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BOOKS IN CANADA

DRAMATIC READINGS



Heather Robertson, winner of our eighth
annual first-novel contest
Leon Rooke on Elizabeth Spencer

SUBSCRIPTION PRICE \$12.95 A YEAR
Volume 13 Number 4
APRIL 1984

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Books in Canada is published 10 times a year, with the assistance of the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council, by the Canadian Review of Books Ltd., 366 Adelaide Street East, Suite 432, Toronto, Ont. M5A 3X9. Telephone: (416) 363-5426. Available to the public free in subscribing book stores, schools, and libraries. Individual subscription rate: \$12.95 a year (\$15.95 overseas). Back issues available on microfilm from: McLaren Mikropublishing, P.O. Box 972, Station F, Toronto, Ont. M4Y 2N9. Indexed in the Canadian Periodical Index. Member of the CPPA. Member of the Bulk Distribution Audit Division of CCAB. Material is commissioned on the understanding that both parties are bound by the terms of the standard PWAC contract. The editors cannot be held responsible for unsolicited material. Second Class Mail — Registration No. 2593. Contents ©1984. Typesetting by Jay Tee Graphics Ltd.

ISSN 0045-2564

'Regardless of what's put on stage, Vancouver seems doomed to be the Second City'

That's entertainment

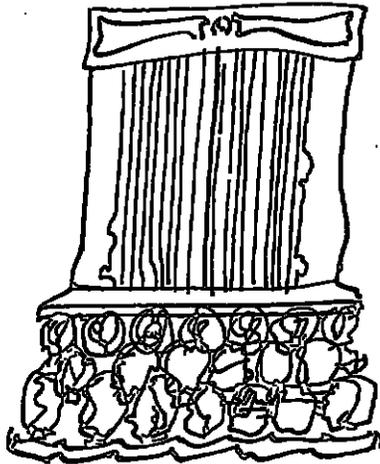
SOMEHOW THE OSCARS have created the prototype of the awards ceremony, whether it's televised or not, and last year's first annual Jessie Richardson Theatre Awards in Vancouver — the Jessies — featured the by now familiar glittery couples alternately reading out the names of the nominees, the discreet services of black-tuxedoed minions from Price Waterhouse who tabulated the vote and sealed the envelopes (please), special awards for long-time devotion to the craft, and the essential sense of self-congratulation that survives even the assault of selected musical numbers from recent productions. Everything but squinting at the cue cards. Even the first award to be announced, for best supporting actress, is also the one that opens the Academy Awards (to keep you from tuning in late to avoid best gaffer or assistant electrician). And, not to be unduly cerebral about it, even the fashions flagrantly emulated the comeback exposed at last April's movie gala — shoulders, the left one suggestively bared or the more daring completely strapless, molded look, set off by tiny pillbox hat and demure veil.

In short, the sell-out crowd at the Arts Club Theatre on Granville Island radiated a sense of occasion. "Everyone" was there. William Hutt was flown in; he hid behind wrap-around sunglasses, Order of Canada medal dangling against a blue polka-dot frilly shirt. He was up for best actor in Walter Learning's Playhouse production of *Mass Appeal*, but no Easterner was going to carry off one of those cute little 12-inch angelic abstractions, arms raised, head a tilt (designed by Australian-born Carl Merten). Tom McBeath, a fine local actor, won for *The Kite* by W.O. Mitchell. Produced by a spunky suburban summer theatre, it's not a show that many of the voters were likely to have seen.

Peer voting means that people inside the industry can demonstrate allegiances or vent hostilities. Significance, therefore, can be read into the fact that the first annual Jessies turned into an Arts Club sweep. The big clue was when the Sam Payne Award, an honorary

prize meant to acknowledge new, up-and-coming talent, went instead to veteran Bill Millerd, the Arts Club's dynamic artistic director and the only guy in town to open a new theatre (a 225-seat revue howl during a recession. Then two of his productions, Ann Mortifee's *Reflections on Crooked Walking* and Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*, picked up three awards apiece — half, that is, of the dozen prizes presented. (Only two-thirds of the categories were given nominations at all.)

While we didn't have Heath Lamberts



in a kilt (mooning last year's Doras in Toronto), beachcomber-adman Jackson Davies proved a winning emcee, good-naturedly subverting Sherman (*Talking Dirty*) Snukal's inane patter about 100 years of theatre in Vancouver. Pia Shandel-Southam played straight man, effective counter-casting since she was pregnant at the time.

Awards ceremonies are an explicit occasion for stock-taking, so it's ironic that the Jessies were launched during a particularly inauspicious season. Why be coy — it was mostly insipid. But it's a truism that every year the reviewers bemoan the lack of risk, the weak-kneed retreat behind a safe season. And every year there are a few productions that poke their way through end rise above. Last season it was *Blood Relations* and a powerful rendition of Pinter's *The Caretaker*. For whatever reason, this season feels better. But I think we can more or less forget about risk. *K2* and *Top Girls*

probably lead the race, but then there are bafflers like *Godspell* and that mammoth waste, a \$200,000 production of *The Murder of Auguste Dupin*.

To be fair, nowadays risk means daring to put on a show at all. Last year saw the demise of Kathryn Shaw's spirited troupe, Westcoast Actors. As if to underscore the futility of the critics' plaint, death followed 11th-hour productions of more adventurous new work. In the summer the slack was picked up by an enormously popular revival of *The Norman Conquests*. It could have been worse. It could have been Nell Simon.

Another new venture was a summer Shakespeare Festival under a tent in Vanier Park. Three plays were produced in repertory not only to employ actors "between engagements," but also to take advantage of the presence of two talented English hands, Henry Woolf and Susan Williamson. Actually, the local acting pool is good, despite the raids Chris Newton staged a few years back to fill out his Shaw Festival.

As for playwrights, we seem to be experiencing a brain drain. The all-male Jewish mafia that used to hang out at Szasz's cholesterol dell — Sherman Snukal, John Lazarus, Leonard Angel — has been depleted by the departures of Tom Cone and Sheldon Rosen. Margaret Hollingsworth recently moved east to Toronto, but not before two of her plays were produced: Ever *Loving, which*, after playing coast to coast, finally came to a Vancouver stage; and her new, more demanding piece, *War Baby*. In fact, this year new plays by Vancouver playwrights seemed to grow in pairs. There was Paul LeDoux's tribute to Garland, *Judy*, which badly needed a script, and his *Children of the Night*, a homage to Bela Lugosi, which badly needed a second act. Jesse Bodyan turned in a dubious but atmospheric mélange of street life in *The Store Detective*, a play that started to look awfully good when Tamahnous produced his pastiche of Western motifs, *Skull Riders*. A cult ad campaign was considered to lure patrons to the "worst-reviewed play in Vancouver history."

Which brings us to Vancouver's most acute shortage: critics. A primary pur-

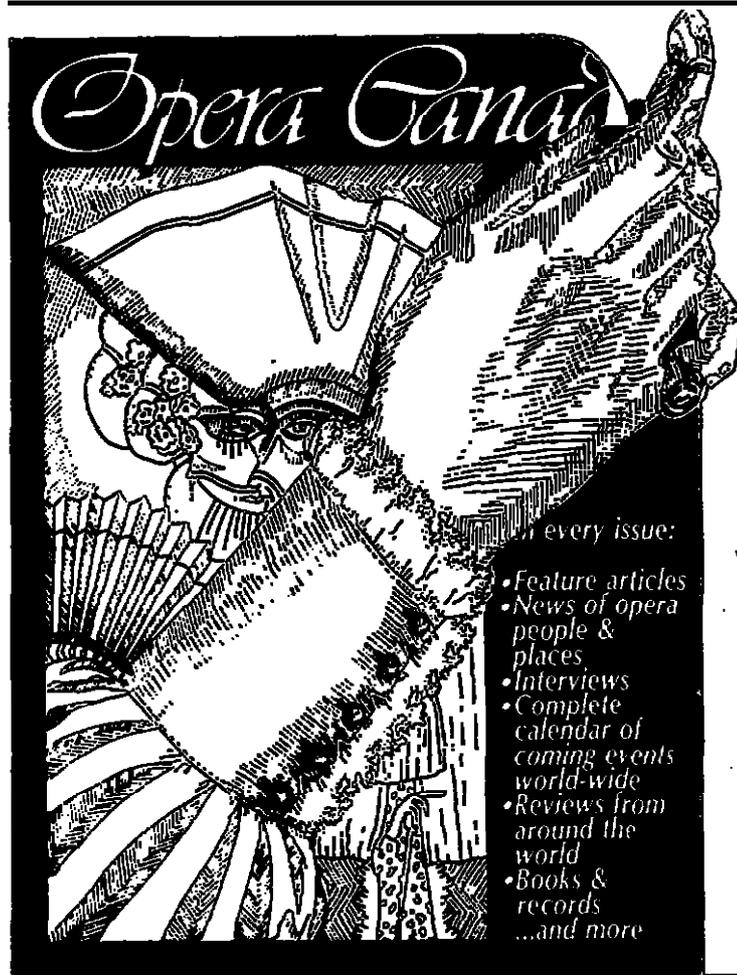
pose of the **Jessies** themselves, apart from celebrating a "healthy artistic theatre scene." was to fill the public awareness vacuum left by the critics. Last year's award nominating committee was able to muster three critics, as well as representatives of funders and the theatre community. This year two of the three reviewers departed midway through the season. The lack of a critical context in Vancouver is sharply felt. Panels are convened to worry the issue. Arts groups meet with newspaper publishers to no avail. Whatever one may think of Ray Conlogue or Gina Mallett, at least they are established people to get mad at in Toronto. Hence, when the *Province* reviewer left for Stratford, the tabloid waited months to replace him, apparently hard pressed to find someone on staff to work weekends and face 45-minute deadlines in order to produce the four paragraphs that represent "in depth" coverage in a tabloid. Meanwhile, over at the *Sun*, the drama critic was replaced last year by the religion reporter. When he in turn moved over to become television reviewer, his job was filled by the former visual art and music reviewer. A local TV station fired its reviewer for being too "soft." Truthfulness and modesty compel me to

note that only **CBC-Radio** has maintained a commitment to reviews of reasonable length. Both the morning and afternoon shows feature regular theatre critics, myself serving in the morning-after-the-night-before slot.

With this relative neglect, regardless of what's put on the stage here, Vancouver seems doomed to be the perennial Second City. Competitiveness with Toronto, glib assumptions about the different "scenes," are inevitable. Given that Vancouver has less than half the population, it can certainly boast a vibrant theatre life. Four of the IO Chalmers nominees this year were Vancouverites (at least at the time). By contrast, the **Jessies** practise protectionism. Unlike the **Doras**, which honoured John Gray's *Rock and Roll*, and the Chalmers, which gave the prize to Sherman Snukal for *Talking Dirty*, visiting shows aren't eligible for a **Jessie**. And by some quirk of rules *Talking Dirty* (soon to be a major motion picture) is up for this year's prizes in Vancouver. Originally produced in October, 1981, whence it proceeded to break box office records by playing for 15 months to 120,000 people, it was remounted last summer before heading to Toronto. How's that for a little *déjà vu*?

Nonetheless, prizes confer a sense of history and celebrate (establishment) achievement. Surely it would undermine any authentic radical fringe to be legitimized this way — even by a nomination. After all, last fall's art "event," The **October Show**, hadn't quite been refused by the splendid new Vancouver Art Gallery, just overlooked. But where is the cutting edge of theatre here? The alternate venue? To the rest of Canada we're **Billy Bishop** and **Talking Dirty** country. That's entertainment. (That's also a lament echoing from Broadway to the West Bud.)

One promising group, **Headlines Theatre**, engages in formalized agit-prop outside conventional theatre spaces. It first hit the street with a stinging attack on real-estate greed, an early-1980s phenomenon that undermined the moral fibre of a generation (and left the rest of us perpetual maters). It followed this success with an anti-nuke show, *Under the Gun*, which has towed outside the province. But where was Headlines (or anyone) when headlines were really being made around here during last summer's explosive budget debate and the true street theatre provided by Solidarity? With the political heat rising, theatres tend to become air-conditioned



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retreats featuring sex-comedy retreats and remote "classics." Not without exception, of course, as every easy generalization invites.

There remains enough teal substance to Vancouver theatre to keep one hopeful. And there is a" audience. Theatre consistently outdraws music or dance or visual arts. With more than \$1-million earned through season ticket holders, and another \$2-million in single-ticket sales, theatre makes back a greater percentage of its operating costs through earnings (as opposed to grants) than either music or dance.

But a sense of direction, which is what awards might be thought to highlight, is not clear at this time. The establishment of new performing spaces in the city a number of years ago promised a parallel blossoming of performance. Actual production has been "even, almost random, under the constraints of availability of rights, fiscal pressures, and the idiosyncrasies of taste. In the absence of discernible trends, perhaps one must leave it to the theatre historians, academics more attuned to manufacturing theories and discovering patterns. Meanwhile, we'll have to check out the tube on April 9 so we'll know what to wear this June for the Jessies.

— ELEANOR WACHTEL

First-degree Burns

A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.

SO DR. JOHNSON defined oats in 1755, and the Ayrshire poet who was to sow so many wild ones was born four years later. If Robert Burns had a penny for every time a human mouth has sung one of his lyrics on New Year's Eve, he'd run out of folk to give his millions away to. In lie" of posthumous copyright fees — and barely weeks after echoes of "Auld Lang Syne" have faded from the Tron on Hogmanay — the Scots give Burns a celebration unlike any other. Burns Niht has to be the most controlled form of anarchy in the world. fmm the ritual piping in of the haggis to the mega-brain-cell drowning in malt whisky. What other poet has been sung fmm the throats of so many?

Justice is more than poetic in Edinburgh, where Scott gets a monument and Burns gets a night. Why has Burns become so ensconced in Scottish tradition? How has he come to be Scotland's most exportable bard? I'd need a doze"

acres of type to plough an explanation, but for now I'll make a wee furrow: like oats and salt he was of the earth, full of lust and living. After stardom, ignominy, and excise, the poet-cum-ploughman was still a man of the people. He distilled the joys of everyday living and offered everyone a dram.

Here in Edinburgh, Bums festivities started two days early with the launching of the Scottish Poetry Library. Only the Scots, as one of the organizers pointed out, would dare to launch a poetry library in January. And, true to form, one of the worst blizzards of a very blizzardy season hit the city. With Wellies and reservations I trudged forth expecting an empty hall, but this was not to be. Nothing like an impossible challenge to bring Scots down from Orkney or Skye. Some 300 lunatics, lovers, and poets packed St. Cecilia's Hall to welcome Naomi Mitchison, Sorley MacLean, Norman MacCaig, and Kathleen Raine. The Commonwealth was back in full flower: fmm India came Eunice de Souza; fmm Australia Chris Wallace-Crabbe; and from Canada Fred Cogswell. The Canadian contingent was well fortified by Douglas Lochhead (this year's visiting professor from Mount Allison) and Gilles Durocher, the Canadian consul-general (who furnished a bottle of Canadian Club for the occasion).

After a whetter or two of reception wine, we were given tumblers of Cullen Skink (which tastes a lot better than it sounds; it's fish soup), followed by Forfar Bridies (a sort of meat pie in the shape of a semi-Frisbee), and two kinds of vegetarian haggis. After careful inquisition, the supplier of the last dish — MacSweens of Bruntfield — admitted that the meat-free innards had been wrapped in the usual haggis way, using the stomach lining of a sheep. Okl habits die hard; but there's some sound Scottish sense behind it: the sure sign of a good haggis is the sputtering of hot liquid onto the guests flanking the carver, and plastic linings don't yield to the knife in quite the same way.

After Galloway Cream, a dessert that came in three consistencies — depending on how fast you were: runny, heavenly, or waxen — the Scottish poets primed us with verbal liqueurs. Mitchison, MacLean, and MacCaig each contributed drafts of their works for auctioning. Mitchison read a lassie's reply to a brusque husband's love-making that ended, if memory serves, "Thank God. I've escaped." MacLean and MacCaig complemented each other as "makars," MacLean giving translations of his verse in English and Gaelic. MacCaig has caught the chill of pre-snow Edinburgh:

The night tinkles like ice in glasses.

Leaves are glued to the pavements with frost.

The brown air fumes at the shop windows,

Tries the door, and slides past.

After the reception we all shifted to the upstairs hall for international after-eights. An honoured guest with at least one Scottish granny, Kathleen Raine offered some of her poignant Highland remembrances in verse, and Fred Cogswell feted us with some recently written sestinas, closing with a profound epigram that encapsulated the humility of a poet's lot.

Eunice de Souza writes from a triangularity of influences emerging fmm Indll under two Rajs: Portuguese, which gave her a Catholic upbringing, and English, which gave her a language. She concluded her poem "Sweet Sixteen," from her volume Fix, with the endemically superstitious observation:

*At sixteen, Phoebe asked me:
Can it happen when you're in a
dance hall
I mean, you know what,
getting preppers and all that, when
you're dancing?
I, sixteen, assured her
you could.*

And Chit's Wallace-Crabbe painted "Melbourne" as a good place, to be

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exiled from, although the last stanza might apply to any urban nightmare near the sea:

*Highway by highway the remorseless cars
Strangle the city, put it out of pain,
Its limbs still kicking feebly on the hills.
Nobody cares. The artists sail at dawn
For brisker ports, or rot in public bars.
Though much has died here, little has
been born.*

Through perversity of fate, the only invited poet who works in Scots dialect — Alexander Scott — was laid up with flu. We needed a Ron Butlin to complement the English, Gaelic, and Commonwealth voices, but he is Fred Cogswell's counterpart in the Arts Council's ex-

change program this year. In spite of the ironic absence of *Edinburry* or *Lallans scribevin*, the Scottish Poetry Library Association generously set the scene for the most vibrant gathering of Clan-Earth in years. "For A' That and A' That," the descending spirits of Fergusson, Burns, and, more recently, Robert Garioch would have lent a chorus of assent to this opening, especially when the other opening (of Talisker) got under way. The Scots have always had a knack of making a little last long. *Tenui musam meditamur avena*, as Sydney Smith offered as a motto for the *Edinburgh Review*: "We cultivate literature upon a little oatmeal." —D.W. NICHOL

ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

Do not argue with The Editor: he is one of those who understand the difference between an accolade and a destruct

By BOB BLACKBURN

I AM ONE of those who believe that many of our problems with English can be solved simply with the use of logic and common sense.

Yes, I am one who believes that.

I even believe that they are writers who would put an *s* on *believe* in the first sentence without thinking about it. But I find it incredible that some of them argue with The Editor (he who brought the problem to my attention) when he gently corrects them.

There's no need to run to the library. In the first sentence, *those* are the people who believe, and I am one of *them*. In the second, I am one (a person) who believes.

It's just one of those things. . . .

I wish everything were that simple (particularly the subjunctive). I'm still fighting with people about gone (or *went*) missing. They say that if you can go hunting then you can go missing, and I say that if that's the case it only means that you are a poor shot. If a person went shooting, he went to shoot. If he went missing, he went to miss, and that make; him OK in my book.

