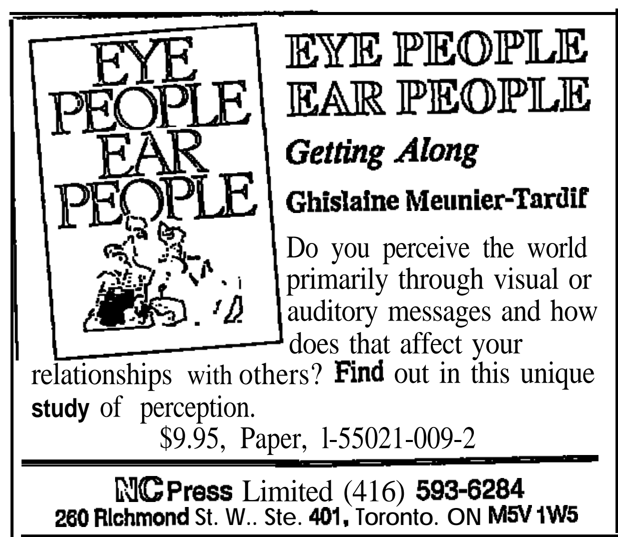

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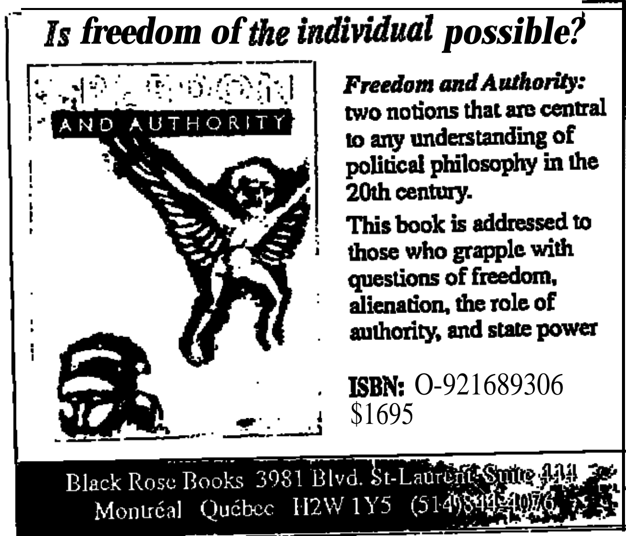
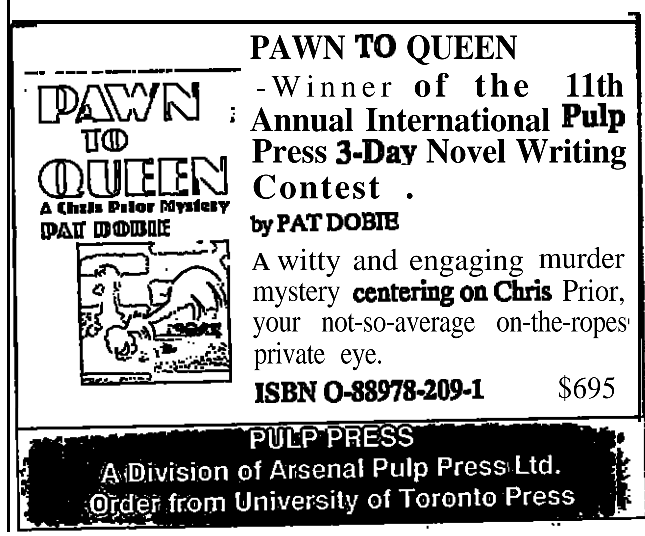




sisters who have chosen spirituality and in doing so. have rejected men. Their purity makes it tempting to place them on a pedestal, and their unattainability is both reassuring and challenging.

In *At the House on Pine Street* Mary Jane's status even as an ex-nun (she has left the Order, but still considers herself a bride of Christ) causes the narrator to perceive her as rather purer of heart than she in fact is:

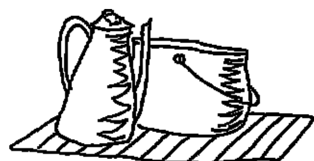
> She could do no wrong. If something she did or said appeared to be in contradiction or in conflict with the holy, almost celestial, persona I gave her. I was wrong. I had misunderstood. I was too worldly. I was unworthy and as time went by I bad nothing less than a shining saint in my house. incongruously incarnated as my housekeeper.

The narrator of *The Kinkajou* has a similarly elevated view of his beloved:

> Chantelle was sacred to me. and yes. that was part and parcel of my withdrawal too. It's hard to be lecherous with the sainted.

In both novels the narrators leave home (the old order) and settle elsewhere before meeting up with their respective nuns. who provide the catalyst for establishing the new order. Kyle (in *The Kinkajou*) moves from Tennessee to Vermont, where he has inherited an inn from the father he never met. Every Easter the inn is visited by a decidedly unorthodox order of nuns. Jamie (in *At the House on Pine Street*) is a successful Irish novelist and journalist in London, who is wooed by the editor of *The Toronto Mail* at a time when he has become disenchanted with his common-law marriage to a BBC producer. Shortly after arriving in Canada, however. he parts company with the newspaper and settles in Port Hope, where he lives near a convent of discontented nuns.

Trevor Ferguson, a Montreal writer of hvo previous novels, has with *The Kinkajou*



written an extraordinarily energetic and fast-paced mystery in which past and present are interwoven and sub-plots explode with violence. His anti-heroic narrator is surrounded by larger-than-life characters — from his snake-lady mother and her bird-trainer lesbian lover, to the indomitable Mother Superior, the red-neck Tennessee sheriff and Hazel. the inn's cantankerous housekeeper. This is big-screen, Hollywood material. written with a sure hand, and a brilliant mind for plotting. The story is so strong that the reader will readily forgive occasional inconsistencies, such as when a character who is too drunk even to say "You poor child" without slurring proceeds to launch into a perfectly coherent page and a half of revelation ending in one of the more gruesome scenes in the book.

