

# BOOKS

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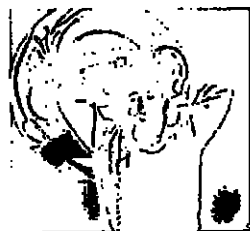
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CONTENTS

Volume 12  
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BOOKS IN CANADA



FEATURES

Pride of the Sox. W.P. Kinsella wins our seventh annual first novel contest for *Shoeless Joe* .....8  
 Blyth Spirit. A profile of Paul Thompson, Canada's exuberant theatrical "gluepot." By Paul Wilson ..... 10  
 Hearts of the West. A round-up of the year's published drama. By Richard Plant ..... 14  
 A Treatise on Lovers. A review of A.N. Wilson's sixth novel, *Wise Virgin*. By Rupert Schieder ..... 23  
 Beyond the Barbed Wire. A review of *Dangerous Patriots: Canada's Unknown Prisoners of War*. By Margaret Laurence ..... 27

REVIEWS

The Plays, Volume 4, by Edward Albee ..... 16  
 Michel Tremblay, by Renate Usmiani ..... 16  
 Every Inch a Lear, by Maurice Good ..... 17  
 Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretative History of the National Film Board, by D.B. Jones ..... 19  
 Lotfi Mansouri: An Operatic Life, by Lotfi Mansouri with Aviva Layton; Bernstein, by Paul Robinson ..... 20  
 A Sound Like Laughter, by David Helwig ..... 20  
 The Ruined Season, by M.T. Kelly ..... 21  
 Trailing Pythagoras, by George Galt; Ricordi: Remembrances of Italy, by Joyce Meyer ..... 22  
 A Sad Device, by Roo Borson; Giving Back Diamonds, by Marilyn Bowering; Power Sources, by Carolyn Smart ..... 25  
 New Poems, by Henry Moscovitch; Capitalistic Affection!, by Frank Davey; Black Orchid, by A.F. Moritz ..... 26  
 Montage for an Interstellar Cry, by Andrew Suknaski; The Mossbank Canon, by E.F. Dyck ..... 28  
 The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada 1850-1950, by Leslie Armour  
 and Elizabeth Trott ..... 29

DEPARTMENTS

Field Notes	Interview with Peter Colley, by Donald Martin ..... 30
Ms Blood, by John Hofsess ..... 3	Letters ..... 32
Capital Losses, by M.B. Thompson ..... 4	CanWit No. 82 ..... 33
Going for Baroque, by Terry Goldie ..... 5	The Editors Recommend ..... 34
English, Our English, by Bob Blackburn ..... 7	Books Received ..... 34

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# Sharon Pollock off-Broadway: success as a subtle form of failure

## Ms Blood

EVERY COUNTRY HAS its playwrights of conscience, artists whose work is more notable for its moral and political themes than for its aesthetics. In English theatre the leading playwright of conscience is still John Osborne whose *Look Back in Anger* and *The Entertainer* have proven to be works of enduring value beyond their initial shock as sociological studies. In American theatre, it is Arthur Miller who has most frequently written (sometimes well, more often ploddingly) with the mind of a moralist. In Canadian theatre, there have been few plays produced dealing with human rights and social issues: about one such play every five years seems to be the average judging by David Freeman's *Creeps*, (1971) and John Herbert's *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, (1967). It is hardly surprising, therefore, in a country where social criticism is regarded as a sign of radicalism, that Sharon Pollock has managed to become Canada's pre-eminent playwright of conscience — for the author of *Walsh*, *The Komagata Maru Incident*, *One Tiger to a Hill*, and *Blood Relations* (which recently received its American première in a handsome production by the Hudson Theatre Guild in New York) is determined to make audiences think more about the issues she raises in her plays than about the plays themselves.

Pollock's output — eight full-length plays in 10 years — has two distinct phases: the work done in the 1970s corresponds, in Pollock's personal life, with her living with one of Canada's leading actors, Michael Ball, and their shared responsibilities of raising six children (five from a previous marriage of Pollock's) in conditions of extreme poverty. The plays that come from this period (notably *Walsh* and *The Komagata Maru Incident*) are passionately humanitarian. By 1980, however, all but one of the children have left home, Ball has departed for an actress half his age, and Pollock's income has become virtually the highest of any playwright in Canada.