Then they tell me that *missing* is descriptive of a condition, and so is *mad*, and if a person can go mad, he can go missing (and, of course, that is sometimes the case). I really don't know what in hell to say to that. If he goes v/en-

ching, then he is hunting for a wench, so perhaps if he goes missing he is hunting for a miss. I dunno. Wouldn't it be simpler to say he can't be found, that he has disappeared, that he is inexplicably absent from his habitat, that he ain't



been seen around lately, not nowhere, or just that he's missing?

Possibly not. Possibly go missing is something we need today.

But I now find I've been worrying in vain, because the term has gone out of style. The journalists who used to say that someone "has gone missing" now

say that he "has turned up missing."

Well, now, that's better. That's in a class with Sam Goldwyn's "include me oat" (if Sam Goldwyn did indeed ever say that). It's cute. Put it in your book of cute expressions. Don't fret about it.

Seriously, *go missing* is a vulgarism on its way to becoming accepted idiom, and if you think you can do anything to stop it, please let me know.

I AM INDEBTED to John Lloyd Monkman of Oxford Station, Ont., for sending me a list of goofs committed by CBC "personalities" and just plain announcers. He reminds me, for instance, that some of them are so upset by the fact that there is no such word as *destruct* that they are determined to coin it, as both a noun and a verb. Alas, it has long been used behind the scenes in journalistic circles, as in "let's do a destruct on so-and-so." You will also see it used, by sloppy people, instead of *destroy*. Anyone who uses it in any way deserves to be destructed.

He also mentions *mischievious*, which is a widespread vernacular corruption of *mischievous*. I happen to love it. I just think it's a more expressive word with the extra syllable and the shift in emphasis, and it has a permanent place in my colloquial vocabulary.

But I go along with Mr. Monkman's objection to such pleonasm as "halt and lame" and "clear and limpid." *Halt* means lame and *limpid* means dear, and it is limpid that no bait excuse for the use of either phrase is acceptable.

AN accolade, properly, is an embrace or slap on the shoulder with the flat of a sword, signifying the conferral of knighthood. That's what it is, and, according to the *OED*, that's all it is (except to musicians and mathematicians in a very special sense). The permissive U.S. dictionaries now approve its misuse as an expression of praise, and that's ridiculous. But *fulsome* still means what it has meant for hundreds of years: disgustingly excessive.

In February and March, after what-sisname announced his latest resignation from the leadership of that party, many reporters were telling us that this or that person had given him an accolade, which I took to mean, as I have always suspected, that he must be the most be(k)nighted leader this country has ever had. When they reported that he had received this or that "fulsome accolade," well, I didn't know what to think. These days, when a journalist uses *fulsome*, we are left to try to deduce from the context whether he means it or simply doesn't understand it, and usually we end up saying, "We're not. . . quite. . . sure." □

KING AND I

Heather Robertson's characterization of the secret life of William Lyon Mackenzie King is the best first novel of 1983

THE EIGHTH ANNUAL Books in Canada Award for First Novels — and a cheque for \$1,000 — goes to Heather Robertson for *Willie: A Romance*, published by James Lorimer. Robertson's characterization of the secret life of William Lyon Mackenzie King — volume one of a proposed series called *The King Years* — was the first choice of three of the four judges on this year's panel. A strong runner-up (one that might well have won in another year's competition) was *Tolerable Levels of Violence*, by Robert G. Collins (Lester & Orpen Dennys.)

Though there were fewer first novels under consideration this year, the competition was particularly stiff. The judges (novelist and short-story writer Matt Cohen; Dan Mozerky of Prospero Books in Ottawa; Leslie Peterson, book editor of the Vancouver Sun; and novelist and playwright Rachel Wyatt) worked from a short list prepared by Paul Wilson, who writes a column about first novels for *Books in Canada*. Besides *Willie* and *Tolerable Levels of Violence*, it included: *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, by Susan Swan (Lester & Orpen Dennys); *Not Working*, by George Szanto (Macmillan); and *Figures on a Wharf*, by Wayne Tefs (Turnstone Press). As the judges' comments indicate, all were strong contenders for the prize:



Matt Cohen: This must have been a good year for first novels. I found all of the finalists readable at the least, and often much more than that. Perhaps the level of accomplishment reflects the fact that at least three of the writers — Susan Swan, Heather Robertson, and George Szanto — have published extensively in other mediums.

For me, two of the novels were so equal in appeal that they deserve to be co-winners: they are *Willie*, by Heather Robertson, and *Not Working*, by George Szanto.

Willie is a long, engrossing read that captures a part of our history in a way both frivolous and fascinating. Like Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business*, *Willie* examines a class of people who have been reputed to be stuffy and narrow and finds that this predictable façade is a cover for much more cantankerous and adventurous lives. As a one-time Ottawan I particularly enjoyed Robertson's deliberately irreverent romp past some of the more sacred cows of the nation's capital. But although the novel is always readable and interesting, Robertson is sometime; like a comic who will sacrifice anything for a good line. By the end of the book I felt that a portrait of a very unusual

Mackenzie King had been presented, but the man himself seemed as unknowable as ever — though a lot more amusing.

Not Working is, like *Willie*, a book of broad potential appeal. But unlike *Willie* it seems to have dropped totally out of sight immediately following publication. That is unfortunate, because *Not Working* is a cleverly constructed and gripping novel about an ex-policeman from California who comes to a small mid-western U.S. town and learns about it in the course of trying to explain the death of his daughter's boyfriend's father. It may sound complex — it is — but the novel

is compelling from beginning to end. In this exceptionally accomplished first novel, time, narrative sequence, and character are all expertly juggled. In some ways *Not Working* narrows itself to the scope of the hard-boiled detective novel, but it has a wonderfully literate surface, and its perfect pacing gives it red emotional impact.

The novel that almost made it was *Figure 9 on a Wharf* by Wayne Tefs. *Figures on a Wharf* is a very convincing portrayal of the dissolution of a marriage under the pressure of an affair. The first half is extremely well-written, but gradually the characters become less believable, and eventually the novel loses the force with which it began. Nonetheless, *Figures on a Wharf* is the only one of the

five novels that attempts to survive without documentary catches, and though it eventually falls to sustain itself, the characters remain memorable.

Den Mozerky: In last place is *Figures on a Wharf*, by Wayne Tefs. Although not badly written, the theme of infidelity and marriage breakdown is clichéd and overworked, and one wonders why anyone would bother writing about it unless stunning new insights could be revealed. The novel chronicles seven months in the lives of Michael, his wife Patricia, and his lover Mary. Each chapter is prefaced by a brief flashback into Michael's sexual past and, although interesting, these flashbacks do not really add very much to the story. Basically, it is the story of a specific "triangle" love-relationship that never rises above itself to invoke wider appeal or universal meaning.

Fourth position goes to *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*, by Susan Swan. This was the biggest disappointment, primarily because it had the biggest potential. It is flatly written with uninspired prose that shows no excitement even when

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describing events or incidents of significant emotional impact. At the same time, the book is very poorly edited and contains obvious historical and linguistic inaccuracies. Words are used that were not even invented during the period in which the "memoir" is set: 1888. Words such as "feminist" (page 88) and "bullshit" (page 138) did not enter the English language until 1895 and 1915 respectively. Once the reader becomes aware of these errors the book begins to unravel, and the author's credibility becomes suspect. There is no real feeling for the historical period, and the characters, although physically freaks, are never really revealed to be exceptional or freakish in temperament, character, personality, or intellect. Essentially this is a dull, sloppily edited book. Too bad, because the treatment of this subject could have been scintillating.

Third place goes to *Not Working*, by George Szanto. This, the only example of genre fiction in the group, is a competently written and fast-paced murder mystery. The characters are totally believable, and the plot is plausible. The murder and its solution are conventional enough, but the book's charm lies in the character of Joe Levy, who has his own problems: unemployment, tensions in his marriage, raising two daughters, role reversal, a guilt-ridden pest, and a burning in the tip of his penis. He not only solves the crime, but the book ends on a positive note, with most (if not all) of Joe's problems solved or dealt with. In short, this is a thoroughly likable book, well-written, well-plotted, and well-paced. In fact, of the live books this is the only one I enjoyed reading.

in second place is *Tolerable Levels of Violence*, by Robert G. Collins, a dialectical novel of considerable depth and profundity. Set in 1999, after a world-wide cataclysm, it is the story of one man's attempt to come to terms, both intellectually and physically, with a world devoid of conventional institutions. This is a novel more of ideas than anything else and that, perhaps, is its most obvious flaw. However, when the author sticks to straight descriptive narrative the book can be powerful and haunting. The mood of implicit violence and death is provocative and frightening, at times, the writing is exceptionally powerful. *Tolerable Levels of Violence* is more like a last work of an author who has written many books: it is a work of summation rather than initiation. It reminds me of MacLennan's *Voices in Time* and, as such, ranks as a forceful work of imagination. But as a final, note first, novel.

Willie, by Heather Robertson, is my first choice. Although this book is badly flawed by a confusing structure and too many voices, it contains the most interesting writing and ideas of the five novels under discussion. The lives of the three protagonists — Lii Coolican, Talbot Papineau, and William Lyon Mackenzie King — are revealed through letters and dies, and so we learn not only about the lives of these characters but also about the time and place in which they lived. The book is a veritable gold mine of information about Canadian (Ottawa) politics during the First World War. Its gift for detail is overpowering. This fictionalized portrait of the psycho-sexual life of Mackenzie King is so fascinating that on this basis alone the novel deserves first place.

I am convinced sloppy editing is responsible for *Willie's* flaws. There is no clear-cut delineation between letters of different characters, and the introduction of a third-person narrator, apparently at random, adds to the confusion. The epistolary novel is not new, and one would have thought that modern typographical techniques would have been employed to alleviate obfuscation. Once the reader overcomes this confusion of voices, however, the novel takes on brilliant dimensions. This is a great way to interpret our history, and one can only look forward to the next volumes with enthusiasm.

Leslie Peterson: Vladimir Nabokov observed that there are three points of view from which a writer can be considered: as story-teller, teacher, and es enchanter. "A major writer com-

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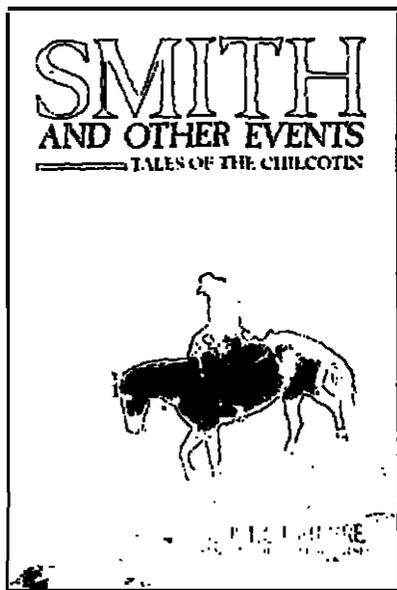
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bines the three . . . but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer." None of the five finalists merits. as yet. anything more than a tag as storyteller. Though we may never hear from some of them again, the imagination is wide, the workmanship commendable.

Tolerable Levels of Violence, by Robert Collins, leads my list by a hair, by virtue of its intellectual structure. Here we have multi-dimensional prose, sure and precise in its voice, wound taut, an apt vehicle for Collins's 1999 Ottawa Valley wasteland. And while his scenario of detritus and destruction — anarchy loosed upon the land — is unmitigatingly powerful, it is relieved by an articulation of rebirth and renewal. Unfortunately, the author can't resist demonstrating that he is in his workaday life a professor of English, and knows his Shakespeare. He merely shows how the solemn is always ready to bushwack the serious — and impede the narrative while it's at it.

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World, by Susan Swan, comes a close second, with its echoes of John Barth's wonderful *The Sotweed Factor*. Like George Bowering's fictional biography, *Burning Water*, diversions on the theme of Captain George Vancouver, Swan's hook takes as its focal point a real life, then embroiders it with fantasy. Anna Swan, her colossal 7'6" heroine, was born in Nova Scotia, exhibited by P.T. Bynum, and received by Queen Victoria. Swan offers us in this enchanting burlesque a carny sideshow with class. Yet this is no mere spectacle, for the inventive biographer presents us with remarkable insight into the mind and soul of an oversized human being. Amid the freaks and feats of derring-do there is poignancy, a realization that between effective farce and mere flam there rests a delicate balance.

Willie: A Romance, by Heather Robertson, is a curious amalgam of fact and fiction. It is a work that, one thinks, ought to be highly regarded. Indeed, one feels almost uncivil in not picking this formidably researched work as the winner. But, in the end, it doesn't meet John Gardner's dictum that fiction must induce "a vivid and continuous dream" in the reader's mind. The diary is a masterly form in the hands of a master (but first you need a firm grasp of the trade). Fictional characterization based on real life has its pitfalls, even where William Lyon Mackenzie King is concerned. For scope and eloquent style, Robertson gets top marks; for the impetus required to carry the reader through 359 pages, only middling.

Both George Szanto and Wayne Tefs tried their best, but only a wizard can turn the routine to glory.

Not *Working*, by Szanto, while competent, lacks originality. The story of a disillusioned cop who has fled to a different milieu for reappraisal is well-plotted, with only adequate depth of characterization. Szanto, a playwright, excels in the staging of his well-paced narrative, pulling on the disparate threads. Still, it remains an entertainment, a one-act divertissement.

Figures on a Wharf, by Tefs, should have been a short story. Tefs possesses well-developed powers of observation, and takes a painterly approach to his literary canvas, but there is something lacking, inducing a sense of ennui. His temporal switchbacks prove confusing, even when flagged with dates.

Rachel Wyatt: My first choice for the award is definitely Heather Robertson's *Willie: A Romance*. I found the book to be very well-written, smooth end dear in concept, funny, fascinating in its details, and overall extremely readable. It has a fine structure that suits the material perfectly.

My second choice is Robert G. Collins's *Tolerable Levels of Violence*. The idea is frighteningly real, the writing is sensitive, and there is a pervasive feeling of humanity in it.

Third I liked Susan Swan's *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World*. The humour in this hook appeals to me very much, as does the subject (being on the tall side myself). On a different list it might have been a first choice. □

MOKEY, BOOBER, AND bp

What does writing a sonnet have in common with writing lyrics for television's *Fraggle Rock*? Perhaps more than one might guess

By BARBARA WADE

THE SCENE IS the Great Hall, the busy underground collection of stalagmites and pools that comprises the central thoroughfare of *Fraggle Rock*. Mokey, a tall, fuzzy-haired character straight out of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, is running after Boober because she has a poem she wants to read to him. Boober, wearing his cap pulled down so low that his eyes are completely shielded, has had enough of the noise and bustle of *Fraggle Rock* to last him a lifetime. He's not interested. "But Boober," Mokey entreats, "a poem is a gift."

The writer of those words may have put a good deal of his own background into them. He is novelist and poet bp Nichol who, along with Dennis Lee and David Young, has recently branched out from the remote (though equally exotic) world of small presses and literary quarterlies to the fantasy realm of Jim Henson's weekly television program, *Fraggle Rock*. Though Lee is already well-known as a children's writer, Nichol (author of such books as *The Martyrology*, *Horse d'Oeuvres*, and the three-day novel *Still*) and Young (*Incognito*, *Agent Provocateur*) are recognized much more for their venturesome, out-of-the-mainstream writing than for their TV scripts — that is, if they are recognized at all. *Fraggle Rock*, co-produced with the CBC and seen in 86 countries, is providing them with a greater audience than either had dreamed possible.

The CanLit connection began about two years ago when creative director Jerry Juhl and senior writer Jocelyn Stevenson moved their core cast of Muppeteers to Toronto to begin work on *Fraggle Rock*, which they intended more for children than the British-produced *Muppet Show*. "I was looking for Canadian writers to fulfil the Canadian-content directive for the show," says Juhl, formerly head writer on *The Muppet Show*. "I talked to Sw Colbert, head of light entertainment for the CBC, and told him I didn't want to go the conventional route of practised television writers. I wanted people who

weren't necessarily experienced in writing for children or for television, but who were good writers." Colbert suggested several names, among them Lee, winner of the 1972 Governor General's Award for *Civil Elegies and Other Poems*, but better-known lately for what the *Globe and Mail* describes as his "delightful doggerel" in such books for children as *Alligator Pie*, *Nicholas Knock*, *Garbage Delight*, and the recently published *Jelly Belly*.

"I'll always remember my first meeting with Dennis," says Juhl. "He came shambling into the office and spent 15 minutes

telling me how wrong he was for television, how busy he was, how it was nice of us to be interested but it was really a dumb idea." However, when Juhl suggested that he write lyrics for the show's songs, rather than the scripts. "my ears pricked up," says Lee. He and composer Phil Balsam had been working together on some children's songs, so Lee handed over a cassette for Juhl's evaluation. "As soon as I heard it," says Juhl, "I said, 'That's what Fraggles sound like.' " Since then, Lee and Balsam have written all the songs (including the theme) for the series. Their quota usually consists of two new songs per show, sung by such diverse characters as the pig-tailed Red or Marjory,



From left, Dennis Lee, David Young, bp Nichol

the living trash heap, and intended to illuminate or highlight the story.

Lee, in turn, introduced the idea of writing scripts for *Fraggle Rock* to his literary colleagues, including David Young. Young, co-editor (with Matt Cohen) of *The Dream Class Anthology*, is an editor on the board of Coach House Press, with which he has been associated since 1972. He had never written either for children or television before, and feels "it was a big step for all of us. *Incognito* took me five years to finish." The start-to-finish process on *Fraggle Rock* takes about three months.

Young gained insight into the project through extensive col-

laboration with Juhl, Stevenson, the directors, and the performers. "It's a very collaborative process," he says. "Jerry Juhl just knows an enormous amount about how children's television can work . . . This is a team of people who have a very clear idea of what they want the stories to be about. I think they believe that if you really care about changing the world, you either go to the top of the power structure or you deal with kids. There's a lot of serious thought involved."

Young found that "you have to simplify your thinking" when preparing a script idea. "I agree with Dennis's idea — he said you have to find the ldd within yourself. Fortunately, in me it's not too far below the surface."

THE SET AND production offices for *Fraggle Rock* are in an unassuming building on Scollard Street in Toronto's Yorkville district. In the studio bp Nichol is watching the shooting of his latest script, "The Day the Music Died." Over 20 stage crew and performers move among the twisted caves of the set, manipulating *Fraggles* or remote-control devices that add a touch of electronics to the artistry. They continually watch several television monitors positioned on the floor or tucked behind scenery, to make sure a telltale hand or wire doesn't intrude upon the shot. Writers must be present throughout the shooting of a script, and may suggest changes or cuts from the floor. Nichol moves quietly through a scene, satchel slung over his arm, to suggest a slight change in wording for one of the performers. In the darkened corridor behind the set to his right, a rehearsing performer manipulates his puppet *Fraggle* as if the two were engaged in quiet conversation.

During a break in shooting, Nichol says he agrees with Young's assessment of the collaborative nature of the show. "It's essentially manipulating a set of givens. The restrictions are just like writing closed verse — a sonnet is equally a set of

restrictions." Nichol won the Governor General's Award in 1970 for, among other works, his anthology *The Cosmic Chef: An Evening of Concrete and The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid*. His novel *Still*, published last fall as the winner of Pulp Press's annual Three-Day Novel Writing Contest, was, says Nichol, "part of a year of experimentation. As is writing for *Fraggle Rock*."