Shaun Herron's style is deliberately understated. His narrator writes novels with such apparent ease that he mentions them only in passing — by the end he has five to his credit and a sixth to someone else's credit. And yet it is that uncredited book that provides the central plot development. Unfortunately, Herron, though a fine stylist, isn't as convincing when it comes to plot. The issue of the stolen manuscript is far too transparent. It is inconceivable, since it was published under its original title, that his lover's evident innocence as to its true authorship could he more than posturing, yet for the plot to succeed we must believe that she doesn't know who wrote it. And the ending of the book is far too sombre for a novel that is fandamentally a literary romp full of philosophical elements. with more than a few insights into the nature of writing itself. Herron's stabs at the Canadian cultural establishment are perfectly aimed and sure to ruffle a few feathers. The risky device he employs in the final section is pulled off with greater success than it was by D. M. Thomas in *The White Hotel;* in Herron's novel it serves as a brilliant metaphor for the role of the author, who knows exactly what his characters 'have been up to but [not] what they will do or become." □

Trees before people

By Larry Scanlan

A LIFE IN THE COUNTRY
by Bruce Hutchison
Douglas & McIntyre, 133 pages, $18.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88894 620 1)

AFTER 88 years of living on planet Earth, Bruce Hutchison has come to certain conclusions. He is a man who knows not only what's what, but what's sacred, what's profane.

In *A Life in the Country* (an aptly named, elegant, Vivaldi-like little memoir, carved neatly by the four seasons) the author describes a magnificent, seven-century-old cedar a mile from his cottage on Vancouver Island. He catches the moment when the tree was felled to make way for someone's two-car garage: "The cedar swayed. its torn wood screamed, its wings beat as if for fllgbt.' Though such prose stretches for effect, we are made to understand that only God could have made such a living monument and only Man could have axed it so unthinkingly.

Hutchison's other property, "a dozen acres of cheaply purchased meadow, rock and trees outside Victoria" offered in 1924 the home cum retreat that he Sought. If his first act was to fence the property and put a house on it, his second was to plant yet more trees, many of them now four feet in diameter. Later in the book, there is a curious juxtaposition. He mentions that "infant oaks" emerged in his rock garden and "with a guilty feeling we uprooted them and ended lives that might otherwise have lasted for centuries." Turn to the next page and we read of the author's method of dealing with strangers who chanced by hoping for a bit of a chat with Hutchison the gardener. He had learned from his father to greet unwelcome strangers with incoherent babbling, even Latin, and thus they were discouraged. So you see where hi sympathies lie.

Also sacred in the Hutchison scheme of things: birds and weather (in all forms), the chorus of frogs, work (woodchopping and repairing old punts are especially recommended), cow manure and worms (boons to gardens), and wheelbarrows. Obsessed with the need for privacy and a pantheist in the tradition of E. B. White (another fine journalist who occasionally preferred the company of trees to that of humans), Bruce Hutchison divides gardeners into "true believers" and 'triflers" and the world In general into people of the indoors and people of the outdoors. His contempt for the former is barely restrained here and so his notions of what's profane come as no surprise.

Hunters, loggers, speedboats on the lake — all these earn his rebuke. His house, once four miles from Victoria, is now besieged by bungalows. his orchard by apple-thieving vandals. One catches a whiff of intolerance and yet I admire this ecological hermit who has no time for humans who have no time for Nature.

Read only this book and you can easily forget that Brace Hutchison was in his day a nationally recognized journalist and author, the winner of three Governor General's Awards and three National Newspaper Awards. Here he is a young man growing older and wiser. learning not to be seduced each spring by seed catalogues into planting too large a garden, becoming over time a reliable, even a principled carpenter (as a carpenter friend put it, "ornament construction, never construct ornament"). By degrees we meet his eccentric friends and neighbours. We

meet James Riviere, who guided Hutchison and his wife Dot along horse hails in the Rockies. By his nose alone he could predict the weather and his knowledge of aboriginal medicine was such that he could treat the various ailments and wounds of his troupe with wild strawberry and turkey grass. Then there was George Rogers, a neighbour who could fix any machine (including the water pump, that quintessential and maddening device that enables and denies country living) and who would never accept payment. I've known such types in the country, and transplanted urbanites would perish without them.

A Life in the Country is just the right length. I began to grow weary of the author's hymn, which, crudely put, goes something like this: "If only more people would do as I have done. ..." And yet there is no denying the book's clarity and good sense. Simple pleasures, meditative quiet, humility before Nature, the joy to be had from watching things grow: these are the lessons that an 88-year-old man has learned. His own father. he writes, had such a faith in seed and soil and growth that it became for him a private, sustaining religion. I can see how it would. □

The small picture

By Jon Peirce

THE CHANNEL SHORE
by Charles Bruce
Formac, 388 pages, $14.95 paper (ISBN 0 88780 065 3)

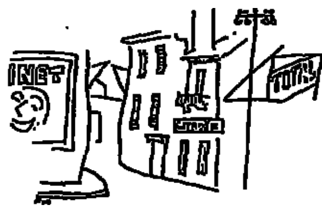
CHARLES BRUCE: WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME, A LITERARY BIOGRAPHY
by Andrew Wainwright
Formac, 270 pages, $19.95 paper (ISBN 0 88780 064 a

CHARLES BRUCE is, as his biographer Andrew Wainwright admits, "hardly a household name," even to most Canadian literature specialists. Yet Bruce won the Governor General's Award for his poetry collection, *The Mulgrave Road,* in 1951, and almost won it again three years later for his novel. *The Channel Shore.*

When au author of the stature Bruce once enjoyed falls into almost total oblivion for 30 years, simple fairness dictates the need for a reappraisal of the man and his work. Thus by helping to make Bruce's best-known novel available, and by writing hls biography, Wainwright has done a useful service. But he would have done even more useful service had he given some thought to the likely audience for his biography.