Whether there is a connection or whether it's a coincidence, the plays created since 1980 (*Blood Relations*,

which received the 1982 Governor General's Award, and Pollock's latest, *Whiskey Six Cadenza*, having its première at Theatre Calgary this season) have a narrower range of concern: they are primarily character studies, subtle and intelligent, like all of Pollock's work, but no longer the kind of plays that emanate from a "great-souled" writer who cares about the plight of others. *Blood Relations* is Pollock's slickest and most commercially successful play, having brought the author earnings of around \$50,000 to date. Yet apart from suggesting a feminist interpretation of the famous Lizzie Borden murder trial (that is, that Lizzie was a 20th-century woman — and a lesbian — trapped inside the 19th-century lifestyle of Fall River, Mass.), the play appears to have no moral concerns or ideas. One could easily go away with the impression that it's understandable for a woman to be absolutely ruthless — to the point of killing her father and stepmother — in order to protect her property rights and secure an inheritance. Such an embittered view of sexual politics would not likely have come from Pollock in happier times. One can't help but notice that all three of the male characters in *Blood Relations* are inadequate and lack courage, whereas in Pollock's earlier plays, in which a major part was always written for Michael Ball, the male characters were strong and vital; indeed, they often embodied the conscience of her plays.



*Blood Relations* is the second Pollock play to reach New York in the last year (preceded by a Manhattan Theatre Club production of *One Tiger to a Hill*) Critical reaction was lukewarm ("Miss Pollock is a prize-winning playwright in

her native Canada — in fact that may say more about Canadian theatre than the quality of her work," said the *New York Times*), but public response gave the play a good run in the 142-seat theatre. Hudson Theatre Guild is an off-Broadway company with high production standards: the set design by Ron Placzek was of Broadway calibre; the performances of Marti Maraden as Lizzie Borden and Sloane Shelton as Abigail Borden were of definitive perfection.

But foreign audiences seem to be more receptive to Canadian plays of sociological interest than they are to those rooted in a more subjective vision. Each year quite a few Canadian plays are announced for New York productions, but either they expire somewhere on the way (like David French's *Jitters*), or else they do get produced and then die. George F. Walker's *Zastrozzi* was tromped by the critics as "sophomoric"; Joseph Papp's half-million-dollar gamble on Des McAnuff's *The Death of Von Richthofen As Seen From the Earth* left the Public Theatre swimming in red ink.

The exceptions to this long, bleak history of failure are almost entirely plays that depict — one could even say indict — some aspect of Canadian society. *Creeps*, *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, and *One Tiger to a Hill* have not fared much better with New York critics, but they found audiences here that connected with the raw, emotional power of the human extremities depicted. It would be a mistake to attribute *Blood Relations'* appeal to American audiences to its Massachusetts setting and its roots in criminal legend. The play has no distinctive geographical or sociological feel to it; it could just as easily be taking place in the mythological western place called "The Land" in Pollock's *Generations*. If anything, it is the feminist stance of *Blood Relations* that makes it popular wherever it plays and that allows it to cross cultural borders with ease. The audience I saw at the Hudson Theatre Guild production was composed almost entirely of middle-aged women, many of whom could identify with the sympathetic character that Pollock has created in her Lizzie Borden and go away mulling over the play's chief contention: "Lizzie did what thousands of

woman dream of doing ... either you kill that which oppresses you or else consent to letting it kill you. A woman's life leads either to murder or to suicide — real or symbolic."

Anyone familiar with Pollock's family background — the alcoholism and eventual suicide of her mother, the rigid masculine code of her wealthy and socially prominent father (described in Dalton Camp's political memoir, *Gentlemen, Players and Politicians*, as always looking "like Clark Gable about to meet Carole Lombard at the Ritz, as though the world were his oyster and he could win at anyone's game") will find many instances in *Blood Relations* where she has drawn on real-life saga, though with quite a different end. It is as if the playwright were revenging her mother's death and in the process, exposing the patriarchal world that makes such a desperate choice — murder or suicide — the *only* one for some women. Almost all of Pollock's work can be seen as a lifelong dramatic dialogue with her "establishment" father, and *Blood Relations* is her most revealing in this regard, though it is too imbalanced to be considered her best play.