Nichol has some experience in writing for children, with such works as *Moosequakes and Other Disasters, Once: A Lullaby*, and *The Man Who Loved His Knees to his credit*. He found the birth of his daughter two years ago "put you back in touch with the kind of writing you enjoyed when you were a kid. On *Fraggle Rock* I am writing for the kids, but I'm writing the kind of story I first began writing as a kid. I've just never had the occasion to "se my adult skills on it. In a curious way, it's a fulfilment of something I was thinking about when I was seven or eight."

Neither Young nor Nichol has any sense of script-writing as separate and apart from his prose or poetry. "All the writing you do interrelates," says Nichol. "There's too much of a dichotomy in people's minds between 'high' art and 'low' art. It's just writing with a range of possibilities." Young agrees. He has just completed a program called "Manny's Land of Carpets," which is, he says, "essentially about the way children watch television — what can happen to them when they open their ears to all the voices inside that box. I found it fascinating to comment on the medium we're speaking in."

The only difference, Young feels, comes in the size of the audience for his work. "In literary prose writing you're writing for an audience of, say, 12 people. It's a much more hermetic activity. By contrast, *Fraggle Rock* is seen all over the world. It's a good feeling to think you may say something that's got substance for a large number of people."

He got some sense of how large a number while on tour for National Book Week in the Yukon last year. "The kids I was talking to found out about my involvement with *Fraggle Rock*. They didn't care anything about books, or literature in general — all they wanted to know was why did Gobo do such-and-so? Why don't you get Boober to do this?"

USING "SERIOUS" writers for the show involved a certain amount of training, notes Juhl, if only to learn "the necessities of television. We essentially write tiny little three-act plays." (His two other regular writers, Sugith Varughese and Laura Phillips, have extensive experience in the field.) "After some fine-tuning, we found these people brought very fresh things to the show." *Fraggle Rack* is expanding its repertory of Canadian writers with the recent addition of novelist Timothy Wynne-Jones, who is writing some lyrics and developing script ideas while Lee finishes a book on cadence.

The experience has been mutually beneficial. "I end up sounding like I'm proselytizing for the show," says Young, "but I was completely overwhelmed by what these people were trying to do. I feel like I've landed in heaven." Young and Nichol express little interest in expanding their experience to other television shows, and neither watches much TV in his span time. "Other children's shows seem ill-conceived and poorly motivated by comparison," says Young.

"I really turned my back on straight-ahead narrative when I was 20," says Nichol. "So writing for *Fraggle Rock* has been a matter of getting back to basic story-telling values. What I'm most aware of is that it's allowing an outlet for me in writing that I haven't necessarily had. It's tremendous to get involved with new kinds of writing that stretch your ability." He has found that "using television — and using puppets and television — is different. You have to convey a lot of the story through action."

Lee remembers a time when he and Young were watching an episode of the show on television, and Young pointed out that

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the words were not necessarily paramount—just the opposite of what he **was** accustomed to in his other writing. In this way, Lee feels, working on the scripts for *Fraggle Rock* may have contributed **something** to the three **writers'** understanding of the use of **language**. "A writer is a different part of the fabric on television. One **of the** great gifts a **writer** can make to a

television or **film** story is knowing when not to **use** words. "Translating from one **medium** to another is **very difficult**," says Lee. "You have to be humble. **Writers** such as ourselves use the words on paper as their greatest tool. In a way, the success of **literary writers** working for *Fraggle Rock* was that they weren't wiped out." □

FEATURE REVIEW

Dramatic readings

The year's theatre publications reflect a significant shift from the 'kitchen-sink realism' typical of Canadian plays in the 1970s

By **RICHARD PLANT**

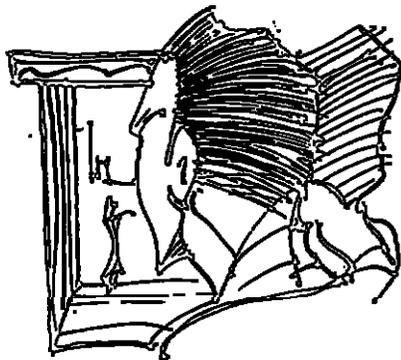
THE REALISM of early 1970s drama in Canada, as challenging and invaluable as it has been, has always appeared to possess shortcomings against which playwrights, particularly those of an experimental nature, have battled. As a result, at the same time *Leaving Home*, *Of the Fields, Lately*, *Creeps*, and many other realistic plays we're being staged, the dramatic undercurrent was a search for different modes to express post-naturalist — even post-existentialist — world views that were not limited by their determinism or other related aspects. This year's published drama shows some of the results of that search in its wide variety of non-realistic dramatic forms and anti-naturalistic philosophy. In short, if published plays me an indication, we no longer have a drama totally dominated by what some detractors have called early '70s kitchen-sink realism.

That is not to say there are no new plays in a realistic mode. Superficial realism and the elementary psychology to go with it are the expressive centres for Sherman Snukal's *Talking Dirty* (Harbour Publishing), a box-office success in Vancouver, then again in Toronto, where it controversially won the 1993 Chalmers Award for best play. A lack of clarity in what the Chalmers Award recognizes is at the cent' of the controversy, so no one should attack the play on the grounds that it does not deserve the honour.

Of its type — a neatly crafted, commercial sex comedy based on incongruous situations and light, witty dialogue — *Talking Dirty* is a commendable and very popular play. Its moral

stance is simple-minded and blatant enough that even the most obtuse spectator cannot miss it. It's also highly conservative, so that it does not offend — nor challenge — its largely middle-class audiences. Really, it's imitation Alan Ayckbourn without his dark, bitter quality, and with somewhat inferior wit.

Harbour Publishing also brought out one of the year's most engaging departures from realism in Morris Panych's *Last Call*, a "post nuclear cabaret." The serious shortcoming of this published script — and it could not be otherwise — is that print cannot capture the entertaining theatricality of the performance, especially the virtuoso song-and-dance



rouines of the author/actor, who plays an "caped convict, Bart Gross, and his partner Ken MacDonald as a blind pianist, Eddie Morose.

As this provocative, witty cabaret sets it up, the two are survivors of a nuclear blast that has levelled the city where they live. Both are dying, and they a"

thrown together in a Beckett-like relationship that sees Gross carrying a gun with which he constantly threatens Morose. He thereby enforces his belief that "the one with the gun is God."

Panych's dramaturgy is sophisticated enough to layer realities by having Gross searching for an audience to watch this final cabaret. When he and Morose find a piano among the ruins — and an audience — the show is on for "al. (Or was it on for "al when they sang *Lust* *Call's* opening song?) Whatever the case, unlike "any naturalist/realist plays, this macabre fantasy, so loaded with irony, offers no-simple social or psychological solutions to the world's problems. Instead, it recognizes the complexity of human nature that has led to disaster.

One of the cabaret's most effective moments — and one that repudiates any simple answers — occurs in a false ending. The entertainment is so infectious that the duo have the audience singing a nostalgic chorus of "Last Call, last chance of all/Forget all your sadness and sorrow/Let's drink a last beer/As friends while we're here/And maybe we'll be here tomorrow." On those upbeat last two lines the audience, despite having witnessed a very gritty evening, is ready to go home happy.

But as the lights fade (and as the audience was applauding the night I saw it) Gross breaks in: "On the other hand, I think we've managed to simplify things justabit.... I think [the ending is] a bit naive." And surely it is. So we are treated to a different conclusion, which drives the cabaret's point home with even more force than the bitter, apocalyptic comedy we had witnessed

throughout the evening. In a country where cabaret has come to mean an evening of sentimental listening to songs of Piaf or Irving Berlin, *Last Call* has put the bite back into a traditionally fierce and meaningful genre.

In the mid-1970s, the translated works of Michel Tremblay, in particular, brought an increased awareness to English Canada of how Québécois playwrights were breaking the boundaries of traditional realistic drama. Again in 1983, with Jovette Marchessault's *La Saga des poules mouillées*, published in English as *Saga of the Wet Hens* (Talonbooks), we have a vibrant example of experimental, non-illusionistic theatre.

The play's dramatic force comes from the rich poetic images that reverberate throughout the six scenes. Dedicated to Michelle Rossignol and Gloria Orenstein, it finds its dramatic action in the meeting of four authors — Laure Conan, Germaine Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert — who combine their radically different times and perspectives as they gradually grow toward a collective creation, the bit of a new work of art: "*Comment les forceps vinrent mu hommes*" ("How Men Discovered Forceps").

The discovery during their creative act that "we're just a bunch of wet hens" leads to the last section of the play, when the authors face the "moment of truth ... bare [their] breasts and strut through the primeval muck." The scene is an exuberant expression of their newfound awareness of the sublime spirituality and earthy reality of being female. It is part self-parody and part joyous celebration: "The air is alive like the first moments of spring"; "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the part of the hen that is wet is her hen-hole, the vaginal spring, the mucous that mocks everything parched and dry"; "The great book of women has begun. AU that was lost will be found, saved end deciphered."

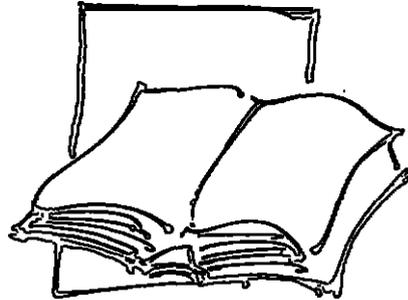
If readers want a glimpse of the tradition out of which dramatists like Jovette Marchessault and Michel Tremblay have grown, they can turn to the fourth volume of *Canada's Lost Plays*, *Colonial Quebec: French-Canadian Drama 1606-1866*, edited by Anton Wagner and published by the *Canadian Theatre Review*. The collection offers seven plays, an address by one of the playwrights "To the Young Actors of the Theatre Société at Quebec" in 1894, and a useful selected bibliography.

Although seven plays can hardly represent 360 years of theatrical activity, these are carefully selected to highlight important aspects of Quebec tradition: the influence of European dramatic and musical forms, French neo-classicism,

18th-century heroic tragedy, 19th-century historical melodrama, Roman Catholicism, British supremacy, political, economic, and moral repression, the early recognition of French-Canadian heroes — in short, the evolution of French-Canadian sensibility in drama.

Marc Lescarbot's well-known masque, *The Theatre of Neptune in New France*, is included, providing evidence of French theatre activity in Canada as early as 1606. This new translation, in a fluent, contemporary idiom that retains the flavour and sense of the original, is by Renata and Eugene Benson.

Between Lescarbot's masque and the



next play, Joseph Quesnel's *Colas and Colinette or the Bailiff Confounded*, are 184 years of various dramatic forms, largely in religious or educational institutions or by amateur theatrical groups of garrison officers and private citizens. Whereas *Colas and Colinette* is the Libretto of a comic opera, innocuous if lightly entertaining, *The French Republicans or an Evening in the Tavern (1800)* is the work of a politically committed author (thought also to be Quesnel) who satirically attacks a vulgar group of libertine republicans in Robespierre's France.

Despite its flat, lengthy, rhetorical speeches, *The Young LaTour*, written by Antoine Gerin-Lajoie in 1844, must occupy a special place in French-Canadian consciousness by virtue of its hero, Roger (the young) LaTour. The elder LaTour, in love with an English lady, has promised the British control of a part of Acadia to Tom by great anguish over his divided loyalties, Roger refuses to relinquish the land and preserves French possession by defeating his father and the English in battle.

Two other plays, *Papineau* by Louis-H. Frechette and *Elzéar Paquin's Riel*, celebrate French-Canadian heroes who oppose British oppression. In *Riel*, Ontario Orangemen receive particularly strong abuse: "If you are one of them you curse Christ and wade in the blood of our [Métis] brothers. Fanatical sect! Bloodthirsty sect! And above all, a Francophobic sect!"

Papineau, a typical late-19th-century historical melodrama, was performed to

popular acclaim in 1880 in Montreal and Quebec City. Paquin's *Riel*, on the other hand, lacks any real semblance of stageable drama. There are sudden, inexplicable character changes (in a mere eight lines Riel's would-be assassin is convinced not to kill him), and actions impossible to stage — for example, a lethal rifle battle between Gabriel Dumont's followers and the British army. If *Riel* was meant as a closet drama, its language gives no appearance of great felicity; any audience appeal comes from the force of Paquin's patriotism and the virulence of his attack on the injustices enacted on the Métis.

The seventh play is, unfortunately, the only 20th-century script: Gratien Gélinas's very popular *Yesterday the Children Were Dancing*, which was first performed at the Comédie-Canadienne in 1966 and in English at the Charlotte-town Festival in 1967. It makes a fitting end to the collection, for it is the last play by one of the founders of modern Quebec theatre. Moreover, the play's moderate stand in regard to the fierce tensions between its protagonists — a Quebec-born federal MP and his politically active separatist son, who is involved in a bombing campaign — makes it an important play at a time when younger writers like Tremblay are expressing a muscular Québécois sensibility.

If I have a quibble about this collection, it is that the translators, Eugene and Renata Benson, Louise Forsyth, and Mavor Moore receive no attention. Effective translation requires an artistic sensibility as well as facility in the two languages. These translations have both qualities.

LIKE *Last Call*, Anne Chislett's *Quiet in the Land* (Coach House Press), which opened at the Blyth Summer Festival in 1981, was a nominee for the Chalmers Awards. On the surface, *Quiet in the Land* seems a simple portrait of domestic strife in an Ontario Amish community. But because the characters are so fully drawn, and because the naturally microcosmic situation contains small issues that are inherently large, the play takes on added significance.

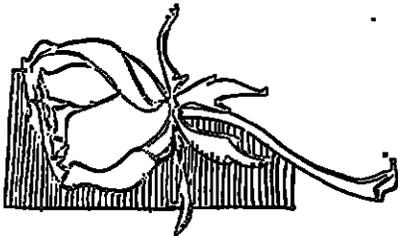
Yock Bauman, a youth at odds with traditional Amish beliefs — as are many other young people in his community — is driven away from his love and home by a strict father, soon to be bishop. When Yock becomes a First-World-War hero his actions repudiate Amish beliefs and align him with the "high people" outside the Amish way of life. At the same time, his actions reveal to him the profound truth carried in his people's traditional pacifism and avoidance of technological change.

What the play allows us to see is the multi-level (social, religious, metaphysical) devastation that comes from a clash between discipline and desire — a war between personal freedom, the will (even necessity) to seek change, and ages-old wisdom. While this is largely a realistic play, Cbislett seems to have found the realistic mode inadequate. She subtly varies the convention so that more than one action and one location are placed on stage at once. The effect is a statement to the audience that it is not watching a slice of life but an artistic representation of what life's actions can mean.

If ever a Canadian playwright has led the way beyond the realistic convention, it has been James Reaney. In 1983 his renowned Donnelly trilogy was reprinted by Press Porcépic in a much-needed, inexpensive, single volume, with useful notes by James Noonan. Also put into print was Gyroscope (Playwrights Canada), which shows Reaney moving in a different direction from what audiences have come to expect from his imaginative, mythopoetic dramas of Canadian history.

Gyroscope has at its core a witty, satirical purpose reminiscent of Reaney's early poetry in A Suit of Nettles. This new play derives its shape, in part, from a search by a young doctoral student, Mattie Medal (Meddlesome Mattie), for information to use in her thesis on life and art as seen through a poet (Hilda) and her husband (Greg). Mattie's activities interweave with Greg's as he tries to join the Guild of the Harpers, a local association of women poets that includes Hilda. A climactic confrontation is set up between Greg and Hilda as they compete to see whether Greg should be admitted to the guild (he has already defeated the other members).

When readers discover that the competition is an improvised sound poem, in the fashion of the Four Horsemen, they may sense one of the reasons the play



was so poorly received at its Tarragon Theatre performances in 1981. But with its humorous, resonant imagery, Gyroscope makes fascinating reading. It offers to a literate, sophisticated audience some enlightening satirical impressions of artistic creativity, sexuality, and Canadian mores.

In building *The Fighting Parson* (Por-

cupine's Quill) around a historical figure from the Windsor area, C.H. Gervais has answered James Reaney's call for plays that translate regional event or character into drama. J.O.L. Spracklin, a Methodist minister who championed the campaign against alcohol and immorality during Prohibition years, has in this play become the Reverend Leo Stockton, whose fight for clean living leads him to kill a childhood friend. Babe Barkley, the owner of a local saloon. Although the court finds Stockton not guilty, the play assures us that the rest of his life will be a troubled one:

STOCKTON: I shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on earth, and anyone who meets me can kill me.

MRS. WILLIS: The Lord answered him, "No, if anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, so the Lord put a mark on Cain. In order that anyone meeting him should not kill him."

Despite hints at ironies that might expand the compass of *The Fighting Parson*, it is closer to documentary chronicle than rich drama. Yet, as Reaney would want it to, the play opens up another tale from "Sowesto" history through the art of the theatre.

Wilfred Watson is probably better known as a poet, but he has been an active playwright for more than 20 years, writing and staging daring, experimental scripts like *Let's Murder Clytemnestra According to the Principles of Marshall McLuhan*, which was performed in Edmonton in 1969. **GRAMSCI x 3** (Longspoon Press) is an allegorical fantasy, to use some of Watson's own words, based on the life of Antonio Gramsci, whom Mussolini killed so that his martyrdom would become part of fascist mythology.

In a fragmented chronology, the play presents Gramsci's relationship with his wife and his mistress (who also becomes Mussolini's mistress in order to aid Gramsci), exploring how the two women nourish his opposition to fascism. It makes a fascinating study, enhanced by Watson's poetic dialogue, much of which is printed in "stacked grids," a kind of concrete poetry for the stage. Certainly the play will not be to everyone's taste, but it represents the challenging of convention that is essential for a vital theatre tradition.

What Is to Be Done? (Quadrant Editions) is important in the same limited way. Written by Mavis Gallant, this group of scenes from the wartime experiences of two Montreal women — Jenny, 18, unmarried; Molly, 20, mar-

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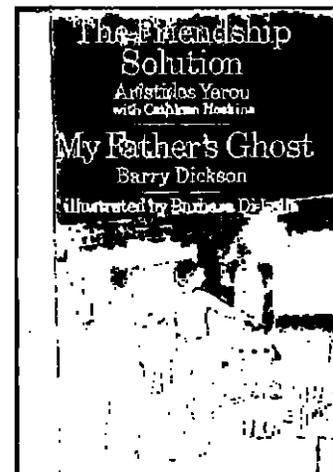
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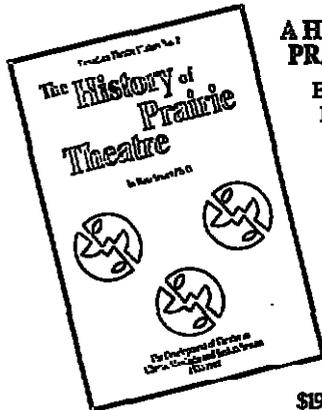
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ried with an unwanted child and a husband overseas — cannot be described as dramatic. Closer to a collection of **prose fiction vignettes** — the kind that quietly reveal **glimpses of life** or human **character** — *What Is to Be Done?* lacks the **intense** unity and dynamic force that the **conflict** between evolving characters provides for traditional realistic drama. What seems meant to hold these **vignettes** together is their **chronological** arrangement and a persistent irony that undercuts their **air** of nostalgia.