As things stand, it isn't clear just who he expected that audience to be. *World Enough and Time* says far too little about Bruce as a person and puts far too much emphasis on detailed examination of his unpublished and unfinished work to be of interest to non-specialist readers. But it also leaves too many important questions about Bruce unanswered and is far too sloppily written and produced to be taken at all seriously by scholars of Canadian literature.

In addition to painting the "big picture" of the author and his work, the biographer of an out-of-fashion writer like Charles Bruce must, at least if he wishes to reach an audience of more than 500, show why the author was popular in his own time, why he was later neglected but deserves reconsideration. and what about his life, particularly his iife in relation to his work, is of special interest. Wainwright provides a certain insight into Bruce's popularity in his own time, but beyond that his "portrait" of Bruce is little more than a shadow. Worse still, his prose is almost uniformly ponderous and long-winded, so that he takes nearly 250 pages to tell us what a more considerate



writer could have said, more eloquently, in less than 100.

To be fair, Wainwright does give a reasonably complete account of Bruce's boyhood in Port Shoreham, the small Nova Scotia community on which he was to draw for most of his fiction, and of hi college days at Mount Allison. where he edited the school newspaper and was known as "The Bard." But we learn next to nothing about Bruce's postcollegiate life.

Wainwright claims to have conducted extensive interviews with Bruce's surviving relatives (his widow, all four sons, four sisters) as well as journalistic colleagues. Yet of his wife, Agnes, we learn lithe more than her name; nor do we find out a greal deal more about their sons. Of his private life in Toronto, where he lived for most of his adult life, we learn nothing at all beyond. the location of hi house and the fact that *Channel* Shore was composed 'in the horizontal position" on the livingroom sofa in the evenings Of Bruce's distinguished 35-year career with Canadian Press we see only bits and snatches. This omission is regrettable, since his contributions to Canadian *journalism* may well have been as great as his conhibutions to Canadian poetry and fiction.

While telling us disappointingly little about Charles Bruce as a person, *World Enough* provides far *more* detail about Bruce's writing process than anyone could conceivably want to know. In addition to a 30-page chapter on the composition of *Channel* Shore. there are two chapters on au earlier, unpublished novel entitled *Currie Head,* and the equivalent of another full chapter on later unpublished work. Here is pedantry for its own sake. The reader who spends the 45 minutes required to wade through all this stuff will take away little of value beyond the recognition (itself not altogether profound) that like most writers of fiction, Charles Bruce initially found it difficult to distance himself from his past.

Wainwright is on the mark in suggesting that Bruce's clear, graceful prose style and, above all, his quietly intense regionalism were largely responsible for his success in his own time. It does not seem to me, by the way. that given that Formac's is the second recent re-issue of *The Channel Shore* much more need to be said about the, novel here. The qualities that were its strengths 35 years ago remain so today. Its merit is unquestioned; it was — and is — among the best regional novels ever produced in Canada In explaining Bruce's long neglect by critics and anthologists, Wainwright is on much shakier ground. His implication that Bruce was essentially an innocent victim of some kind of central Canadian establishment conspiracy against Maritime writers and culture is at best debatable, at worst almost paranoid. Certainly such an accusation needs to be supported by evidence far stronger than the fact that only five 0 95 20th-century poets in a 'ven anthology came from k e Maritimes.

It is true. as Wainwright says, that Bruce was omitted from most anthologies after 1980. But he was also doing very little writing by then. In this connection. it is interesting to note that in 19.69, he could not persuade even his close friend and long-time publisher, John Gray of MacMillan's, to print a collec'don of poems that included most of those printed earlier in *Mulgrave Road.* Given this fact, his omission from anthologies should hardly have come as a surprise, regrettable though it may have been.

W&right's intense focus on scholarly minutiae leaves him little time for dealing with the important questions of Bruce's life. For instance, given Bruce's oft-professed desire to return to his native Nova Scotia, why didn't he do so upon taking early retirement (at age 57) from CP? Why, having long yearned to retire from journalism so that he could write full time, did

he refuse the offer of hvo professorships either of which would have left him ample leisure. choosing instead to plunge into a commissioned history of Southam Press? And why, above all. did he write far less during his retirement than he did when working long days at CP? Wainwright does not totally disregard these issues, but by attempting to address them in a six-page conclusion, he tends to trivialize them. All too often. the result is an "answer" based on speculation when the right kind of research might have produced a basis in fact.

Space does not permit anytbing like a detailed listing of *World Enough's* stylistic and editorial flaws; suffice it to say that these flaws are far too frequent. We read, for example. of a tribute to Bliss Carman "couched in language more indicative of his comfort with certain imagery than it was admirable emulation of Carman himself." Gabrielle Roy's name is misspelled, and Wainwright's own name is misspelled on the copyright page. And the short poem "Return and Introduction" contains not one but *three* typos in the second stanza. Why Wainwright should have paid tribute to his editor in his acknowledgements is beyond me — unless he was being ironic. □

Her fill of sunlight

By Joe Rosenblatt

POETRY BY CANADIAN WOMEN

edited by Rosemary Sullivan

Oxford University Press, 301 pages, $19.95 paper (ISBN 0 19 540688 5)

OXFORD UNIVERSITY Press deserves kudos in Canada from poetry connoisseurs for publishing this ambitious anthology representing more than 70 poets from pm-Confederation days to the present postmodernist era. Rosemary Sullivan. a poet and associate professor at the University of Toronto. has carefully structured this volume reminding

the reader of Virginia Woolf's wisdom (in *A Room of One's Own*), to the effect that

> Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.