That honour belongs to *Walsh* (originally produced in 1973 but revised substantially last year for a new production at the National Arts Centre this spring), in which Pollock recreates the events of 1876 when Chief Sitting Bull and the Sioux Indians moved into southern Alberta following the battle at Little Bighorn. Walsh (a role written for Michael Ball) is a superintendent of the North West Mounted Police who becomes friends with Sitting Bull, a man he respects and trusts, and who he understands has killed only because his people have been threatened with extinction. The play is based on little-known historical facts and is a searing indictment of the collusion of two governments (Canadian and American) against native Indians. Similarly, in *The Komagata Maru Incident*, Pollock examines another forgotten case of racist infamy: the illegal incarceration of 376 East Indians in Vancouver harbour in 1914.

Pollock's best work is done on a broad scale, in which the energies of her art can be directed toward important and complex issues. When she addresses domestic life, however, she becomes one-sided and bitter. In most relationships that fail, there is failure on both sides; there is blood on all our hands, selfish stupidities in all of our lives — a fact that Pollock has yet to see or, at the very least, an admission she has yet to make. Pollock's plays were better when she wanted love more than money, when she believed, given the evidence of her

plays, that love could transform human life. Judging from the American response to *Blood Relations* there is a market for what Pollock does. But a truly great playwright, which Pollock has the potential to be, would be more concerned with leading an audience than following it. Pollock once said: "The best theatre is *illegitimate* theatre ... but you can't expect to be illegitimate, critical of society, and also well paid." If Pollock is proving palatable and popular with hordes of middle-class theatre-goers, it is probably a sign that her plays are becoming bourgeois. Sometimes success is a subtle form of failure.

— JOHN HOFSESS

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## Capital losses

IN THE BEGINNING were the Orpheus Society (for musical comedies) and the Ottawa Little Theatre (for "straight drama"). They served the needs of the Ottawa theatre-going community then and, alas, to all intents and purposes, they serve it now.

Toward the end of the 1960s somebody decreed, as somebody always does in this town, a stately pleasure dome: its name, not evocative of wonder, mystery, and delight, turned out to be the National Arts Centre. For some years it, Orpheus, and OLT were what one thought of in Ottawa as theatre when Ottawa thought of theatre at all. This petrific trio was supplemented by the suburban amateur companies — New Edinburgh, Kanata — and the odd ethnic group such as the Tara Players, which did concentrate, and do, on Irish vehicles. French theatre, apart from its component at the NAC, minded its own business across the river in Hull.

A series of less-than-inspired stewardships at the NAC, the steady OLT fare of fluffy comedies, courtroom dramas, tear-jerkers, and Broadway dropouts (and debate in some quarters about whether you'd be advised to use an English accent when trying to extract a ticket at the box office), the worthy but necessarily unlicked offerings from the universities, Carleton's Soc'n'Buskin and the University of Ottawa's Drama Guild — all these produced their predictable effect, a burning need for alternative theatre in the nation's capital.

And, *mirabile visu*, alternative theatre came about. Not in one guise, but several, not with one or two shows a year, but often with half a dozen. Penguin Theatre appeared, initially under the gifted Don Bouzek, with a

self-enjoined mandate to try almost anything. Theatre 2000 followed, along much the same lines and picking up some of Penguin's slack. The Great Canadian Theatre Company closed in on a narrower repertoire: Canadian plays and only Canadian plays, manned and womaned by only Canadian actors, technicians, publicists, costume-snippers (a technically "stateless" Chinese girl was not permitted to help sew threads for Robin Mathews's *Selkirk* since she lacked the citizenship for it). Like the others, the GCTC intended from the start to be a professional company, and has finally managed this, moving last year, like Penguin, into a splendid new permanent space on Gladstone Avenue after its mendicant, peripatetic years. Last summer a fourth alternate company, SRO, launched itself with a fine marathon staging of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and has just closed an eccentric, piquant *Macbeth*.