In **essence** we experience a collection of **ironic** insights about **war** and **peace**, justice, **fascism**, **Marxism**, and the **new** world expected to evolve after 1945. **More specifically** as it **relates** to *Molly* and *Jenny* — or to women in general — we see a world of **social injustices** that need to be **righted**. The effect of the play is of life **passing** by, a bit **zanily** and slowly, repeatedly **introducing** the **question**, "What is to be done?" You may go to sleep **in the theatre**, but if you are awake to the proliferation of little insights, the play **will** foster the **darkly** humorous **answer**: "It won't happen again. It won't happen again."

IF YOU SEEK more traditional drama, CBC Enterprises have just the **thing**. In conjunction with CBC-TV's televising of Stratford Festival productions, they **have** brought out the **first three** in a **series** of plays by Shakespeare — *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and *As You Like It* — in glossy, **well-illustrated** editions that **contain brief** — too brief to be of value — comments by their **respective** Stratford directors. The festival's changes to the standard Globe **edition** are recorded **following** the text, **along** with a few notes on line readings and

one-paragraph biographical sketches of selected personnel, directors, designers, and the literary managers.

The virtue of this **project** must be that it **preserves** and **makes** accessible the **illustrated** text as performed by one of Canada's **important** companies. **Theatre** historians may find these publications useful; audiences may nostalgically recall an evening of **theatre**, but at \$9.95 **these texts do not rival the Arden** or a **number of other editions already on the market**.

Two other Canadian plays bear mention. **Robin Skelton's** *The Paper Cage* (Oolichan Books) addresses **contemporary** life by interweaving the story of the famous Roman general, **Regulus**, with a Second-World-War tale of a **suicidal, hallucinating British Army officer**. Although overwritten and less dynamic than many audiences would like, this **verse** drama reveals another playwright seeking modes different from the **realistic-naturalistic** combination.

This same **search** is evident in the more **successful** drama *Under Coyote's Eye* (Quadrant Editions), by **Henry Beissel**. In poetic **prose** and evocative stage **pictures**, **Beissel** projects onto the stage the mind of the last male of the **Yahi Indians, Ishi**, who must **decide** whether to father **children** with his sister or **follow** the laws of his tribe that **forbid incest**, and thereby let the tribe die in the face of **white encroachment**. A **shaman, Ishi's** sister, and **other** tribal members are joined in the cast by white Indian-killers. The characters of **Coyote, Rattlesnake, and Eagle** embody the **archetypal forces** at war in **Ishi's** mind. An imaginative and **stageable** play.

One **ignorable** play is **David Knight's** *The Conscript Fathers* (Childe Thurs-

day), which dramatizes the mental anguish of four **undergraduate** me" over the fact that a young woman, **whom all have slept** with, is pregnant. Who did it? **Who cares?**

THIS YEAR'S publishing around Canadian drama **has** been light. Only a reprint of Betty Lee's *Love and Whisky*, the story of the **Dominion** Drama Festival (Simon & Pierre), and a study by Renata **Usmiani, Second Stage: The Alternative Theatre Movement In Canada** (University of British Columbia Press), are new on the market. At **first** sight **Usmiani's** work is bound to **arouse enormous** interest, especially since **no other book-length** study of **this** important topic has appeared. After reading it you **will** likely concede **that**, as a **spotty** overview of what has happened chiefly in **five** "alternative" **theatres** in Canada (**Theatre Passe Muraille, Tamahnous Theatre, Savage God, The Mummies, and Théâtre d'Aujourd'hui**), the book has value. If only.

If **only** it were **not** so troubled by a process of **reductive** thinking — that is, by its **author's** penchant for **reducing theatres** or plays to categories, and discarding those that do not fit. If only the study did **not** have so many factual or conceptual errors. (**I averaged** them out at about one **every five** pages.) If **only** the book did not spend so much of its space on plot outlines of plays performed in **these theatres**. And **finally**, if only, in a **173-page** book, the author had **provided more than three pages** of analytical conclusions. After all this criticism **what** do we have? A **primer** on a group of idiosyncratically selected small Canadian **theatres** — a book that most be used, **but with caution**. □

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After the storm

Seeking order out of a maelstrom of character and plot, Elizabeth Spencer's new novel is mostly about coming to terms with old ghosts

By **LEON ROOKE**

The Salt Line, by Elizabeth Spencer, Doubleday, 302 pages, \$21.50 cloth (ISBN 0 385 15698 7).

ELIZABETH SPENCER'S stature as a short-story writer was confirmed by the appearance in 1981 of her collected stories, some 33 tales spanning four decades of authorship. *The Salt Line*, her first novel in some while and a most ambitious one, is likely to confirm her place in the front ranks of the novel form as well.

Intricately and densely populated, elaborately plotted, and always gracefully worded, the book is ostensibly set in the early 1970s along the Gulf Coast, where Mississippi's heel comes down, although its greatest strength, undeniably Spencer's own, is its radiant evocation of a place not confined by these specific years. For a Mississippian, the Gulf Coast — bounded, say, by Pascagoula dim on one side and New Orleans bright on the other — and, more particularly, Gulfport would be the beacon. If you were young Spencer, up in Carrollton in central Mississippi, and driving for the coast, Gulfport, likely as not, is where you would come out. And come out meaningfully, in a way never to be forgotten, for it was here the Old South shed its burdens and the new world opened up with promise. It is for this reason that the salt line — that point in the terrain, whether in Mississippi or elsewhere in the south, where you first scented open water, scented escape — was so important.

It is where Spencer has come out in this novel, in an imaginary town called Notchali, midway on the real 20-mile stretch of white sand linking Gulfport with Biloxi. Montreal-rooted for a long time now, Spencer has been expansive in her use of locale (Italy, Montreal, New York, etc. frequently serve), but when she does elect to return to the coast she does so with an instinct for detail sharp as a sorcerer's wand, and with an undisguised love for the place powerful enough to make it exclusively her fic-

tional property. While she has, as one does, "taken up residence in the world" — this from the preface to her collected stories — "there are images that never go away; they do not even fade."

No fiction, in 1969 a killer storm, Hurricane Camille, devastated much of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama. The backdrop for this novel is Camille's aftermath, with scavenging over and the rebuilding underway. What remained of the old, Spencer accurately records, looked "surprised at itself, and seedy, like people after major surgery."

Arnie Carrington, the novel's central character, has bought an island, a battered old hotel redolent with history,



Elizabeth Spencer

and a row of wrecked houses; he yearns for a coast rebuilt in near-image of its previous glory, and is intent on warding off what he can of encroaching fast-food outlets, gaudy motels, bowling alleys, parking lots "as big as lakes," and miniature roadside golf courses composed with dinosaur motifs. (You shoot "the balls along thorny spines and into their yawning gullets.") In the past, Arnie saved lives. But for such as this?

Arnie has vision, but no money.

Enter Lex Graham, former "best" friend and old academic colleague from the brutal '60s; Lex has sheen, a newly acquired wealth to laminate his crippling troubles, but his vision is festering. He wants revenge against Arnie, and has grounds. That is what this novel is mostly about, in one form or another: rebuilding, resurrection, coming to terms with old ghosts, with memory, setting the past to order — getting back into life. Freeing oneself of the "locked up" past and its passions. Seeding the natural flow.

In addition to Lex and Arnie, there is Mavis, sexy, down-home, alluring, fading away from two faceless marital couplings and an ill-consummated affair with a racketeer. There is the racketeer, Frank Matteo, warmly but curiously drawn, with one painful and secret marriage behind him, intent now on securing Arnie's island for syndicate smuggling. There is Lex's smouldering and doomed wife Dorothy, "glossy product woman" (endearing, I found), wanting as last hope to renew her ancient trysts with Arnie. There is her beautiful and virtuous daughter Lucinda, "polite as cream," lacy, a rosebud in lavender, and "carrying herself like a guardian of something" — soon to cast off her "born again" attitudes following a sexually loaded episode with Arnie in a lighthouse. There is Arnie's son, reclaimed dropout, who believes his father murdered his mother. There is that mother, Evelyn, Arnie's wife and comfort, dead by cancer, but present in ghostly essence throughout the novel.

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAM TATA

Children of the rue Morgue

By ALBERT G. MANGUEL

Sweet Poison/Coming Soon. by Pierre Turgeon, translated from the French by David Lobdell, Oberon Press. 176 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 498 1) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 500 7).

The Man with a Flower in His Mouth, by Gilles Archambault, translated from the French by David Lobdell, Oberon Press, 136 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 501 5) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 502 3).

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S literary fate is a curious one. In English his over-written stories are more often remembered than mad, but in French (where his name has been shortened to Edgar Poe), in Charles Baudelaire's passionate translation, he continues to exercise a powerful influence, and in Quebec he has fathered titers as different as Michel Tremblay (in his short stories) and Pierre Turgeon. Poe's long, latinized phrases flow naturally in Baudelaire's prose, and allow the exploration of horror and the grotesque to become clearer, better mapped. Horror and the grotesque are the backbone of Pierre Turgeon's novels. Turgeon sets out not so much to explore these themes as to confirm their existence, finding in the life around him the ghosts and ghouls that haunt the world of Poe. For Turgeon it is we, the living, who are buried alive; it is on our own heads that the House of Usher falls, and across our own bound bodies that the deadly pendulum swings inside the pit. Turgeon's dusky domain is, of course, Quebec itself.

In *Sweet Poison* (a feeble translation of *Faire sa mort comme faire l'amour* — "Making One's Death Like Making Love," originally published in 1969) Edouard, having deserted from the army, tries to hide among his family in Montreal and is betrayed to the military police by his own mother. If Edouard, the romantic hero, is reminiscent of Poe, Suzanne, the mother, is pure Sade: "Let family bonds never be sacred to you," wrote the Marquis de Sade in *Juliette*. "It is false that you owe anything to the being that gave you life; and even more false to suppose that you owe anything to the being you give life to. Why should

blood have the right to dictate its own laws?"

Happiness is not allowed in Turgeon's Quebec; nothing, not even cruelty, comes easily there. "Cruelty," says Edouard, "requires a long apprenticeship. First, you have to learn to hate your body. You smash the mirrors, those ancient symbols of man's narcissism. Then you take a sliver of glass and mutilate yourself. When you've taught yourself to hate everything about yourself, when you've become your own worst enemy, you stop feeling pity for anything or anyone." In the end, Edouard makes Baudelaire's famous prayer his own: "Oh God give me strength and courage to look upon my heart and body without disgust!"

The question that arises after reading *Sweet Poison* is: why the anger? Why this urge to tear down those 19th-century idols — family, state, church — so close to the 21st century? Turgeon's answer seems to be that, at least in Quebec, the idols are still standing, and that they need demolishing. The result is a description of one man's battle against the realm of darkness.

In *Coming Soon*, written four years after *Sweet Poison*, the anger is still apparent; but it has become an image of reality instead of reality itself: a film made in the streets of Montreal. As in *Alai* Robbe-Grillet's *Project for a Revolution in New York*, we are no longer certain whether the scenes show are from the film within the fiction or whether they are the fiction (Turgeon's reality) of the novel. The writer has contaminated the real world with his metaphor; art has become larger than life and twice as real. *Coming Soon*, however, lacks the sense of immediacy created by the sheer fury of *Sweet Poison*. Turgeon has become more reasonable, less moving. And yet, *Coming Soon* is, in spite of the deliberate craft, a powerful novel.

Turgeon is not only a good writer, he is also a good publisher. His new company, Editions Primeur, is planning to bring out 40 titles in June, making use of Turgeon's experience as editor-in-chief of Editions Quinze, certainly one of Canada's most important publishing companies. Among the many authors published by Turgeon at Quinze was Gilles Archambault.

Compared to Turgeon, Archambault seems innocuous. Ten years older than Turgeon, the author of more than a dozen books, Archambault is less a teller of tales than an evoker of impressions, a dealer in sketches, descriptions, the watercolours of the mind. The *Man with a Flower in His Mouth* is a radio operator who lets his thoughts carry him through his working day, back to the woman he has loved, to his frustrations,

(Ghosts, I should say, are common as gulls in *The Salt Line* — all, aside from Evelyn, who comes across drearily, enriching it greatly. Spencer is not we to shy away from life's improbables, or "improbable truths," ghosts being a cogent part of her landscape and message.)

There is, too, a host of lesser characters: a marauding gang of drugies nicknamed The Weasel; Ellen, sister of a congressman, saved from addiction — it does sound funny — by Arnie's intellectual stimulation; Barbra L., the darkie, accommodating mistress of Arnie — who does, for a guy who's impotent during much of the book, find himself circled by a remarkable host of females; and an intriguing minor character — the only unruffled figure in the book other than Barbra — the black busboy at Matteo's restaurant, who always seems to know more than he's telling.

All this is a heady mixture, as each gets his or her apportioned time. But for all this teeming life, which is life, and despite its astonishingly skilful manipulation, the dance of interlocking lives, there is sometimes a sense of overload. Necessary, you might think, for the author's purpose. "We live among forces," says Amie. "Every cross-current in the world, if you're noticing, comes near enough to make you feel it The heart makes houses for itself. They get broken into." For some (Les), the cross-currents, the past, are "all quicksand"; others (like Matteo) are not in the habit of looking back.

Presiding over this maelstrom, taking as brother/mentor a massive smiling Buddha ("all debased in mud, former glory fled"), is Arnie Carrington, steadfast and relatively tranquil despite all his manoeuvrings: the calm eye of the hurricane. If — other than abundance — the novel has any difficulties, they largely reside in Arnie's portrait. He's too give to self-description, a trait that wears. (I'm "an eccentric old widower" . . . I'm "not the rampant lion I used to be" . . . I'm "king of a mined country" . . . I'm "a broken down old billy goat . . . no great guy.") His past heroics — rescuing a wounded soldier in Korea, rescuing his son in Colorado, fiery exponent for black intergration at his backwater college, even his love for Evelyn — have a fabric that's decidedly thin.

But these are small qualms — bickerings, really — hardly enough to drown a novel of *The Salt Line*'s buoyancy. Whatever his flaws, his voice is clear: "Take risks for improbable truths Save lives Let the past continue naturally, live on. Flow in one stream." Ardent messages. □

to his growing age. Salvation, he feels, will come with his grandson, "I'll do my best to persuade him to become a journalist. He will be the instrument of my revenge." The reader knows that even that wish is somehow impossible. In another book, *The Absent-Minded Traveller*, Archambault outlines his intentions: "The slow confession I am about to make today. . . has in the end no other merit than to allow me to address myself in a low voice to a reader who will perhaps recognize in passing the expression of a feeling that will not leave him indifferent." Unfortunately, unlike Turgeon's novels, most of Archambault's "confessions" do leave the reader indifferent. Unlike *Sweet Poison*, *The Man with a Flower in His Mouth* does not seem a necessary book.

Whether in the excellent writing of Turgeon or, much less, in the prose of Archambault, there is a sense of coming to terms with reality — of highlighting its bleaker aspects, stressing its worst points — to achieve perhaps in the end a clearer image of the battleground. The nature of the battle itself, its origin and its outcome, remain whispered, undefined, but the characters who fight in it are alive, recognizable, and in their creation lies, ultimately, the writers' achievement. □

REVIEW

Mean streaks

By HELEN PORTER

Lotus Man, by Gildas Roberts, Breakwater Books, 223 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 919519 30 X).

IT'S DIFFICULT TO review a comic novel. If one follows such guidelines as believability of characters and plausibility of situations, one is apt to be criticized for taking the book too seriously. Signs of racism and sexism should be seen, we are told, as revelations of the protagonist's hang-ups, not the author's. But so many comic novels are spoiled by what appears to be the novelist's desire to get back at some aspect of society with which he's familiar. I found that to be true of *General Ludd*, John Metcalf's otherwise

expertly written send-up of a very with-it university where scholarship is of minimal importance. I find it to be occasionally true of Newfoundland's Ray Guy, who at his best is one of North America's finest humorists. And, in *Lotus Man*, I find it to be true of Gildas Roberts, a writer of talent who has allowed his considerable gift to be squandered on a novel that seems to be an attempt to get even with Canadian nationalists, certain university typed, and feminists, to name just a few of his targets.

There is no doubt that Gildas Roberts, a professor of English at Memorial University of Newfoundland, knows how to write entertainingly. He proved this with his short novel *Chemical Eric*, published about 10 years ago, which deals with the dramatic changes in the life of Eric LeRoux (note the surname) after he takes to swallowing the "greenies" supplied to him by Sol Bordello, offspring of a Mafia-type Montreal family and a student at Cenotaph University in Newfoundland where Eric teaches English. The first 70 pages of *Lotus Man* are actually a repeat of *Chemical Eric*, and are the best part of Roberts's new novel.

The theme of *Chemical Eric* (now Book One of *Lotus Man*) is an intriguing one. It opens with LeRoux being taken to task by the acting dean of arts, a stony-faced Scotsman named Stephen Gray, because in his seven years at Cenotaph, Eric — a South African like his creator — has not even begun work on a doctoral thesis. Aided by chemical help from the generous Sol Bordello, Eric changes overnight from Number One Wimp to Macho Man First Class. He also completes his thesis in record time. Roberts's account of how he does this, and the literary happening that concludes Book One, contains some genuinely funny moments, marred somewhat by a fixation on bosoms, bottoms, and bathroom humour. Jean-Paul Potter and the kilted Tartan MacTavish are slyly accurate takeoffs of two of Canada's best-known literary lights. However, the portrait of Marvell Chestnut is a vicious one, foreshadowing what is to follow.

Book Two takes Eric from Newfoundland to Columbus, Ohio, where he works for Dr. Frank Frommfleisch at the Center for Human Communication Studies, Ohio Christian University. Dr. Frommfleisch is perhaps the only really funny character in the second half of the book: As his research assistant, Eric's actual job is to teach all of Dr. Frommfleisch's courses while Frommfleisch locks himself up in his library carrel and gets on with his writing and research: "But as Eric drew closer he could see

Dr. Frommfleisch crouching almost motionless over his little metal desk diligently annotating a 5 x 8 file card. From each of the books crammed into the shelves above him, long, buff-coloured carrel slips protruded like sterile, blighted corn."

The other people Eric meets at Ohio Christian are treated less kindly. The beauteous Dr. Helen Eve Richards, "winner of such awards as the Magoun-Norgarb Prize and the COCUP Laureate, co-editor of Dolt, Swinehart's giant anthology *The Great Britishers*," is seen mainly as a woman of insatiable sexual appetites who jumps from bed to bed with reckless abandon. But this shouldn't be surprising; very few of the women in the book are seen in anything but sexual terms. Eric is obsessed with "sanitized female crotches." When he goes to see Dr. Harvey Krupp, director of the Center for Human Communication Studies, he is greeted by a girl "almost as vaginal-douche lovely as the one downstairs." From the beginning of Book One the women are interchangeable; whether a secretary, an English professor, or a student, every woman's mind is constantly on copulation.