No doubt influenced by the above maxim, and having culled a century and a half fmm the corpus of Canadian women's poetry, Sullivan places those gems under a variant roof with a historical and evolutionary nexus to hold the poetical works together. She allows tbe reader to interpret the anthology "as a cumulative work, a single long poem..."

It works; the treasury's clever infrastructure draws this reader almost effortlessly from the earliest poet, Margaret Blennerhasset and her ponderous and didactic verse (1778?-1842) to Susanna Moodie's caustic muse. I, however, found myself wanting to extricate myself from archaic poetry and beam up to the modernistic sunlight and so my biases waved goodbye as I travelled away from pioneer snowdrifts. russet landscapes, and wild geese. Soon I welcomed Dorothy Livesay's "Bartok and the Geranium" with its Wallace Stevens influence: "She lifts her green umbrellas/ Toward the pane/ Seeking her fill of sunlight/ Or of min."

I hastened to a masterpiece. rereading P. K. Page's 'Stories of Snow." The poem's magic instantly sang to me:

> *Those in the vegetable rain retain*
> *an area behind their sprouting eyes*
> *held soft and rounded with the dream of snow*
> *precious and reminiscent as those globes*
> souvenir *of some never-nether land —*

I went on for a further fix, shooting up with Anne Szumigalski's tingling stinger, The Bees" and with Margaret Atwood's "Notes toward a Poem That Can Never Be Written." Atwood's is a poem I've continually urged creative-writing students to absorb into their malleable psyches in the hope that they might learn something about the craft of modem poetry.

Feeling some cosmic vibrations I sailed over to Gwendolyn MacEwen's fantastical work. I dined on "A Breakfast For Barbarians." It was this very poem that inspired my egg muse. It was then that a wee embryo in the egg spoke to me. Suddenly I remembered that Sullivan had lauded Margaret Avison as a top heavy metaphysical poet 'No Canadian poet had yet demonstrated the linguistic sophistication of Avison in her pursuit of a personal metaphysic." A male embryo squeaked inside my soul. Okay, then what about forgotten A M. Klein and especially his lyrical wonder "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"? Must we allow gender prejudice to get in the way of value judgements in poetry? Yes, assembling a platinum ghetto does produce its blind orbs.

Among the contemporary poets shining in this anthology I was pleased to see Lorna Crozier's poems well represented. My favourite Crozier poem, "We Call This Fear" is her best linkage in connecting visceral emotion with metaphorical vision. Erln Mouré is in fine bardic form with a violent poem, "Vision of a Woman Hit By a Bird." In thii piece she is both 'the woman hit by a bird" and the critter itself, injured and beating its wings wildly. Daphne Marlatt in terms of linguistic adventure is the most experimental poet in the anthology. Her extended line placements on the page connote stylistic elements of the kinetic beat poets, Corso, Ginsburg and Black Mountain poets Olson and Creeley along with their spiritual forebear, Walt Whitman. Sharon Thesen combines a demotic stance with an opaque sublime. I enjoyed The Occasions." a magical mystery tour through Vancouver and especially its illustrious zoo with ape-In-residence — "purple-ass baboons."

Being an animal lover generally (baboons, frogs, cats, snakes, and abused and much maligned toads. ..) I am partial to Jan Conn's society and landscape. "All Women Dream of Snakes" struck my undulous curiosity. Here was a potentially controversial poem. Dare she mention snakes (an obvious penis sub symbol) and "Freud in the background" and survive in a feminist atmosphere? But wait — Jan Conn favours snakes because of other associations:

> *It must have a tot to do*
> *with tba texture of their skin*
> *(belts, purses, shoes)*
> *and the lack of legs*
> *so every moment is a sort of dance —*
> *grace they slide in and out of*
> *like a hand* in a *glove.*

Coon's snake poem is a metaphysical jewel, like Phyllis Webb's "Eschatology of Spring," which contains paradisiac fauna and animal life who 'divulge occult excrement." I am pleased, however. to report that none of Webb's delightful unicorns excrete in The Days of the Unicorn." a memorable poem.

Despite the anthology's bland title (meant to draw on the mass woman's market in the English-speaking world) this remarkable opus is a must for every library. If *Poetry by Canadian Women* proves anything it is that women's poetry is an illuminant force unto itself no longer dependent on some male conductor along a literary power grid. □

CORRECTION

Books in Canada apologizes to Budge Wilson. In our April issue, we mistakenly referred to her book as "his" book.

FIRST NOVELS

Cheap thrills

As Edna St. Vincent Millay said, 'It's not one damn thing after another, it's the same damn thing over and over again.'

By Dayv James-French

ERIC MCCORMACK wisely distances himself from the gratuitous horrors of hi first novel. The Paradise Motel (Viking, 210 pages, $22.95). The narrator, Ezra Stevenson, hears a bizarre anecdote originally told to his grandfather by a ship's engineer. A South American doctor kills his wife and covers the evidence by surgically implanting pieces of her body in the abdomens of his four children. The children are named *Ester,* Zachary, Rachel, and Amos. Put them all together and they spell ... *Ezra.* This mysterious link to the present provides the slight impetus that McCormack finds ade quate to shape his material. As Ezra searches for the ultimate fate of his collective namesake, he's ear-witness to disjointed tales suggestive of a hybrid of Somerset Maugham's Singapore stories and Kraft-Ebbing's *Psychopathia Sexualis.*

The narrative jumps from person to person, obliquely demonstrating a point that apparently eludes the author: excessive levels of violence blunt the capacity to respond to individual cases — even McCormack's interest shows signs of strain. A murder is described thus:

> Inflamed with anger. shouting her contempt, she hacked once with the knife at the white. naked throat, ripping apart the soft carotid artery.

Hacked is the operative word. Pubescent boys tell each other stories like this, imagining that the resultant *frisson* is similar to sexual excitement. When novelists substitute sensation for reflection, imagination subordinates itself to cheap thrills. The predictably "ambiguous" ending (and a hot shower) will help you recover from feeling dirty after reading *The Paradise Motel. The* story has no staying power. As Edna St. Vincent Millay said about something else. "It's not one damn thing after another, it's the same damn thing over and over again."

A similar story-within-a-story repetition distances the reader from the over-wrought hut mechanical narration of 0. R Melling's Falling Out of Time (Viking, 201 pages, $22.95). The nameless narrator has travelled to a writers' retreat in Ireland, there to create a myth of Two Magicians that will free her from tbe real story of her failed marriage to Damian. Fantasy controls reality. She meets an artist, Michael, who alters the shape and meaning of her invented Michael/Damian in his relationship with her alter ego, Raffie. That totals three, four, or perhaps six characters, and all of them, oddly enough, have little pointed ears. The men are 'elfin." the women are "like a sprite or something."

The complex construction is quite easy to follow; Melling is eager to let the reader know that she wants the stories to he read as parallel. She and her narrator use exactly the same language: as a result there is no separation between one "spell" and another. In trying to wrap up the increasingly messy plot, the narrator claims, 'I invoke the First and Universal Law of Fiction. Nothing *is true. Everything is invented."* It's been a while since I was in writer school, but the First Law I remember is: Every word must be true.

Times change, rules change. But standards do not. Even as a parody of cold, post-Nixon self-involvement, I can't believe a sentence like *Michael sensed the psychological balance which was being maintained and decided it was time to escalate.* Which means, They seem to be getting along well and he should ask her to sleep with him. Equally unengaging is Raffie's insight: *She saw herself moving round and round a delineated sphere whose perimeter was steadily shrinking to a dot.* Which means ... well. who knows?

Falling Out of Time is intoxicated with its own overdosed linguistic excess. and perhaps that explains why the reader is excluded from the hilarity. The contents overwhelm the context and the three levels of story seem to be hvo too many.

After an opening of self-referential fragments — teasers — Jacqueline Dumas strains to graft an extra layer on Madeleine and the Angel (Fifth House Publishers. 192 pages, $12.95) with a retelling of *The Wild Swans.* It's unnecessary, and the narrative soon makes a smooth transition to its own story, rich with the language of a very private liturgy. Madeleine is the mother of Pauline. whose story this is. She is also, intermittently, the Angel of her husband's alcoholic psychosis — an enabler both punitive and victimized. The megalomaniacal Michel is abusive in every conceivable manner; sexually, physically, and emotionally. After his death, Pauline examines her own memories, which are hazy with self-denial. The scenes from her past are made powerful by the novel's refusal to present "reality" with any greater clarity than Pauline's memory can command; the story is internalized in the exact manner of the subjugation it details.

Dumas limits her focus. specifically, to Pauline. Moral outrage is not buttressed (or buffered) by sociological theory, but there's a short, revealing scene in which Pauline's daughter. Elise. is reduced to tears by the Christian/patriarchal-oppressor figure of Santa Claus demanding to know if she's been naughty or *nice.*

The action of Keith Leckie's The Seventh Gate (Macmillan, 334 pages, $19.95) is less written than reported. The straightforward narrative is presented in the unadorned manner of a television movie-of-the-week: all the foreground detail without subtlety or depth of field.

David Lassiter is a retired journalist, content to sail the Caribbean, until Globalcom News offers him a great deal of money to cover the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, with a huge bonus for securing an interview with Jesse. a member of a resistance faction. Since Jesse is David's long-lost brother, he agrees. The subject of Jesse's opium addiction is quickly dealt with, and the addiction equally quickly overcome. Next, the brothers become involved with the Eastern Alliance of Afghanistan, working with its inspiring but cowardly leader.

Every possible hackneyed phrase is put to work to keep the reader's attention on the plot rather than the page. No one will want to linger over descriptive passages where all valleys are "fertile" and all mountain peaks 'ancient." Wounds leave "cruel red" scars. Lassiter's "blood quickened" when he knew he would accept the assignment Ali Jamal's first wife "had ridden like a man" but his "new wife. unfortunately, could read a little." No one says, "Ve haff ways of making you talk,' but "Allah will guide even an infidel eye engaged in His work" may be a new "foreign" identification for the '80s.

The Seventh Gate is a page-turner, best read to discover how the story turns out, rather than for the pleasure of the telling. ☐

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LETTERS

LEACOCK HOUSE

IMAGINE PARIS without the Eiffel Tower, or think of it jammed cheek-by-jowl against a glassy row of apartments.

Yet in Orillia Mayor John Palmer wants to sell most of the gardens around the Stephen Leacock Memorial Home to build apartments. Why? Palmer explained on cross-Canada radio that Leacock was somewhat unpopular 75 years ago when *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* was first published.

If Palmer had been in charge at the time of the furor that greeted the construction of the Eiffel Tower a century ago. he would have ordered it melted for scrap. The French should be warned in case Palmer shows up in Paris with a cutting torch.

Perhaps it is too late to save the Leacock Home. but there's still time to protect the Champlain Monument in Couchiching Beach Park. After all, it would make a cute courtyard statue for a condominium if Palmer decides to sell more of Canada's cultural heritage.

Ted Rushton
Phoenix, Arizona

HIGH SERIOUSNESS

IN THE March issue. Richard Paul Knowles attacks my biography of William Hutt apparently for not being the kind of book one suspects he might have written — had he merely the time and inclination to do so.