The men don't fare much better. Eric's roommate, Ra Lim, says things like, "I do a lot for Amelica in war. It is a pity my father loses his civil lights in Kolea. General Park, hau, he is a bad one!" I don't think I've come across such a stereotype since *The House of Peter MacGregor was on the radio years ago*. In fact, Sol Bordello comes across as one of the few likable characters in the book. I also rather liked Dr. J. Oedipus Fish, dean of graduate studies at Cenotaph, but I'm not sure that I was supposed to. Objectionable characters like Ray Pople, Sam Evans, and Milton Markesteyn — "a swarthy little Jew with a balding pointy head" — are almost too bad to be true. Of course Ray Pople and the lustful Sally Heissbroek get what they deserve. It's amazing how many of Roberts's characters get killed off in various bizarre ways: I counted seven violent deaths, rather a lot for a comic novel. Anything remotely connected with the political left ("Pete Seeger rubbish," affirmative action) is a target here; much of the time I saw Roberts as a funny Barbara Amiel.

I'm not sorry I read *Lotus Man*. Gildas Roberts has a genuine comic talent that is used to best advantage in the first part of the book. But I suggest that before he begins his next novel Dr. Roberts should shake up the milk of human kindness in his veins. Meanness is not an essential ingredient of humour but rather the reverse. It ruins many situations that without it would have been truly funny. □

Going through the notions

By **ELWIN MOORE**

The **Singing Rabbi**, by **Martin Avery**, Oberon Press, 104 pages, \$17.95 cloth (ISBN 0 38750 490 6) and \$8.95 paper (ISBN 0 33750 4914):

A **First Class Funeral**, by **Sonia Birch-Jones**, Oolichan Books, 160 pages, \$3.95 paper (ISBN 0 88982 058 9).

MARTIN AVERY'S short stories stretch thinly between two far poles. One pole is the quiet cottage country around **Gravenhurst, Ont.**, where Avery grew up, from which he fled, and to which he later returned, even though "The landscape lacks a certain significance. . . . Nothing important has ever happened here." The other pole is **Jewishness**: a faith he at least temporarily adopted: a people and a history he has taken into his fiction; a country, Israel, where he lived on a kibbutz; and a way of telling — his prose borrows a little from **Isaac Bashevis Singer**, a little from innumerable stand-up comedians. "I converted to Judaism," Avery writes, "because I felt that was about as far as you could go. It is too difficult to learn Chinese."

Unfortunately, it is more fun to talk about Avery than to read him. *The Singing Rabbi*, his first full-length book, is short and slight and holds much vexing cleverness. One piece consists of bad comedy-club routines. Another seems inspired as much as anything by a desire to pun "Soviet Jewry" with "Soviet Jewellery." Trying to annex Gentile Canada to the purposes of his eccentric would-be Jewish sensibility, Avery creates fictional worlds that have the air of notions, not places. And just about the only character of satisfying depth in these eight stories is the apparently autobiographical "I."

Nevertheless, *The Singing Rabbi* has good moments. I think of the graceful ending of "Jerusalem & Home," the tension between contrary lovers in "Promised Land/Newfoundland," and all of the title story except for the Ed Sullivan introduction. This story, the book's best, presents an elusive spiritual leader who manages to unite in his person the world of tape recorders and the world of cabalistic spells. To hear him is "like leaving Toronto in a fog and getting lost

somewhere over Eastern Europe in another era." The frustrated longing here may be Avery's own. The story, at any rate, is stylishly framed and strongly told, and gains from the moral earnestness at its core.

Avery's alienation ("I have always felt like an outsider . . .") shows itself not only in themes but also in manner. He likes to move outside his characters, stepping away toward the higher ground of irony. He favours effects of wit, coolness, distance. **Sonia Birch-Jones**, author of *A First Class Funeral*, is a writer of quite opposite bent. She's intent on burrowing inwards, on fitting herself back into the skin and feelings of a girl growing up in **Cardiff, Wales**, around 1930. And she's after warmth — the warmth of white china mugs tilted with steaming tea, of just-peed knickers and aunts' hugs and family fights.

Birch-Jones tells all 10 stories in this first collection in the artless, rattling-along voice of the girl Sarah:

My Uncle **Shadrach** was a chazza. At least that's what my mother said. A chazza is a pig, a slob, but as Uncle **Shadrach** was Jewish I always thought of him as a Jewish pig. But I did wonder if he could be a Jewish pig when a pig wasn't Kosher. I thought he was called a chazza because he looked like a pi& He

did. He looked just like the fat, hairy pigs I used to see in **Cardiff** market on Saturdays.

Submerging herself in Sarah — even to the unwise extent of writing "s'pose" for "suppose" and "cept" for "except" — **Birch-Jones** produces fictions that reminded me of a child's crayoned pictures. They're quickly drawn and vigorous, in bright colours that seem emotionally right but rudimentary. Characters, typically, are fat or thin, handsome or ugly, kind or unkind, loved or hated. The reader misses an adult voice, misses the depth that might have come from setting Sarah's perceptions then against the author's perceptions now.

Sarah tells how she made Uncle **Shadrach** stop molesting her; how her charming, gambling father won a first-class funeral for a poker mate; how she helped break up a fiery romance between her favourite aunt and an untrustworthy Canadian logger. Merchant-respectability serves as a tattered backdrop to all manner of unrespectable acts. Sarah is menaced by drunken louts; she spies on three different sets of illicit lovers; she is forever spotting bums being patted and hands going up skirts. She eavesdrops, too. This is folksy, entertaining stuff, a little sentimental,



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the dialogue colourful and stogy. A story about the deaths of Sarah's brother and grandfather is stark and moving; mostly, though, the writing carries milder rewards — the rewards not so much of art as of memory and anecdote. □

REVIEW

Laughing all the way

By PHIL SURGUY

The *Best of Modern Humour*, edited by Mordecai Richler, McClelland & Stewart, 561 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 7479 4).

IT HAS NEVER, to my knowledge, been posted on a bulletin board anywhere, but reviewers of anthologies seem to follow one unbreakable rule: ignore the contents of the book in question and cram the space you've been given with an eye-glazing list of people who've been left out; the more friends and helpful business acquaintances you can name, the better.

Well, I have no friends who deserve to be included in The *Best of Modern Humour*, nor any bums I wish to pat. Moreover, I can think of only four authors — Paul Hiebert, Hunter Thompson, Tom Sharpe, and George MacDonald Fraser — whose absence from the collection is remarkable. For sheer funniness and technique, Hiebert's biography of Sarah Binks, the sweet songstress of Saskatchewan, is equal to or better than any of the works Richler has selected. Few humorous writers have reflected, and contributed to, the craziness of their times as successfully as Hunter Thompson did in the late 1960s. Tom Sharpe's outraged satires of England and South Africa are savagely uneven, but very much of what he's done is excellent; the police interrogation of the title character in *Wilt* is a brilliant piece of sustained comedy. And George MacDonald Fraser deserves a place, if only because he's accomplished the scarcely possible task of writing good, consistent humour over the course of almost a dozen novels.

Otherwise, Richler's anthology comes extremely close to living up to its title,

and it's pretty well a treat from one end to the other. I could quarrel with a few of the selections, but I won't. In the foreword, Richler writes that his basic criterion for the selection of material was that it had to make him laugh, "sometimes at seven o'clock in the morning, before my first cup of coffee, which may have been playing dirty pool." Who can argue with that? Also, I'm grateful to the book for sparking my interest in the work of the novelists Beryl Bainbridge and Lisa Alther.

P.G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, Robert Benchley, Groucho Marx, Damon Runyon (represented by the lovely story "Butch Minds the Baby"), James Thurber, Peter de Vries, Kingsley Amis, S.J. Perelman, Kurt Vonnegut, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Berger, Woody Allen — in short, almost everyone you'd expect to find is here, as well as many of the more recent humorists. The selections are arranged chronologically according to the authors' birthdates, from Stephen Leacock's "Gertrude the Governess" to Ian Frazier's "Dating Your Mom."

But what gives this collection its extra bite, carries it way beyond the predictable, is that Richler has clearly gone to some effort to screen more than the obvious candidates; and he has had the common sense to include humorous non-fiction, which accounts for nearly one-quarter of the 64 selections. There are swatches of memoir by V.S. Naipaul, Jessica Mitford, Nora Ephron, H.L. Mencken, Roy Blount, Jr. and John Mortimer. The essays include Tom Wolfe's excellent "The Mid-Atlantic Ma," Truman Capote's hilarious and ultimately moving tale of the day he accompanied his cleaning woman on her rounds, and Wolcott Gibbs's eviscerating *New Yorker* profile of Henry Luce, the Time-Life empire, and the terrible Times language that prevailed for so many years. "Backward ran sentences until reeled the mind." And beginning on page 66 is the extraordinary correspondence that resulted when the Ford Motor Company asked the poet Marianne Moore to help them name a new car. Utopian Turtletop was one of her joyous suggestions, but they ignored it and called their car Edsel.

Drawing attention to the non-fiction selections is not to imply that they are in any way more true, relevant, or incisive than Roth's "Whacking Off," Thurber's "The Breaking Up of the Winships," and the rest of the fiction. That's a necessary caution, because too many people still believe non-fiction is somehow superior to fiction. Similar bigotry holds that humour is not serious. Or, as Woody Allen once put it, "When

you do comedy, you are not sitting at the grownups' table." Yet an ostensibly serious writer can present the world with any manner of sloppy thinking and imprecise prose and still be thought good, while a comedian, if he or she is to succeed, must be well-nigh perfect. "Whacking Off" and "The Breaking Up of the Winships" are both examples of superior writing and tragi-comedy of the first order. And, if sexuality and marriage aren't serious enough for you doubters out there, Richler has not excluded really serious topics like nuclear madness. Donald Barthelme's contribution is "Game," which is narrated by one of "two me" who, armed with their doomsday keys, maintain an underground missile installation. It begins, "Shotwell keeps the jacks and the rubber ball in his attaché case and will not allow me to play with them." What more need be said? □

REVIEW

Three's a crowd

By SHIRLEY KNIGHT MORRIS

The *Medusa Head*, by Mary Meigs, Talonbooks, 162 pages, 58.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 210 X).

IN *The Medusa Head* American artist and autobiographer Mary Meigs describes one year during which she and her long-time lover, Canadian novelist Marie-Claire Blais, lived in a ménage à trois with a French woman writer, identified only as Andrée. Both were so completely mesmerized by Andrée — although one wonders why, as her character, which dominates the book, is unappealing, not to say downright obnoxious — that their relationship was severely damaged and healed slowly later only after the two titers, ravaged by fears and nightmares, managed to put 3,000 miles between themselves and the strange Andrée.

Considering the title of the book — a description of Andrée as she appeared in her frequent unprovoked tantrums — deranged might be a more suitable adjective:

"The Medusa head," for instance, which turned us not to stone but to cowardly jelly, was the result of an "état de désarroi," when Andrée, herself petrified by terror, frightened others. She accepted amiably the grand idea of her Medusa head, which gave her a chance to analyze her "états de désarroi," exercises in exoneration, but fled if the analysis contained any accusation . . . she must have learned the uses of her Medusa head at an early age, when the appearance of it first struck fear into another person, and she noticed that people could be manipulated by ha alternations of rage and sweet tractability. People are gradually broken in this way, as they are broken by more refined forms of punishment and reward in prisons, torture chambers, and concentration camps. . . .

While the allure of such a "irrational and terrifying woman remains a puzzle, one must concede that it did indeed exist, for Blais based her novel, *A Literary Affair*, on the same complex character. Both writers convey a love/hate relationship with Andrée, but for all Meigs's skilful writing she is still unable to explain satisfactorily to the reader or (one gleans from her attempts at justification) to herself just why they remained so long in the clutches of a nightmare figure.

In 1981 Meigs, who now lives in Quebec, published her warmly praised autobiography, *Lily Briscoe: A Self-Portrait*, in which she confesses that her talent is for drawing rather than painting. She might have applied the same description to her writing. *The Medusa Head* is a literary drawing, a sketch, delicately pencilled on a small canvas. She illustrates with fine perception the three major characters and several intriguing minor ones — especially Antoine, the pederast to whom Andrée is, married:

Everything about him was beautiful. His line nervous features and curly greying hair fitted his Donatello-skull with its bumps like the skull of a graceful, brilliant boy, a French boy — thin-lipped, sensitive and arrogant. Antoine wore English shoes, made of the finest leather that money could buy, and tweed suits, with the subtle colours of a French autumn. His marvellous hands that played Schubert and Hayden (but Andrée was as jealous of Antoine's piano as she was of his boys), his thin mouth with its thin wile, for he seldom laughed in the vulgar way we Anglo-Saxons laugh, the extreme subtlety of every word that came out of his mouth — I still cannot think of this man, who conformed so perfectly to my ideal of manly beauty, without a certain regret. . . .

It is this sensitivity in the writing, the artist's eye for detail, colour, texture, mood, perfectly captured descriptions of

a Paris apartment, a Cape Cod house, a farm in Brittany, an antique lamp, an exquisite meal, that give the book its beauty and grace and fascination. But lacking a large canvas, boldly executed in vivid oils, the characters remain elusive and remote. The very qualities that give the book a sort of breathtaking radiance also frustrate the reader, struggling to understand the characters' real feelings and motives. by what the author chooses to leave blank in her drawing, by what she does not — perhaps cannot — explain.

Obviously we are meant to feel sympathy for the meek, fragile, child-like Marie-Claire; instead, because we know she is a talented woman, probably far more intelligent than the cruel, overbearing Andrée, and because we do not understand why she behaves as she does, we wish she would stop cowering and whimpering and obeying. Although Meigs writes of Marie-Claire with love, she cannot disguise the fact that her friend appears to wallow in a masochistic self-pity, which arouses the reader to bewildered impatience.

Meigs herself — who perhaps comes out best of all the unlikable characters — annoys us. Her Yankee good sense quickly sees through the "witty, charming" Andrée to the ferocious monster underneath, but instead of packing her bags and getting out she spends a year sulking, inwardly rebelling, pitying Marie-Claire without offering to help her, and despising Andrée. Only occasionally does she make some small feeble gesture of defiance. She seems in a stupor, a hypnotic trance.

What motivates these bright, independent women to behave as they do is never clear. Meigs blurs the charcoal sketch with a careful finger when events demand an explanation of why she and



Marie-Claire endured a year of Andrée's slow torture. I think she realizes the weakness of her own attempt to explain when she says: "Why did I hang in? Have you never rested in an impossible situation, semi-paralyzed, with the hope that it will have a happy ending. . . . Why did I wait a year to make the break

with Andrée? Why didn't I leave? . . . An autobiographer can only resolve whys like this by further stem scrutiny of her own soul and the plaintive wish that people would not insist on reasonable explanations. . . ."

As for Andrée herself, since the author cannot supply us with a "reasonable explanation," I can only echo the opinion of a friend of Mary Meigs, who commented sometime after the episode was over, "I thought she was an unmitigated little bitch." □

REVIEW

The lives of the party

By DAVID HOMEL

The Strangest Dream: Canadian Communists, the Spy Trials, and the Cold War, by Merrily Weisbord, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 2.55 pages, \$18.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88619 029 0).

THIS IS A book of social history that opens with the words, "I begin to write a book about communists so I can understand my parents and the ethos in which I was raised. I expect to find the warm, communal, and hopeful spirit that I remember as a child." From the start Merrily Weisbord takes a position against that naive idea we all absorbed in school that history is somehow "objective," that there is no room for personal explanations — that it is strangely outside the individuals involved. She makes us dream her strangest dream along with her and her characters, and on the way we learn of the rise and fall of the communist movement in Canada, a period extending from the Depression in North America to Khrushchev's revelations about the Stalinist darkness in Russia. Therein is the cycle of belief and disillusionment that characterized those who thought communism was the way to a better world here on earth.

Weisbord introduces her people as in a play. The setting is Montreal, early in the 1930s, and the characters are immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, who brought their social convictions with them in their meagre baggage, and a handful of politicized French-Canadian

workers. Because she is rooted among these people., Weisbord was evidently able to interview past activists who might have remained closed-mouthed to less sympathetic inquiries. To such people, the choice in the 1930s was between fascism and communism: the Free World was not yet committed to stopping the Nazis, and on the domestic front the Depression was running unchecked. With its insistence on equality, communism seemed the only choice. And it was a social thing, too: party life was remarkably intense.

In Quebec, Canadian communists proved such good organizers that they soon attracted the repressive wrath of Premier Duplessis, who instituted the Padlock Law, by which any building that housed suspected seditious activities could be padlocked by the police. Communist-led strikes were enormously successful, and the resulting police repression only heightened the communists' thirst for action, even at their own physical peril. These were romantic years, when it was easy to believe.

The beginning of the end was the 1939 non-aggression pact that Russia signed with Nazi Germany. Though very few party members were swayed by rumours of Stalin's "Moscow Trials" in the late 1930s, it must have been hard to accept Russia signing a treaty with a fascist, anti-Semitic state, even if the Soviets were only stalling for time before the big showdown. The Canadian Communist Party suddenly found itself an ally with Germany — the enemy — and was forced underground, while many Jewish members refused to swallow the bitter pill from Moscow and left. This pattern of purge, either self-administered or ordered from above, was repeated time and time again: first when MP Fred Rose was sacrificed by the party after being accused of spying; then over the national question, when the Toronto Party boss made Montreal drop its interest in Quebec nation; and finally over Khrushchev's revelations of life and death under Stalin. These internal wars of attrition finally helped destroy the Party.

Once Germany invaded Russia and the latter became an ally, communism became acceptable for a while. Then the Gouzenko affair ushered in the Cold War. Fred Rose, the only Communist MP Canada ever had, was accused of passing military information on to a foreign power, the Soviet Union (even though that power was an ally). Weisbord is sure Rose did engage in spying, and she is able to tell us why by exploring the extraordinary devotion to the party — and, by extension, to Russia — that Canadian members upheld. Belief in the workers' paradise was so strong it

bordered on religion, and the fact that Russia was a Western ally made it easier to help them out. Given her background, Weisbord tends to pardon, and it is tempting to sympathize with Rose after reading about the pitiful imitation of justice provided by the Canadian government as it prosecuted him and his comrades.

In the end, assaulted from within and without, the party fell apart, and we feel an odd sense of loss, so well has the author drawn us into the characters' lives. Some critics have objected to the almost novelistic side of *The strangest Dream*, but they are missing the point: this is history from the point of view of men and women who lived it. For a couple of hundred pages Weisbord makes us dream along with them — the dream of a fair world no longer dreamable hem on the brink. □

REVIEW

Postscripts to a marriage

By GAIL PEARCE

Canada Home: **Juliana Horatia Ewing's Fredericton Letters, 1867-1869**, edited by Margaret Howard Blom and Thomas E. Blom, University of British Columbia Press, illustrated, 425 pages, \$24.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7748 0174 3).

JULIANA HORATIA EWING'S photograph shows a thin, severe-featured woman, nose too long, pale hair drawn back in an elaborately braided knot. She looks older than her 28 years, prim and stem. That misleading image has sensibly been relegated to the frontispiece of this collection of her letters to her family in England while she was living in Canada between 1867 and 1869. The jacket, a bright, dancing watercolour of the Fredericton waterfront, gives a far truer sense of her book.