Apparently unaware of the distinctions between theatre biography and academic term papers, Knowles reads my book as if it were meant to be a seminar on acting. and then criticizes it for not being precisely what it was not meant to be. Accusing me of "name-droppings" and "pop psychologizings," he charges that my book fails to provide a serious analysis of Hutt's craft and is riddled with "mundane and pretentious clichés" — providing no examples, of course. as he passes judgement from tbe heights of Mount Allison. His comments will come as a surprise to the many actors and directors at Stratford and to the majority of reviewers (including the Shakespearean scholar Alexander Leggatt) who have responded most enthusiastically and warmly to the very thing that Knowles finds lacking.

Knowles should at least get his facts right. There are substantial analyses in my book of Hutt's landmark acting as Pandarus, Feste, Lady Bracknell, and Timon. And Robin Phillips did not say that everything that Hutt does should be "written down." Rather, Phillips said, 'Everything he does should be recorded" — which is quite a different thing. After a misquotation about Hutt (I wrote "pieces of his self," not "pieces of himself — a subtle point which any academic should note!). Knowles goes on to complain about my 21 short and eccentrically chosen chapters." Now I suppose a book of merely 366 pages could be considered short given the kind of subject it has, but what is eccentric about chapters being arranged chronologically for a person's life? Knowles calls chapter 4 the "middle section" in a book of 21 chapters. Give" his shaky sense of numbers, it is easy to understand why he appears to be baffled by other things, particularly my selective principles.

With his Allisonian Manual of Style in hand, Knowles fumes about my language, objecting that "writing like this is simply not acceptable in works of literary or dramatic criticism." Quite! But I was writing a biography — not a" essay for a learned journal or for those who suffer conniptions over 'shy. pink" roses, arch euphemisms, or adjectives outside the domain of the classroom. In his missionary zeal for academic writing. Knowles seems to forget that style is a case **of knowing what your literary purpose is and who your audience is likely to** be. Had I wanted a plain,

declarative prose style, I could have managed one by imitating countless dreary journalists. Had I wanted a relentless solemnity — the *Sturm und Drang* of High Seriousness — I would have done my version of Common Room experts. And had I pretended to purity in style, I could have consulted Knowles. whose occasional journalism has a purity unviolated by accidental or deliberate tropes of lyricism. But I detest the rattle of pedants who know the price of pretentiousness and the value of nothing else.

Keith Garebian
Mississauga

Richard Paul Knowles replies: *I* stand by my review.

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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:

An Other I: The Fictions of Clark Blaise, by Robert Lecker, ECW.
Arrondissements, by Daryl Hine, Porcupine's Quill.
The Backyard Horseman, by Ron Rude, Lone Pine.
The Beauty Who Would Not Spin, by Adele Morgan Fasick, illustrated by Leslie Elizabeth Watts, North Winds.
Before and After, by Katherine Govier, Penguin.
The Blue Raven, by Ted Harrison, Macmillan.
Bonds of Wire, by Kingsley Brown, Harper & Collins.
***Buying, Owning, & Selling a Condominium*: A Guide for Canadians**, by Douglas A. Gray, McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
Canadian Writers and Their Works: Fiction Series, Vols. 3 and 9, edited by Jack David et al., ECW.
Catholics, by Brian Moore, M & S.
Charles Baillairgé: Architect & Engineer, by Christina Cameron, McGill-Queen's.
The Charter of Rights and the Legalization of Politics in Canada, by Michael Mandel, Wall & Thompson.
The Chinese Man Said Goodbye, by Bruce McManus, Blizzard.
The Cognitive Revolution in Western Culture: Volume 1, The Birth of Expectation, by Don LePan, Macmillan.
Crackpot, by Adele Wiseman, M & S.
The Cult of Seizure, by Rikki Ducornet, Porcupine's Quill.
Duncan Graham: Medical Reformer and Educator, by Robert B. Kerr and Douglas Waugh, Hannah/Dundurn.
***E. J. Pratt*: Complete Poems, Parts 1 and 2**, edited by Sandra Djwa and R. G. Moyles, U of T.
The Earth and How It Works, by Steve Parker, Macmillan.
Ed Broadbent: The Pursuit of Power, by Judy Steed, Penguin.
Emergency Care for Cats and Dogs, by Craton Burkholder, Summerhill.
Extraordinary Experiences, by John Robert Colombo, Hounslow.
Fade to Blue, by Michael Dennis, Pulp Press.
Financial Pursuit, by Graydon G. Watters, Financial Knowledge.
From Culture to Power: The Sociology of English Canada, by Robert J. Brym, Studies in Canadian Sociology.
The *Girl in the Hat*, by Jane Jacobs, Oxford.
Goldilocks and the Three Bears, by Tamara Lynn Thiebaux, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
Henny Penny, by H. Werner Zimmerman, North Winds.
History on the Run, by Knowlton Nash, M & S.
How People Lived, by Anne Millard, Macmillan.
Human Rights in Canadian Foreign Policy, edited by Robert O. Matthews and Cranford Pratt, McGill-Queen's.
Imaginings: Poems by Canadian Children, Puffin.
In Love and War: The De Lanceys at Waterloo, by James B. Lamb, Macmillan.
Inside the Bank of Canada's Weekly Financial Statistics: A Technical Guide, by Peter Martin, The Fraser Institute.
Jacob's Little Giant, by Barbara Smucker, Puffin.
Last Call: A Journey Into — And Out of — Alcohol Addiction, by Bruce Blackadar, Prentice-Hall.
Life Writing: Autobiographers and Their Craft, by Ruth Latta, General Store.
Little by Little: A Writer's Education, by Jean Little, Penguin.
Lucky Strike, by Hrant Alianak, Playwrights Union.
The Man Who Murdered God, by John Lawrence Reynolds, Penguin.
Marshall McLuhan: The Man and His Message, edited by George Sanderson and Frank Macdonald, Fulcrum.
Microwave Food Fun with *Madame Benoit*, by Madame Jehane Benoit, Les Editions Heritage.
A Necessary End, by Peter Robinson, Penguin.
Once Over Lightly, by Billi King, Wolsak and Wynn.
Reading Mavis Gallant, by Janice Kulyk Keefer, Oxford.
Red Earth: Revolution in a Sichuan Village, by Stephen Endicott, NC.
The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde: Works *from the Collection of George Costakis*, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.
Scholastic Sticker Fun: Dinosaurs, by Pat Hancock, illustrated by Paul McCusker, Scholastic.
Smart Money: Investment Strategies for Canadian Women, by Cathryn Motherwell, Key Porter.
Such Is My Beloved, by Morley Callaghan, M & S.
Taking Education Seriously, by John Wilson and Barbara Cowell, Althouse.
Talking About Periods, Vancouver Women's Health Collective.
Tay John, by Howard O'Hagan, M & S.
The Book of Eve, by Constance Beresford-Howe, M & S.
The Field Naturalist: John Macoun, the Geological Survey, and Natural Science, by W. A. Waiser, U of T.
The Third Ascent, by Frank Moher, Blizzard.
Translating Sleep: A Serial Meditation on and by Alexander Graham Bell, by Jim Smith, Wolsak and Wynn.
Tried and True Programming Guide, edited by Mary Eaglesham, Saskatchewan Library Association.
The View from Tabor Hill: Paintings and Drawings by Glenn Priestley, by Robert Stacey, U of Waterloo/Archives of Canadian Art.
Women Talking About Health: Getting Started with Workshops and Groups, Vancouver Women's Health Collective.
Women at Work: Discrimination and Response, by Stephen G. Peitchinis, M & S.
WordPerfect 5 in Ten Easy Lessons, by Rashid Tayyeb, published by the author.
Wordstruck: A Memoir, by Robert MacNeil, Viking.
Write Now!, by Karleen Bradford, Scholastic.
Youth and Adult: The Shared Journey Towards Wholeness, by Frank D. Cardelle, Gardner.