Juliana (Judy, Julie, or Jow to her family) was the second daughter of the vicar of Ecclesfield, in Yorkshire. Her mother, Margaret Gatty, was an author and naturalist. Juliana was a children's author (still known for *Jackanapes* among other titles) and an amateur artist. In June, 1867, she married Alexander Ewing, a composer (best known

for his setting of the hymn "Jerusalem the Golden"), a student of Near Eastern languages, and like her a children's author. Rex, as he was called, had been forced by family problems to give up his musical training and go into the army; a week after their marriage he and Juliana sailed for a new posting in Fredericton.

J.H.E., as she generally signed herself, wrote her first letter on the boat, and thereafter mailed one about every two weeks. They are spontaneous, loving, cheerful, full of family jokes, with an undercurrent of homesickness running beneath an effervescent happiness in her marriage. She describes Fredericton as it affects her personally. She says scarcely anything about politics, even though the Ewings' stay in Canada spanned the period from Confederation to the withdrawal of British troops from New Brunswick. The occasional farmer or Indian appears, trading from door to door, but otherwise the letters are peopled almost exclusively by cultured and educated friends.

What they do give is a detailed portrayal of one stratum of Fredericton society — its sleigh rides, balls, and musical evenings, its fashions and domestic arrangements, its gossip and worries. They vividly show a novice housekeeper coming to terms with domesticity in a new country — the fecklessness of Irish servants, the difficulty of buying high-quality goods, the endless preparations for winter.

J.H.E. was captivated by the scenery and climate of New Brunswick, and fascinated by its natural history. The moods of the St. John River provide a continuous backdrop to the week's events; the weather, with the dangers of sunstroke in summer and draughts or wet feet in winter, is a constant preoccupation. J.H.E. was rarely deterred, however, despite her weak health and Rex's over-solicitous care. She sketched endlessly, indoors and out, winter and summer, and her acute, often humorous drawings illustrate almost every letter. She delighted in snowshoeing and canoeing, but failed to appreciate the thrills of "coasting" (tobogganing). She avidly collected specimens of local plants, helped Rex tune the church organ, sang in the choir, taught drawing, wallpapered her own dining room, supported the work of a mission church in the country, and had a large circle of friends. Rex's military duties do not seem to have been arduous; they left him time to train the church choir, found the Fredericton Choral Society, study Hebrew, learn to sketch, and sham in his wife's outdoor activities with boyish enthusiasm.

In 1869 Rex was posted back to England, and the last letter in the book

is from Mrs. Gatty to a relative, expressing the family's delight at being together again. In the late 1870s Juliana's health deteriorated and she was unable to accompany Rex on his next foreign posting, from 1379 to 1883. Shediedb 1885, aged 44.

J.H.E.'s Fredericton letters were written in fits and starts, as time allowed, and the editors have taken pains not to destroy their rapid flow and informality. They have not changed abbreviations (shld, cld, Xmas, Govt, yr, &) or punctuation (heavy use of dashes and parentheses); they have retained many spelling mistakes and also Gatty family spellings and slang. The result is prose that is lively, but often uncomfortably dense and jerky. It is a shame that the few notes that are important to the meaning of the text could not have been printed as footnotes, sparing readers the need to check every scrupulous scholarly annotation at the end of the book.

For the general reader, the letters could with advantage have been cut considerably. There is not enough variety in the Ewings' lives over two years to need this many pages: the density of the text makes slow reading, and the family jokes and sentiments tend to cloy. The strongest appeal lies in J.H.B. and Rex's apparently idyllic marriage, and in J.H.E.'s originality, ingenueness, and sense of fun. The reader who does reach the end of the book may well be sorry to say goodbye to her.

REVIEW

Documenting the myth

By KEITH GAREBIAN

Approaches to the Work of James Reaney, edited by Stan Dragland, ECW Press, 235 pages, 98.95 paper (ISBN 0 920302 64 0).

Invocations: The Poetry and Prose of Gwendolyn MacEwen, by Jan Bartley, University of British Columbia Press, 130 pages, \$12.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7748 0177 8).

JAMES REANEY'S POEMS are often like aquarelles — rather like his own water-colour that decorates the cover of Stan Dragland's collection of critical

approaches to his work. Regionalism alone cannot explain his literature. George Bowering writes of "a marriage of 'documentary and myth,' probably the shortest and best definition of the regionalist's art," but notes Reaney's density in poetry and drama, "a density not only in the denominative, but in the symbol, irony, rime." The density is given full effect by metaphor, whether they be the play-box whose props and costumes furnish Reaney's theatrical imagination, or the numerous biblical allusions, varnished by a transformation of Northrop Frye's brilliant exegesis into allegorical art.

The 11 pieces in *Approaches to the Work of James Reaney* give us all the major perspectives, ranging from Reaney's documentary regionalism and melodramatic theatricality to his parodic playfulness and subtle anagogy. Richard Stingle, a close friend of Reaney's, traces the burgeoning interest in Frye at the University of Toronto, drawing attention to Reaney's romanticism and offering a close textual interpretation of *Gyroscope*, a play that once baffled the Toronto theatre critics. Although many passages in Stingle are heavily academic in tone and style, they are nevertheless highly instructive of Reaney's intellectual and theatrical subtlety.

One of the distinctions I find in this book is the light it sheds on Reaney's paradoxes. In a recent interview with Jean McKay, Reaney reveals his ingenuous, innocent side — the side that loves "accidental charms," Walt Disney, farm crafts, and so on. This is a side that has an acknowledged genius with moving collages, but it is counterpointed by a side that is systematic, allusive, and richly compact. The counterpoint is probed in twin studies of the Donnelly trilogy by Gerald D. Parker and Diane Bessai, and in Jay Macpherson's segmented notes on *One-Man Masque*.

In his afterword on Reaney's relevance, Dragland pulls together point and counterpoint to show that Reaney's "system" is one of coherence, reintegration, and recuperation. Reaney is a documentarian of shapes as much as he is of textures, but even the simplest of his art is complex. The hazard, as Dragland notes, is Reaney's self-consciousness and the impulse to let the reader know what he is doing. But then Reaney (like many of our best writers) is a teacher, and while this generates a didactic thrust it also alerts us to his vision of contemporary Canadians as archetypal sleeping giants or lost princes. A vision that is, finally, both regional and allegorical, and a triumph of symbolic imagination over mundane fact.

Symbolic in a different mode is Gwendolyn MacEwen, whose poetry

also permits mythology to bloom out of mundane or quotidian reality. I find reading her poetry there is a temptation, as Margaret Atwood once commented, "to become preoccupied with the original and brilliant verbal surfaces she creates, at the expense of the depths beneath them." True enough, but what are these depths? Are they mystical? Are they simply sources of wonder and inner discovery? Or are they, as Atwood showed, source of an informing myth that is translated into life and poetry?

The virtue of Jan Bartley's *Invocations* is its effort to reread the poet's "taps. Although it is rooted in the "mystic nature of MacEwen's vision," it heeds MacEwen's signposts, examines numerous sources and influences (though ignoring Hart Crane and Dylan Thomas, two of MacEwen's early idols), and directs the reader to a deeper participation in MacEwen's poetry and her prose.

Taking the mystic quest as a major theme, and the amorphous presence of a masculine Muse as a dominant symbol, Bartley's book — the first full-length study of MacEwen — focuses attention on major leitmotifs (light and dark, gold and silver, the revolving wheel or circle, the rising fire, magician, and dancer). In general, however, it complements

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Atwood's earlier exploration (in *Poets and Critics*) of the myth of the Muse in its various incarnations. Bartley traces the various forms in the novels *Julian the Magician* and *King of Egypt, King of Dreams*, the short story collection *Noman*, and the various hooks of poetry. In the first novel the Muse is shown to be a human magician "cloaked in the divine through his reluctant re-enactment of the Christian myth," and in *King of Egypt, King of Dreams* "a presumably divine kii who fails in his attempt to translate divinity into human terms." In MacEwan's poems the Muse as shadow-maker inhabits the most exotic of inner landscapes, and within an atmosphere of strangeness, horror, and ecstasy the Muse (ghost and god, demon and healer) is initiator of the process "whereby surfaces are broken and repaired to reveal a mythic level of reality."

Bartley shows how MacEwan's raw materials embrace a wide range of esoteric and psychological sources — Jacob Boehme, early gnostic texts, Jung, alchemy — and how the poet constructs a literary mythology that aims at synthesizing opposites in psyche and cosmos. "I want to construct a myth," MacEwan has said, and the shaping of this myth has sustained a prolific and resonant career. □

REVIEW

A mixture of strengths

By PAULINE BUTLING

The *Mask in Place: Essays on Fiction in North America*, by George Bowering, Turnstone Press, 164 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88801 074 5).

BOWERING'S CHARACTERISTIC wit and humour serve him well in these essays, written over the past dozen or so years on an assortment of Canadian and American prose fiction writers. Most of the essays are ground breaking essays; his panning with words or playing with ideas or mixing metaphors help to open out the subject and to move the reader (and himself, too, presumably) toward insight and understanding. His approach stimulates thought by provoking

reactions from the reader. You may laugh, or get mad, or disagree, or want to argue a point with him, or ask questions. But you will not be bored. He will almost always set you thinking.

There are 13 essays and an introductory note in which Bowering first justifies his presentation of a Canadian/American mixture by asserting that "Canadian fiction... does not suffer by being seen in a North American context." The book includes essays on Hawthorne, Richler, Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, Gertrude Stein, Sheila Watson, Jack Kerouac, Douglas Woolf, David Young, and by Nichol, as well as three general essays exploring the theoretical base of modernist realism and post-modernism. The essays are not dated, but it seems likely that they are roughly in chronological order because Bowering's grasp of the issues becomes gradually more detailed and astute. He himself suggests there is a theoretical progression "leading from pre-realism through realism to post-realism."

The theoretical essays reflect the concerns suggested by the title. They treat the fiction writers' various guises and disguises. In "The Thne Sided Room" he shows the pretence, essential to realist fiction, that neither the writer nor the book exists, and he delights in pointing out the contradictions in that position:

One writes a book and then tries to make the reader agree that he is act reading a book. The reader is enjoined to cooperate in a shell game as soon as he opens a modernist novel. First he sees that it is called fiction, so he separates it from non-fiction. Then he notices that the author, say Hugh Gamer, uses as many devices as he deems necessary to make it seem real — the name of streets in Toronto, detailed descriptions of his character's 1968 Chevrolet. . . So now the reader is led to agree that what he is getting is the straight pods, or a window onto his own world. Then he looks back to the beginning of the book to make Sure, & reads that "the characters and events in this novel are fictitious. Any resemblance they have to people and events in life is purely coincidental." We know that co author or publisher would say that unless the opposite were true.

The post-modern writer, on the other hand, says Bowering, invites the reader to pay attention to the mask itself, and to the activity of writer writing.

But Bowering himself makes no pretence at offering a definitive statement on post-modernism. You will not find a simple handy definition here; rightly so, since the mode is still emerging. But you will find signposts that point in the directions some recent writers have taken. In "Nichol's Prose" he finds "the intent is not so much to

illuminate the world seen and remembered from the eyes (à la Munro), as to tell outward what's behind the eyes during composition. Where plot isn't happening, and language isn't action, where feeling is primary." In "Genreflect," a short essay on David Young's first novel, Agent *Provocateur*, he talks about how Young disrupts plot and time sequence with a narrative that doesn't go anywhere.. forcing the reader to pay attention, simply, to what is present (a spatial rather than temporal structure). And further, "the language is not transparent, as it is supposed to be in the thrillers you race through in an evening, but highly opaque."

Particularly useful as a source of information on the direction of post-modernism is the essay "The Painted Window," in which he gathers together some of the "smart comments on the old & the new & the change," and explores their implications. After quoting John Hawkes on structure, Bowering says: "the whole quotation from Hawker illustrates a major shift in attention — whereas the realist had seen his writing as a window, the post-realist presents something opaque. Notice that Hawkes spoke of meaningful density, where a realist might have striven for clarity." He also offers a new definition of the term "poetic prose." It is not "the Dylan sing-song or the Joyce-comelateles," but a structure: "Time in the book is not sequential & linear, but repetitive." And he points to a phenomenological approach to character, quoting Raymond Chandler: "We do not see who people are but what they do. We see doing." Appropriately for an essay that is explorative rather than definitive, he ends with an imaginary dialogue between God and man, which leaves one puzzling over the questions it raises.

But the essays are by no means all theorizing and playing with words and ideas. Bowering has clearly done his homework. His discussions of individual writers take you through a close reading of the works. The essays on Audrey Thomas, Hawthorne, and Laurence are particularly detailed. In the Thomas essay he traces the nuances in Thomas's very astute handling of her characters' inner fears through two short-story collections. Or in an essay on "Sheila Watson, Trickster," along with a sometimes playful discussion of Watson/Coyote's trickery, he considers the major critical discussions of Coyote's role and provides important information about the coyote in Amerindian mythology.

Most of the essays have been previously published in magazines, but it's useful to have them brought together here. Although there is a certain amount

of repetition of **Bowering's** favourite hobby horses (inevitably, **since** the essays were written over a number of years as individual pieces), taken together they serve as innovative **discussions** on questions of form and language and theme in both the **new** and the old **fiction**, questions important to **anyone** involved in investigating the processes of **writing**. They **also** provide a record of **one** contemporary writer's response to some of the books **around** him. As **Bowering** comments in the introduction, referring to the thread of thought in the **book**: "That thread will not hold any **minotaur** from escape or havoc. In fact it **will** not even lead to daylight. But it **will** tell a reader where this **en-mazed** captive has been." □

REVIEW

Amazing
grace

By JUDITH FITZGERALD

The Visitation, by **A.F. Moritz**, Aya Press. 91 pages, 97.00 paper (ISBN 0 920544 33 9).

THERE IS MUCH to admire in **A.F. Moritz's** first major collection of poetry, **The Visitation**. Divided into four parts, it provides a wider audience with a **fine** introduction to a **writer** of talent and perception. The **parts** are not entirely successful as apparently autonomous sequences; however, each contains a number of **exceptional** poems.

Of these, the title poem of "Music end Exile" stands out as exemplary. It is a potent and **provocative** statement of love and loss gently wrapped in **revolution** and regret; its **language** drips with **luxuriant** images that belie the starkness of its subject matter. **Rich** and subtle in turns, "Music end Exile" achieves a **dénouement** rarely equalled in **English** poetry:

*And you:
you know that there is nothing within
their power,
not even the coils of rope and the
pistols
that some have hidden in their rooms:
occasionally there k suicide
but another always comes and fills the
place...*

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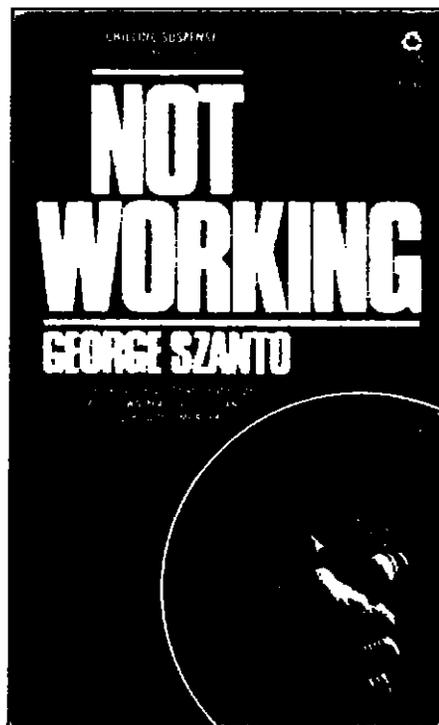
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*I wish I could awaken and find you
with me.*

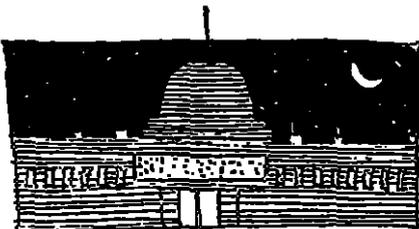
*Softly you are speaking to yourself, to
me,
and now I can almost see you
where you sit unnoticed at a dirty
table
in the darkness shuffling, reshuffling
the tattered cards.*

Moritz offers readers 21 poems in "Music and Exile," but many of them don't belong in this section (or any other). "Thoughts in a Bank Elevator," for example, doesn't really tie in organically with the powerful title poem, nor does it seem connected to the taut "Pianoforte," a poem that plays itself loudly and softly in turns.

Part two, "Prayer for Prophecy," contains 22 poems including "Areas," a long poem within a long poem (as it were). Again, the simple organizational facts of these sections can be faulted. "Areas," containing 12 poems, stands bat alone. It is a fine sequence, beginning as it does with "Badlands" and concluding with "Fog Hollows in Town." In it, Moritz marries physical and mental geography in a series of intense passages:

*... At last you hollow
a space in me and the pure light comes
through.
A space — where is my body?
Water bums in the air....*

Of the remaining two parts, "You, Whoever You Are" is generally more successful than "The Visitation." The former contains 16 well-integrated meditative pieces concerning sacrifice and salvation, while the latter is a long poem narrated by a confusing female persona.



Both sequences address divine mysteries and damned miseries. As well, they occasionally depend too heavily upon an allusive framework that may be less than convincing for some readers.

In all four parts, it is dear that Moritz is a gifted poet with an unerring sense of art and craft. *The Visitation* is musical, and points repeatedly to an exceptionally fine ear for details of cadence. When Moritz pares down an almost-too-rich allusion system, the results are straightforward poems that speak eloquently. Superbly executed, these poems effortlessly combi with a startling sense of lyrical grace. Here, Moritz is intensely unique in both phraseology and imagery. □

REVIEW

The French way

By DA VID WINCH

The Anglo Guide to Survival in Quebec, edited by Josh Freed and Jon Kalina, Eden Press, 148 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 920792 33 2).

THE EDITORS of the *Anglo Guide to Survival in Quebec* recognized early on in their project the risks of publishing "sub-National Lampoon" material; the pool of writers for this collection of Quebec satire is made up mostly of CBC-Montreal and *Gazette* reporters, and only one of the book's 21 contributors is a humour writer by trade. Still, the results turned out surprisingly well, and some of the contributions to the *Anglo Guide* could sit well in the best French or American satire magazines. Most important, perhaps, is that readers find the collection extremely funny, and in its first two months the book sold 60,000 copies.

The *Anglo Guide* is an "instant book," hatched in bars and newsrooms in mid-1983, and it shows both the advantage and the disadvantages of the genre. It is unswervingly topical, and the kind of situations that it parodies — Anglos at odds with the bureaucracy, moving to and moving back from Tomato, finding the perfect hot dog steamé — are as chatty and popular as the Expos' latest pennant letdown. This reflects well the daily-journalism experience of the core group of contributors, but it means of course that the book will not wear well. Reading the *Anglo Guide* in 10 years will probably be like reading an old Parti Pris manifesto from the 1960s; the liveliness will still shine through even though the urgency of the concerns has vanished.

The lead-off piece in the *Anglo Guide* is *Gazette* writer Mike Boone's very funny "A Voyage East: A Wilderness Guide to East End Montreal." Boone's eye for significant detail and his willingness to deal in some of the crudest and funniest stereotypes gives his article the bite that real satire needs. Boone writes about Montreal east of the Main as if it were a foreign country, and positions himself to give guidebook-style tips: "Tourist moms" are generally not for tourists. If you still haven't got the picture, they're rented by the hour, not

the day." Or, "Do not tarry in clubs where men are methodically dousing the furniture in gasoline and stacking tables against the exits." Or, "When driving, be mindful of a few quirks unique to East End drivers . . . Motorized vehicles — cars, trucks, motorcycles, hearses, etc. — travel at 100 km/h in the right-hand lane. The left lane is reserved for motorists making illegal turns."