CanWit No. 138

By Barry Baldwin

WE HAVE the last words of many famous people, but what about their first ones? Competitors are invited to supply suitable words uttered by prominent Canadians at their birth. Examples: *"Le jour de gloire est arrivé"* — Pierre Trudeau: "If management harassment doesn't stop, 111 be out for a long time" -Jean-Claude Parrott. The prize is $25. sad entries should be sent to CanWit No. 138, ***Books in Canada***, 366 Adelaide St. E., Sk. 432. Toronto. Ontario M5A 3X9 by May 25.

RESULTS OF **CANWIT** NO. 138

The request for eye-catching titles for film biographies of prominent Canadians provoked a (relatively) large response. A few were too subtle to make it to the marquees, and one or two in longhand failed from illegibility. Not an easy decision this month, but the winner is Diane Stuart of Vancouver, who got the right combination of paranomasia and meanness:

Robo Copps (Sheila Copps)
Nadirs of the Lost Clark (Joe Clark)
Throw Flora from the Train (Flora MacDonald)
The Unbearable Tightness of M. King (MacKenzie King)

Honourable Mentions

For Whom Nobel Tolls (Lester Pearson)
The Codfather (Joey Smallwood)
-Alec McEwen, Ottawa

A Man for One Season (John Turner)
Margaret Doesn't Live Here Any More (Pierre Trudeau)
Everybody Waved Goodbye (Ed Broadbent)
-Sharon MacFarlane, Beechy, Sask.

A Funny Thlng Happened on the Way to the Quorum
-Charles Crockford, Waterloo, Ont

SOLUTION TO ACROSTIC NO. 19

The packing of the cauliflowers for this competition was a decidedly particular job. Each specimen was pulled up by the roots. I wrapped the heads in waxed paper and between each head I stuffed papers, enough to hold them tightly in position. The rest was up to Lady Luck.

Klaas De Jong, *Cauliflower Crown*, Western Producer Prairie Books

CanLit acrostic no. 20

By Mary D. Trainer

		1 T	2 I	3 B		4 D	5 H	6 U	7 Q	8 L		9 G	10 F	11 N	12 S		13 W		14 C		
15 I	16 E	17 D	18 P	19 O		20 G	21 X	22 W	23 F	24 P	25 A	26 M	27 V		28 R	29 H		30 C	31 A	32 G	33 D
34 P		35 R	36 J	37 S	38 F		39 L	40 B	41 C	42 M	43 V	44 Q	45 W	46 D	47 S	48 F	49 E		50 J	51 B	52 U
	53 G	54 L	55 C	56 H	57 V		58 N	59 X	60 H	61 U	62 T		63 D	64 V	65 I		66 M	67 C		68 W	69 U
70 F	71 V	72 U	73 P		74 O	75 K	76 G	77 L	78 A	79 X	80 V		81 P	82 I	83 F		84 X	85 U	86 R	87 B	
88 S	89 H	90 T	91 C		92 G	93 F	94 A		95 L	96 H	97 P	98 I	99 N		100 F	101 M	102 O	103 D	104 B	105 L	106 V
	107 H	108 Q	109 S		110 C	111 K	112 M	113 X	114 T		115 A	116 I	117 P	118 N		119 C	120 J	121 D	122 V	123 W	124 F
125 K		126 N	127 L	128 H		129 I	130 M	131 B	132 J	133 D	134 B	135 Q	136 C		137 I	138 N	139 A	140 S	141 V		142 R
143 Q	144 H	145 E		146 D	147 G	148 A	149 C	150 R		151 M	152 V	153 D		154 H	155 N	156 E	157 T	158 M	159 U	160 L	161 V
162 D		163 W	164 F	165 G	166 A	167 X	168 C	169 O	170 V	171 T		172 B	173 P	174 G		175 D	176 A	177 U	178 H	179 E	180 F
181 M	182 R	183 I		184 D	185 L		186 N	187 V	188 J		189 S	190 F	191 E	192 U	193 H		194 P	195 B	196 I	197 D	198 E
	199 V	200 G		201 M	202 J	203 Q	204 H		205 K	206 L	207 C	208 G	209 D		210 T	211 S	212 A	213 F		214 U	215 H
	216 V	217 C	218 O		219 R	220 G	221 A	222 N		223 R	224 B	225 Q	226 I	227 D	228 X	229 T	230 O		231 V	232 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.)

A. Quebeckers' 'spirit': 3 wds., Fr. — 115 139 148 212 166 94 221 78 25 176 31

B. Legal term: 2 wds. — 40 51 172 195 131 104 134 87 224 3

C. "Sowing Seeds in Danny" author: 2 wds. — 91 207 14 217 119 67 41 149 110 30 55 168 136

D. Quebec area known for its rural charm: 2 wds. — 197 121 4 46 162 227 63 17 184 146 209 153 133 103 175 33

E. Ontario winery — 191 198 179 49 145 16 156

F. Famous Colville painting: 3 wds. — 93 190 70 213 10 100 48 180 38 83 164 23 124

G. Subsequent to a thing done: 3 wds. — 220 200 76 208 20 53 147 174 9 32 165 92

H. Trudeau's 1968 campaign slogan: 3 wds. — 29 89 193 154 60 178 5 107 215 56 96 128 144 204

I. Showed clearly — 15 137 98 116 129 183 2 226 65 82 196

J. Type of reception: 2 wds. — 202 132 36 50 120 188

K. Voyageur's hat — 232 111 205 75 125

L. Canoeing gold medallist: 2 wds. — 127 206 95 39 185 160 77 8 105 54

M. Toronto elites' meeting place: 2 wds. — 181 151 158 42 101 26 130 201 112 66

N. Gambling game BCers might play: 2 wds. — 11 138 186 126 155 58 222 99 118

O. Revered — 169 230 74 102 19 218

P. Place of entering — 34 173 97 24 117 81 194 18 73

Q. Reproving — 7 108 143 203 44 135 225

R. Ornamental tree with red berries — 219 28 142 35 150 86 223 182

S. NWT most easterly district — 140 109 211 88 37 12 47 189

T. Placed firmly in surrounding matter — 90 1 210 157 114 62 229 171

U. Rocky Mtn. pass — 6 72 61 192 85 214 159 177 69 52

V. Yukon phenomenon: 3 wds. — 71 170 64 161 27 231 57 80 122 199 43 106 152 216 141 187

W. Large brown African antelope — 123 163 68 13 22 45

X. Scribbled aimlessly — 228 59 167 79 113 21 84

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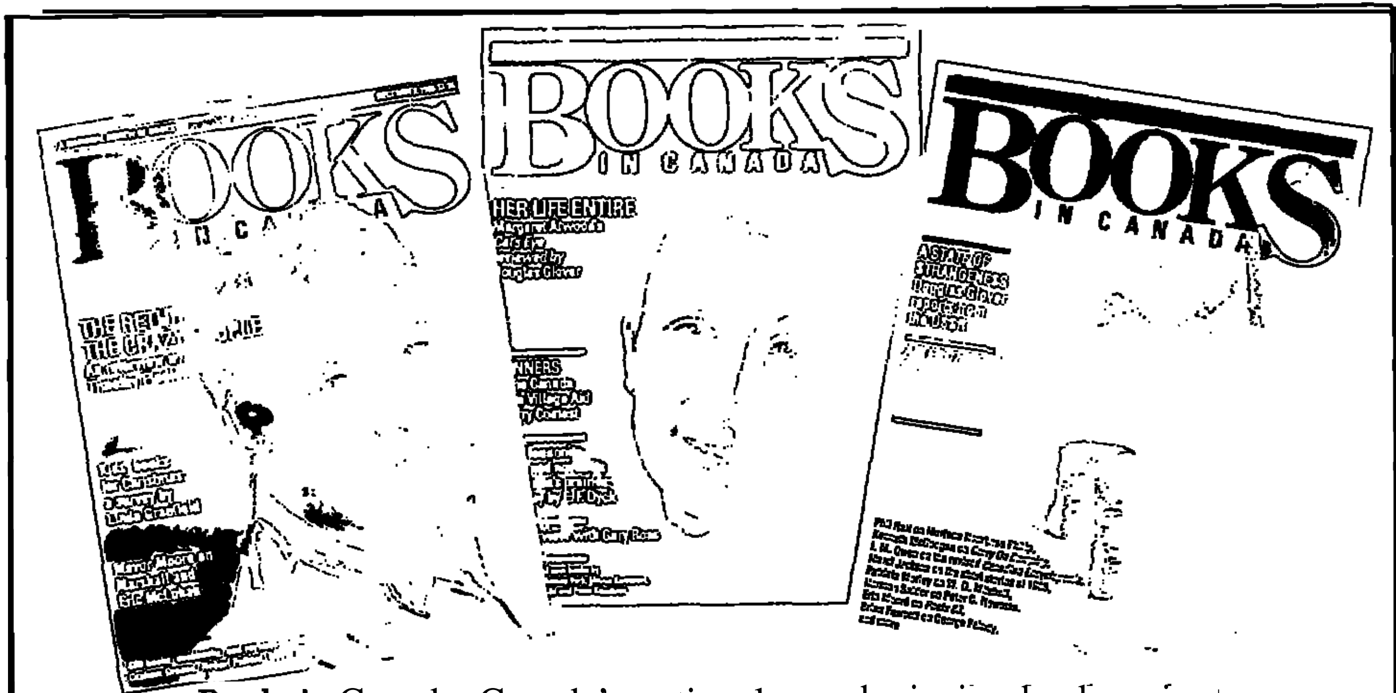

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