Josh Freed's contribution, "Functioning as a Functionnaire," is similarly well-observed. Quebec has set up an affirmative-action program for anglophones in its all-French civil service, and Freed plays it straight, reporting on what it's like to be one of these Anglo pioneers in the bureaucracy. "Carry *Le Devoir* at all times" and "switch to smoking Gitanes," advises Freed, who then adds tips for Anglos as to how they should talk, dress, eat, and even work in their new milieu: "Keep in mind that Quebec civil servants are as hard-working as any . . . The usual Canadian Civil Service Code applies: It's okay to leave early, but if you plan to leave late, then you'd better have a damn good excuse." Québécois civil servants, cautions Freed, are notorious *bons vivants*, and their back-breaking work schedule is frequently interrupted by two-hour lunches, excellent wines, and announcements that the lobster have finally arrived from Iles de la Madeleine. The Anglo, then, may have to spend long evenings boning up on French cuisine, and learning to chatter casually about the latest concern of *Le Monde* or *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Otherwise, he or she will simply not measure up to the requirements of being a *fonctionnaire*.

But if the *Anglo Guide* succeeds in turning up a few gems, it also includes several contributions that are undeveloped or have problems in conception. "Le Jacques Strap: How to Become a French Athletic Supporter" ostensibly deals with sorting out French sports vocabulary (i.e. *grand chelem* means "grand slam homer"), but it also tries to be insightful about the Expos, the Canadiens, and their fans. The piece comes off as forced and perfunctory, and really contains very little "news." And *Gazette* columnist Nick Auf da Maur tries to draw up an elaborate historical joke — which might have worked — to the effect that Quebec's key historic figures, tight back to Jacques Cartier, have in fact been British agents. Auf da Maur has boasted that the piece was composed fast, in two weeks before the *Anglo Guide's* publication. Trouble is, it shows.

But if the *Anglo Guide* is a book-for-the-season, it is also an extremely good reflection of the new-style Anglo of

1983: bilingual, bemused, and a determined Quebecker. After a few readings, what remains with the reader's mind are some sharp definitions of what it is to be a Montrealer; these adopted-Montrealers and ex-Montrealers tend to dwell to an extraordinary degree on night life, antic street-crossing customs, erratic drivers, bizarre French-English social patterns, and food, food, food.

Politically, the *Anglo Guide* is impeccable: it avoids completely the reactionary tack of some Quebec commentators, who profess support for the emergence of an assertive and modern

francophone society while at the same time rejecting every cultural change in the province after, say, 1969. The assured tone of this book is very encouraging, and its often zany humour is a welcome antidote to the "yet-another-language-debate" weariness that can arise in readers' minds when the subject is contemporary Montreal. But the real message of the *Anglo Guide* is the fact that it was published at all. For if there ever were any serious threat to the English language in Quebec (as does not seem possible) then no one would be laughing this hard, now, would they? □

INTERVIEW

'The best way to be a Canadian film-maker,' says David Cronenberg, 'is to make a film and be Canadian, and that's what I've always done'

By SHERIE POSESORSKI

CRITICAL RESPONSE to David Cronenberg is split between those who find his films repulsive and those who herald what William Beard has called his "visceral mind" and consistent style. Best known for such horror productions as his recent adaptation of Stephen King's novel, *The Dead Zone*. Cronenberg made his first 16-mm film, *Transfers*, in 1966, and since then has written and directed two feature-length art films — *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* — and six other commercial features: *Shivers*, *Rabid*, *Fast Company*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, and *Videodrome*. Last fall he was honoured with a retrospective at the Festival of Festivals and with the publication of a book of critical essays on his work, *The Shape Of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, edited by Piers Handling (General Publishing). Born in Toronto in 1943, Cronenberg studied biochemistry at the University of Toronto, but switched to English after one of his short stories won an Epstein Award. He lives with his wife and two children in Tomato, where he spoke to Sherie Posesorski:

Books in Canada: Why do you classify your films as adult horror films?

David Cronenberg: There is a split between horror films meant to be entertaining films for kids and those meant for adults. Frequently the people who make horror films are trying to recapture their own childhood (Spielberg's

Poltergeist), or their own cinematic past (John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing*). Their general perspective is backwards. They automatically exclude adult concerns. These films are entertaining on a child's level — delicious for kids but often boring for adults because



David Cronenberg they don't deal with issues that touch adults, on an emotional level. My films operate on the level of adult experience; they address adult sexuality, fears, and intelligence. Unlike Spielberg and Carpenter, I'm communicating with myself in the present. My films are acts of the present.

BIC: A central preoccupation of your work is the split between the mind and

the body — a split of which your characters only become aware after they have contracted some disease, or near death. Susan Sontag has written that "disease is the will speaking through the body, a language dramatizing the mental." Can you apply that to your work?
Cronenberg: Yes, that's very related to my films. It's a very medieval concept, the belief that your physical being represented your soul, and disease was considered God's will. The body and the mind are intertwined, even though they are often considered as different, so that when the body is sick, it's hard to separate the sickness of the body from the sickness of the mind. When the entity is diseased, it affects both mind and body. If you are looking for a positive aspect to disease, it is that it's suggestive that we are a coherent entity that cannot remain separated for long. Part of the maturing process is coming to terms with yourself as a total entity, one that has a finite end. In my films I am trying many different ways to come to terms with disease, aging, death. There's a Japanese philosophy that says all of life is a preparation for death. That's absolutely true.

BIC: The characters in your films are all obsessed in one sense or another.

Cronenberg: The prime mover in many of my films is usually someone who is obsessed with control — attempting in one way or another to control his environment, be it his body or his technological environment. At an early age I learned that the best way to learn about something was to be obsessed with it. Obsession is the best mode of learning. It is a compulsive drive to keep on connecting with, an insistence on abstracting, a particular object of desire from the rest of the world. Art is a form of abstraction. If you want to include the whole universe in your work, you have to do it by abstracting certain things from your experience. Only then can you deliver the whole thing. It's necessary to continue focusing down to the exclusiveness of all other things, so that you create a laser-like ray that bums right down to something that's extraordinary in its interior.

BIC: Do you consider your films to be personal statements?

Cronenberg: Yes, but not in the normal sense. They are personal statements because everything about them, in them, is me. Film is a collaborative medium; nevertheless, the ultimate choices filter through the director. When you write the screenplay, the characters are all part of you. When I write, I believe what the character says because part of me tries to dissolve my own approach to language. Then as the actor creates the character, he believes it. It is a mistake to think that

what a character says or does is me, because I'm all of those characters at once, and they're contradictory and conflicting. What you end up with is a very complex creature, which is what I am. The films are personal statements, but they are not projections of me. The artist is not necessarily the art.

BiC: How do your films express a Canadian identity?

Cronenberg: It's inevitable that my films express a certain kind of Canadianism because I'm Canadian. Many people still harbour the assumption that you have to make a historical film to dramatize the Canadian identity. Everything is looking backwards. My god, where is our present?

Years ago, when I went to the Canadian Film Development Corporation for funding to make *Shivers* and *Rabid*, they judged the scripts in terms of their Canadianism. The criteria were literally. Does it have Mounties in it? How can those scripts redly be Canadian? It's an aberration to search after the exclusive, unique Canadian subject. Rather than trying to find our essence, what we are as a totality, we look for the unique, little crystal of Canadianism that no one else has any part of. That's perverse. There's nothing that is Canadian that doesn't connect with something else in the world. Such a mechanistic concept of what a culture is is doomed to failure.

I think that *Videodrome* is one of the most Canadian films ever made. There is a unique character, Brian O'Blivion, based on a modern Canadian hero — Marshall McLuhan. He is as much a part of our new heritage as *Marie Chapdelaine*.

Too many film-makers use Canadianism to justify the value of a film. Falling all else, it's Canadian. Well, that's never enough. It still has to be seen as a film that works or doesn't work. The best way to be a Canadian film-maker is to make a film and be Canadian, and that's what I've always done.

BiC: Has the Canadian critical response to your films altered?

Cronenberg: I've always had support from *Cinema Canada*, the Canada Council, the CPDC. I never felt like an outsider, but I did feel outside the official Canadian film industry. Now I'm getting establishment reaction. The tone has changed — from dismissing me as someone unimportant to dismissing me as someone important who shouldn't be important.

BiC: The direction of the screenplay based on Stephen King's *The Dead Zone* was the first time you directed a film for which the screenplay was not written by you. What was it like?

Cronenberg: On the set and during the

editing process I dealt with the same problems I always have: how best to convey what the script requires. I was very involved in the writing and the structuring of the script. Debra Hill, the producer, and Geoffrey Boam, the screenwriter, and I sat in a hotel room for three days and reinvented the novel for the screen. Reinventing it is the only way to be faithful to the work — to throw away the book's structure and reinvent it as if you were thinking of it originally for the screen. Stephen King has said that it's the best adaptation of his work that he's seen, and the reason is that we didn't worry about a literal adaptation. What we are faithful to is the tone of King's novel.

BiC: How does *The Dead Zone* differ from your own work?

Cronenberg: The characters are open, naive, although their relationships are complex. I don't normally worry whether the main characters are sympathetic. A character doesn't have to be sympathetic to work. You just relate to the character on a different level. But in *The Dead Zone* the characters are very emotionally accessible. Whereas in *Videodrome* they are complex and guarded.

BiC: What do you respond to in films?

Cronenberg: I'm pretty catholic in my tastes. I go to films to be surprised, amazed, amused, entertained, and demolished. □

FIRST NOVELS

Larger than life: from the sprawling story of an unruly Titan to a skilful, if familiar, look at the havoc adultery can wreak

By PAUL WILSON

The Biggest Modern Woman of the World, by Susan Swan (Lester & Orpen Dennys, 340 pages, \$14.95 paper), is a bii, unruly, and entertaining behind-the-scenes novel based on the life of the 19th-century Nova Scotia giantess Anna Swan, who grew to a height of 7'6", was a star attraction in P.T. Barnum's American Museum in New York at the time of the American Civil War, and went on to become a celebrity in Europe and a court favourite of Queen Victoria. Eventually she settled down in a small Ohio town, where she "declined in her sleep" in 1888 at the age of 42.

Using this skeleton of historical fact as a starting point, the author (who shares her heroine's surname and is described on the cover as "the tallest woman freelance writer in Canada") fleshes out her fictional portrait of a fascinating and sometimes infuriating woman. Through Anna's own narration — her "Real Time Spiel: as she calls it, enhanced by diaries, letters, and testimonials — she gives us an intimate, inside look at life through the eyes of someone who cannot help looking down on the rest of us from a vantage-point several feet above our heads. For Anna, perspective is all.

It is a measure of the author's abilities that the book can be grasped, appreciated, and enjoyed on several different

levels: as straight story, as colourful social history, as pure entertainment, and even as a novel of ideas. Not surprisingly, there is a pungent, Rabelaisian flavour to Anna's narrative, tinged strongly with the bold colouring of the American tall tale and the h&-up irony of an old carney's confession. The book is full of wonderfully bizarre scenes that are both funny and disturbing: Anna d&lowered by a sly and randy dwarf wielding a large icicle; Anna rescued from a fiery inferno in Barnum's theatre by a crane, and then driven through the crowd-lined New York streets in a limousine, giving the American public its first free look at a popular attraction; Anna in audience with good Queen Victoria, who displays an unseemly curiosity in the state of her underwear.

One of Swan's talents is her ability to portray comic eccentricity. Among her finest creations are the American giant Captain Bates, late of the Confederate army, who eventually becomes Anna's impotent husband, and Hiram Ingalls, also known as Apollo, a protégé of P.T. Barnum who takes Anna and Bates to "conquer Europe." Both men are fascinated by her, but in entirely different ways. Bates sublimates his inadequacies in wild dreams of being, with Anna, the

progenitor of a **new** master race of Titans **who** will eventually supplant **"normal"** humanity. There is a **chilling scene** when Bates, **who** is obsessed with the **"scientific"** aspects of **gigantism**, **watches** in hiding as a physician **examines**, **measures**, and **catalogues** Anna for posterity. Apollo, on the other **hand**, is **"normal,"** but has **the** advantage of being sexually adept. Hi **mind** is **usually** preoccupied **with** gauging the public mood. but suddenly he **finds** **biif** — **against** all his **business instincts** — being **irresistibly** attracted to Anna. This **turns** out to be his **undoing**, **though** in the meantime he provides **Anna** with some of her most satisfying hours.

Swan's portrayal of P.T. **Barnum** is **fascinating** as well. **Barnum's** great contribution to **American** free enterprise was his discovery that human **curiosity** could be **harnessed** to human misery on a scale that made a lot of money at the same time as it satisfied the curiosity and alleviated the **misery**. His secret was in **taking** the **midgets**, **dwarfs**, **fat ladies**, **human skeletons**, **Siamese twins**, and **giants who were under contract to him** and presenting them to **the public** in a dignified **guise**, the **guise** of enlightenment. His actors would deliver cleverly composed spiels about **themselves** and perform, **in elegant costumes**, **scenes from popular plays** and **pantomime sketches**. And he **paid** his actors well. Tom **Thumb**, another **Barnum protégé**, was a **wealthy man and a genuine international celebrity**. So, **in fact**, was Anna; one year she made **\$20,000**. As **Swan** presents her, there is no **question** that **in** the deepest and strongest part of her nature she enjoyed immensely **playing** all the **roles** that working for **Barnum** allowed **her** to play, despite her occasionally caustic observations about **the individual** as a mere "business gimmick."

Of course, Anna **is** the most complex and interesting character in **the book**. She is part Victorian lady, and part **feminist heroine** a century before her time. Her revelation of the intimate **details** of her **life** and her **shrewd** and **entertaining** observations of the **world** around her more **than** make up for the **price** of admission. She absolutely refuses to treat her **size** as a liability. She is spunky and cheerful and **chin-uppish** and competent in a way that I associate **with** many of the grown-up women I remember **from my childhood**, and she is **appealingly** frank about **her own sensuality**. But she can also be strident, nasty, **and self-centred**, and she **often** cloaks **her meanness in the pompous language** of ideological **righteousness**. Toward the end **of the book**, in an attempt to describe **her sense of isolation** among the **folks of Seville, Ohio**, she

writes the following lines to her mother:

I feel I am acting out America's relationship to the **Canadas**. Marlin [her husband] is the **imperial ogre** while I play the role of genteel **mate** who believes that **if everyone is well-mannered**, we can inhabit a **peaceable kingdom**. That is the national dream of the **Canadas** isn't it? A **civilized garden** where **lions lie down with doves**. I did not see the difference until I married **Marlin**. We possess no **fantasies of conquest and domination**. Indeed, to be from the **Canadas** is to feel as women feel — cut off from the base of power.

The point **here** is not whether she is right or wrong but whether anyone would actually write things like that to her mother in the year 1874. I find it far-fetched, **but** who knows? In a book as **carefully researched** as this one obviously **is**, the **anachronism**, if that's what it is, could very well be deliberate. **Still**, such moments obtrude only rarely, and the book's main **strengths**, its lusty good **humour**, its **warm** intelligence, its comic sense and its good **writing**, triumph over its flaws.

If *The Biggest Modern Woman Of the World* sprawls **outward**, defying one to contain it, **Figures on a Wharf** by Win-

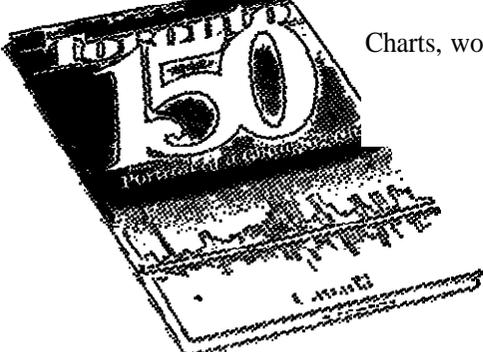
nipeg author **Wayne Tefs** (Turnstone Press, **231 pages**, \$8.95 paper) is an intensely **introverted** novel that draws one **into** its world **through** a **finely wrought design** of delicate detail. The story is a classical one: of adultery and the **havoc** it can wreak. The bare bones of the plot are **familiar** enough: Michael, a university teacher approaching **middle age**, has **been** married to Patricia long enough to have **produced** two **children**, now-both **adolescents**, and to have become tired of the **set-up**. To **compensate**, he is **having** an **affair** with a student, **Mary**, who **is** also **married**. The situation, though somewhat **tense**, **is fine with him**, and he has no desire to challenge fate by **resolving** it in a **responsible way**. **Patricia**, however, suspects that **something** is going on and, in her **terror** of having the **family break up**, she pursues **the matter**, eventually **discovers** the truth, and **goes** on the rampage, thus **destroying** any hope she **might have** had of reconciliation.

Tefs **manoeuvres** us **skilfully** through his story, **moving** deliberately **through** a complex **accumulation** of detail. We **watch**, almost **mesmerized**, as a sentence is expended to light a **cigarette**, another

Toronto

150

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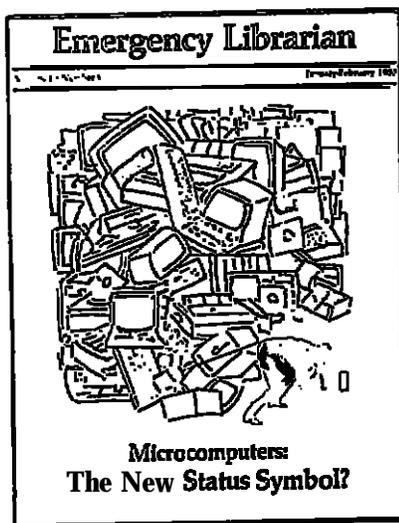
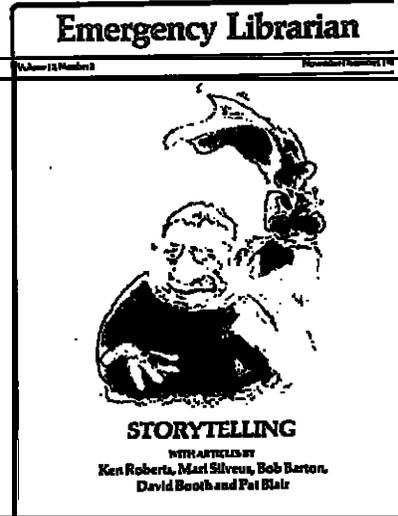
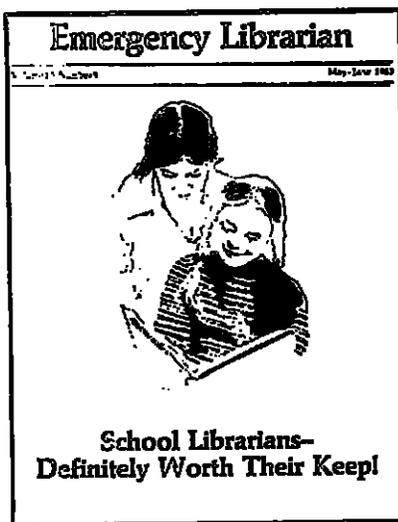
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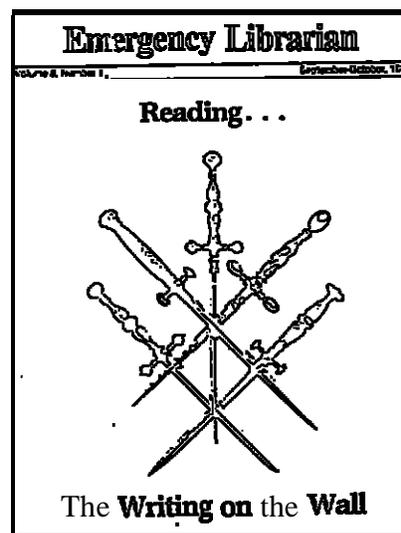
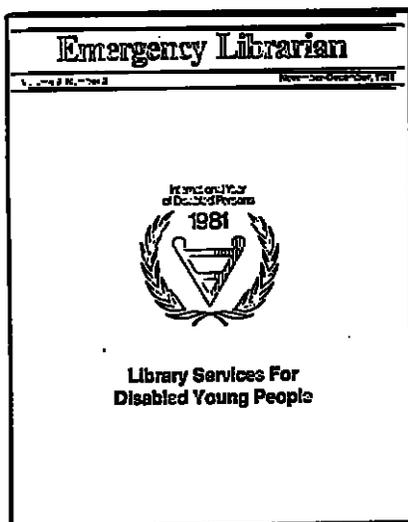
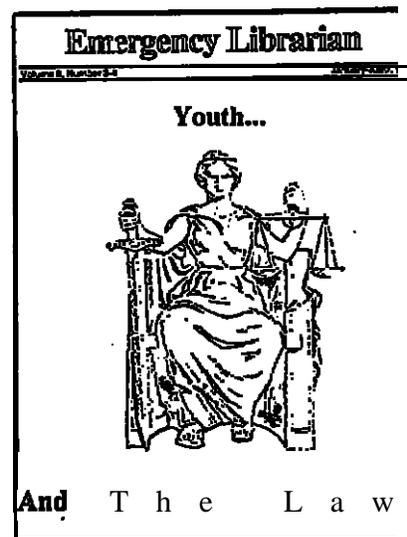
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to curl the smoke above the smoker's head, a third to notice the bubbles in a soft drink sparkle in the light. The erotic passages, end them are quite a few of them, are equally detailed. Conversations are always to the point.

Superficially, *Figures on a Wharf* reminds me of those French movies of the '60s end '70s — the sluggish erotic tragedies with a long, slow, sensuous wind-up and a brief, violent kicker. But the resemblance is really only superficial. For Tefs's characters are not the pampered, Fashion-plate creatures of the Gallic imagination but real, recognizable people who are very much of their time (1979) and place (Winnipeg), despite the fact that they are acting out what amounts to a universal drama.

Tefs's best-drawn character, to my mind, is Patricia, the wronged wife. she upsets the balance of the book somewhat because the author's central interest is in Michael, but Michael is so hopelessly wrapped up in himself end hi need to be admired by women that he eventually loses our sympathy. Mary, the mistress, has a strong physical presence, but is otherwise a shadowy creature with little in the way of a tangible personality. Patricia alone understands Michael in a complex way, and her tragedy is that she cannot compel him to Face up to what he is doing. Despite this weakness, however, *Figures on a Wharf* should establish Wayne Tefs as a bright new writer with an ability to comb conventional territory For attitudes end emotions that still exist, even though we sometimes seem to have forgotten them.

IN MY REVIEW of *Feldafing* (February) I inexplicably attributed Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* to Jonathan Swift. I apologize For any agony this may have caused to anyone who noticed. □

LETTERS

Worlds apart

I AM WRITING to protest against the review in your February issue by J.D. Carpenter of the new books by Jeni Couzyn and Bronwen Wallace. Surely this is the kind of stupid writing that should be extinct by now, but apparently it isn't. Carpenter Follows perfectly the formula For such reviews:

(a) Begin with a reference, usually derisive, to Atwood.

(b) Go on to sneering generalizations about "the world of women's poetry" end "our women poets."

(c) Concentrate throughout the review on analyses of content rather than style or technique; this will allow the reviewer to talk et tedious length about himself instead of the work under discussion.

(d) Say something positive only when



the writers stick to subjects more appropriate to their sex. In Couzyn's case this is only when she "lays aside ha weapons" end writes about something "joyous" like childbirth; in Wallace's case it is when she writes with "delicate grace" about the loss of a loved one.

(e) Ignore things like the fact that a number of the poems in Wallace's book won first place in the National Magazine Awards one year, and that she was a finalist the next year.

(f) Conclude with a classic complaint about how these women don't use "their gift For beauty" because "they're so serious."

Surely *Books in Canada* should be able to offer us something better than this.

D.R. Evox
Surrey, B.C.

IS THIS "Another World" or just a man's glib review of "women's poetry"? J.D. Carpenter is dead wrong in his review of Couzyn end Wallace about the "world of women's poetry." What has changed in that other world of poetry, preoccupied es it has been with the themes of love end death For centuries? The freshest and most original voices of my generation are women: Roo Borson, Erin Mouré, Robyn Sarah, Dii Hartog, as well as Bronwen Wallace, are just a Few outstanding examples. How can a reviewer so misread a poet as to mistake point of view For self-interest? I-o say that "Stanley's Ladies Wear, Cii 1952" is

about a little girl lost in Kresge's is comparable to saying that Pat Lane's poem "Luna Moth" is about renting a mom. or that *Othello* is about a lost handkerchief.

Mary di Michele
Toronto

Kinsella's complaint

I IMAGINE W.P. Kinsella's diatribe in your Field Notes column (February) will generate cold prose in the hearts of booksellers all along the Trans-Canada Highway. As I live at the end of the road, end suffered through the reading your author found the least commodious of all, I Feel bound to comment.

Kinsella read at the Volume One book store in Duncan, B.C., in late 1983. It was an uninspired reading. Duncan is good enough for Audrey Thomas, Dennis Lee, Phyllis Webb, Alice Munro, etc., etc., but definitely not large enough for the ego of W.P. Kinsella.

What has sudden fame done to this men that he cannot deep in an ordinary bed? Does he think he is Princess Di? Does he need a canopy? Is he pregnant, For God's sake?

I can think of a tone, and the words almost tit: Won't you go home, Bill Kinsella. Won't you go home.

Linda Rogers
Chemainus, B.C.

Letters may be edited for length or to delete potentially libellous statements. Except in extraordinary circumstances, letters of more than 500 words will not be accepted for publication.

THE EDITORS RECOMMEND

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

FICTION

Chameleon and Other Stories, by Bill Scherbrucker, Talonbooks. Years later, From the safety of British Columbia. author and narrator recall their African past in a spellbinding series of short stories that draw their strength from the tension between fiction and fact.

NON-FICTION

The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature, edited by William Toye, Oxford. Though one may quibble endlessly with any such reference work, Toye is justified in making his introductory claim: "In spite of all weaknesses . . . there

is offered here a wealth of detail and commentary, and many new insights."

POETRY

The *Weather*, by Lorna Crozier, Coteau Books. In four previous books the pain of love has been Crozier's special territory. The process of turning bitterness into hope has been a long one, but now, no longer fighting, she offers us a voice with a vision.

CANWIT NO. 9 2

*Beware the jocund Moose, my son!
The jaws that crop, the foot that springs!
Beware the Cariboo, and shun
The foliage Nature flings.*

ASTUTE READERS will recognize in the above lines a parody of not one but two poems, Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and Joseph Howe's "Acadia." Contestants are invited to submit similar verses that conflate two or more well-known poems, of which at least one should be Canadian and one bad. The prize is \$25, and \$25 goes to Douglas McLeod of Halifax for the idea. Deadline: May 1. Address: CanWit No. 92, Books in Canada, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9.

Results of CanWit No. 90

OUR REQUEST for low-calorie summaries of heavyweight tomes produced enough light reading to keep *Reader's Digest* busy for, well, a couple of minutes, anyway. The winner is Mark Fortier of Toronto for the following lite titles:

- *Remembrance of Things Past: Marcel*, a would-be writer, tends to forget things, until one day he remembers.
- *War and Peace*: First there's war, then

there's peace, then there's war, then there's Peace again.

- *Nineteen Eighty Four: Big Brother* doesn't want Winston to see his girlfriend Julia. After much persuasion, Winston and Julia decide not to see each other anymore.
- *The Sun Also Rises: Jake Barnes*, who was wounded in the war, goes fishing and to the bullfight with Mends.
- *The Fall of the House of Usher: Roderick Usher's sister*, Madeleine, comes to visit unexpectedly. All hell breaks loose.

Honourable mentions:

- *Remembrance of Things Past: Marcel Proust* stays in bed to write down a memory. He falls asleep. When he wakes up he has forgotten it.
- *Les Misérables: J. Valjean* steals a loaf of bread. Is chased by policeman Javert, who slips, breaking his neck. That night the Valjeans eat bread.

-Jerry Williams, Montreal

- *Bear: Lou's been sleeping* in my bed.

-Tom Williams, Calgary

- *Macbeth: Macbeth* is encouraged and supported by his wife (an assertive woman, but always a lady) in his rise to the top. They give fascinating dinner parties.

- Natalia Mayer, Toronto

- *The Fire-Dwellers: Stacey*, a confused and unhappy housewife, gives herself a good talking to and all of her problems are then solved.

-A.M. Thomas, Calgary

BOOKS RECEIVED

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

Addicted & Free . . . at the Same Time, by David A. Stewart, Empathy Books.
Alexandra's Lebanese Cooking, by Valerie Mansour, Alexandra's Lebanese Cooking.
Amongst Thistles and Thorns, by Austin C. Clarke, New Canadian Library.
The Apostate's Tattoo, by J.J. Steinfeld, Ragweed Press.
Auschwitz, by Wayne Ray, Unfinished Monument Press.
Banking on Poverty: The Global Impact of the IMF and World Bank, edited by Jill Torrie, Between the Lines.
The Better Part of Heaven, by Ken Norris, Coach House.
The Blessings of A Bird, by Stephen Gill, Vesta.
The Bones of Cuttlefish, by Eugenio Montale, translated by Antonino Mazza, Mosaic Press.
The Book of Eve, by Constance Beresford-Howe, New Canadian Library.
Brave Season: Reading and the Language Arts in Grades Seven to Ten, by Don Gutteridge, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario.
The Bakowski/Purdy Letters, 1964-1974, edited by Seamus Conroy, Paget Press.
By Violent Means, by Cathy Ford, blowpoint press.
Cast a Thin Shadow, by Joan Borland and Barbara Dacks, Seal.
The Channel Shore, by Charles Bruce, New Canadian Library.
Childhood, by Jana Oberski, Lester & Orpen Dennys.
City Parks of Canada, by Linda Martin and Kerry Scgrave, Mosaic Press.
Class Discussions for Teachers and Counsellors in Elementary School, by John A.B. Allan and Judith Nairne, Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, U of T.
Class, Power and Property: Essays on Canadian Society, by Wallace Clement, Methuen.
Computer-Talk: The Softwords Complete Glossary for

Computers, Press Porcopic.
Convergences, by Lionel Kearns, Coach House.
The Crafty Cook, by Angela Knapik and Benita McNeill, The Crafty Cook.
The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell, by George Woodcock, Book Center.
Dive to Adventure, by Jack McKenney, Panorama Publications.
Edward and Patricia, by Frank Davey, Coach House.
Energy Options for Atlantic Canada, edited by Marshal Conley and Graham Daborn, Formae.
Flowers of Darkness, by Matt Cohen, New Canadian Library.
Globalism and the Nation-State, by Eric Kierans, CBC Enterprises.
Henry Allue, by J.M. Burnsted, Lancelot Press.
Holding the Pose, by Sharon Thesen, Coach House.
The Honey Drum: Seven Tales from Arab Lands, by Gwendolyn MacEwen, Mosaic.
How the Irish Got Stout, by Cliff Reid, Press Echinox-dermater.
The Icarus Seal, by Christopher Hyde, Seal.
Images of Vulnerability: The Art of George Wallace, by Greg Peters, Mosaic.
In a Bright Land, by Alan Pearson, Golden Dog Press.
In a Hiding, by Mary Weymark Goss, Penumbra Press.
Insel, by J. Michael Yates, Penumbra Press.
Island Pointers: The Life of Robert Harris, by Moncrieff Williamson, Ragweed Press.
Island Women, by Chris Fellers, HMS Press.
The Ivory Swing, by Janette Turner Hospital, Seal.
Jobs This Summer, 1984: A Guide for College and University Students, by Carl L. Bodal, Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, U of T.
Judith, by Aritha van Herk, New Canadian Library.
Kerrisdale Elegies, by George Bowring, Coach House.
Laugh and Tell, by Odo Woldstein, Simon & Pierre.
Legendary Canadian Women, by Carol McLeod, Lancelot Press.
Life (and Death) in the 'Yonsted States of Umurica,' edited by Gord Deval, Simon & Pierre.
The Little Flowers of Madame de Montespan, by Jane Urquhart, The Porcupine's Quill.
The Maple Syrup Book, by Marilyn Limon, illustrated by Lesley Fairfield, Kids Can Press.
La mer et le cadre, by Lois McConkey, Douglas & McIntyre.
The Middle East at the Crossroads, edited by Janice Gross Stejn and David B. Dewitt, Mosaic.
The Needle in the Eye: Poems New and Old, by R.A.D. Ford, Mosaic.
Neighbours Across the Pacific: Canadian-Japanese Relations, 1870-1982, by Klaus H. Pringsheim, Mosaic.
The New Ancestors, by Dave Girdle, New Canadian Library.
Nightingale of the North, by Amy Louise Peyton, Jespersion Press.
Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers, by Elizabeth McLuhan and Tom Hill, Art Gallery of Ontario/Methuen.
An Odd Attempt in a Woman: The Literary Life of Frances Brooks, by Lorraine McMullen, UBC Press.
Oh, Hear the Winds, by Adam C. Zimmerman, Pathway Publications.
On Duty: A Canadian at the Making of the United Nations, 1945-46, by Scott Reid, M & S.
On the High Seas: The Diary of Capt. John W. Froude Twillingate, 1863-1939, Jespersion Press.
Out from Under, by Rolf Harvey, Oaks.
Over the Side, by J.P. Andrieux, Jespersion Press.
Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State, edited by Leroy Little Bear et al., U of T Press.
Perspectives on Women in the 1980s, edited by Joan Turner and Lois Emery, University of Manitoba Press.
A Portrait of Paradise, by Carolyn Zonailo, blowpoint press.
Prodons, by Douglas H. Glover, Seal.
The Questing Beast, by Richard Hebert, M & S.
Recipes to Celebrate, edited by Foundation for Education Association, Jespersion Press.
The Return of Cavemungah, Book #2, by Ian Anderson, Seal.
Rogues' Hollow: The Story of the Village of Newburgh, Ontario, Through Its Buildings, by Peter John Stokes et al., Architectural Conservancy of Ontario.
Round Trip Home, by Elizabeth Kouhi, Penumbra Press.
The Samurai, by Shusaku Endo, Lester & Orpen Dennys.
Settlement in a School of Whales, by Roger Nash, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
Seven Robins, by Neil Graham, Penumbra Press.
The Sino-Soviet Border Dispute in the 1970's, by Tsien-hua Tsui, Mosaic.
Sorry Daddy: A Father's Guide to Toddlers, by Marvin Ross, illustrated by David Shaw, Houslow Press.
Stability and Change in Literacy Learning, by Don Holdaway, Faculty of Education, University of Western Ontario.
Stranded in Term, by Deborah Godin, Penumbra Press.
Le Texte Scientifique, edited by Laurent Mailhot, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
The Toronto Collection: An Anthology of the New Toronto Poets, edited by Leslie Nutting, Manoeuvres Press.
The Tojem Curves, by Phil Nuytten, Panorama Publications (1982).
Travella Light, by Jim Christy, Simon & Pierre.
Trilateral New Harvest Recipes, Trilich.
The Tyrion Veil, by Kenneth Banks, Lushino Press.
Underwater Man, by Joe MacInnis, Panorama (1982).
Wilderness Images, by St. John Simmons, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
Woman in the Dust: Poems and Drawings, by Patrick Lane, Mosaic.
Writings and Reflections from the World of Roderick Hing-Brown, M & S.
Young Robert Duncan, by Elbert Faas, Paget Press.

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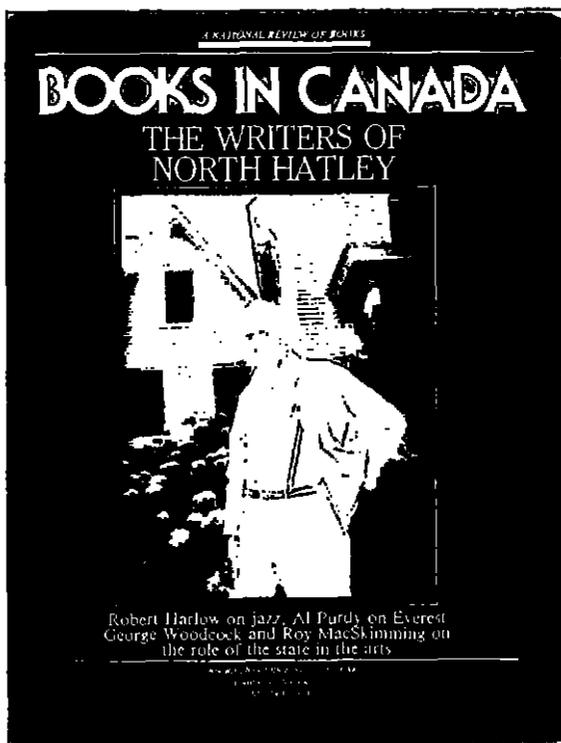
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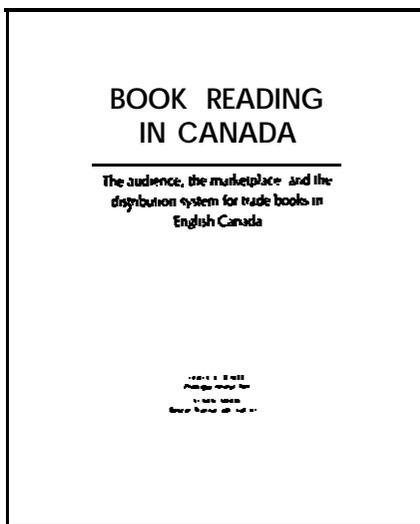
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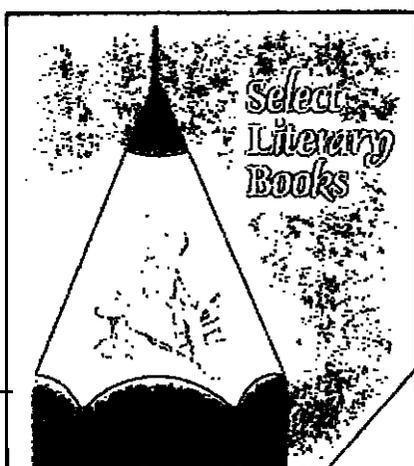
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