But, twang the shoestring as it did, it made little or no money on *Macbeth* despite extending its run for a week. Its space (which used to be Penguin's) held no more than 100, and one can go only so long packing in 100 people per show. Penguin's own homeric fantasy, *Living in Exile*, opened its fine new York Street theatre (capacity 250 seats) to average houses of 25, much of that paper. At the same time, Theatre 2000 halted its last offering, a powerful and excellently mounted piece about Angola, *Sweet Like Suga*, in mid-run to announce to a saddened but hardly surprised Ottawa theatre community that 2000 had finally given up the ghost. No one would be flabbergasted if Penguin and SRO were shortly to go the same way. GCPC will survive, not least because it is both a "Canadian" company (right and proper) and a mouthpiece for callow left-wing propaganda, being psychologically located, as they say, not a million versts from where the Canadian Labour Congress keeps its money-bags. This enables it to plumb whatever pork barrels are administered by grant-granting liberals



eager to shell out support for mendacious, one-sided propaganda such as the GCTC's recent Nicaraguan fantasy, *Sandinista!* The GCTC will survive, that way, and also by virtue of its fitful excellences, its diversification into other uses for its space (a series of folk-concerts this year, for instance), its frequent

school tours of the ubiquitous kiddy-play, and incessant assiduous wooings of sponsors, audiences, talent: anything from Mayor Marion Dewar, to CUSO, to wishy-washy liberals like myself.

So the GCTC will survive. Penguin may. SRO may. Theatre 2000 hasn't. Why, in an area that comprehends up to a million people, cannot a company survive whose successes far outweigh its flops, who have offered a rich diversity of theatrical experiences over the past several years — American classics like *Death of a Salesman* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a W.O. Mitchell première, a Dario Fo, Michel Tremblay, country and western musicals, cooperations such as *Strip* with a local French company, popular hits like *Nurse Jane Goes to Hawaii*, and so on and so on — whose audiences, albeit in the woefully attenuated space, are for the most part healthy?

Theatre 2000 was charging \$7.00 for a non-subscription ticket this year. In times felt to be parlous, this was considered to be exorbitant. It isn't of course, even if Theatre 2000's premises were less than commodious, the occasional actor or actress proved substandard, and the opportunity for intermission refreshment was nonexistent. Did

2000's offerings lack variety? Hard to see how. Did theatre-lovers fail to turn out to watch those offerings? Yes they did.

And there's the nub. Theatre-lovers in Ottawa did turn out and do turn out. But there aren't that many of them. The informed guess among theatre people here is that somewhere between one and two per cent of the Ottawa and area community go to the theatre. Of those, some go to a lot of theatre, though a good slice of them are OLT or Orpheus regulars who would trot out to sit in front of *Gidget Goes to Mechanicsville*. Or stay home and watch mush on television. Or winter in Florida to return in the spring bubbling over the cute little place in Coral Gables that did Neil Simon so well.

A community gets the theatre it deserves, no doubt. Well, Ottawa, Theatre 2000 isn't with us any more, its actors, directors, technicians, and supporters dispersed elsewhere, to the other companies for a while, to Toronto, to sensible jobs. No big deal really, *Winds of War* is more real anyway, and you're not really going to miss something that you never knew was there in the first place. Let's go on with the show: *la com-media è finita*. — M.B. THOMPSON

## Going for baroque

SOME OF YOU mainlanders may have chanced to see the recent television production of *Joey*. It was originally created for the stage by Rising Tide Theatre, a St. John's company, and playwright Rick Salutin, and later toured Canada with quite significant success. And now the CBC, in one of their few gestures to regional disparity, have given the arm-chairs of the nation a glimpse of how it really is down on the rock.

Or have they? Those of you far removed from our little island culture may not realize the various sorts of furore that accompanied *Joey*, both on stage and on the box. And even that is, to use an appropriate metaphor with St. John's harbour frozen in, but the tip of the iceberg. The essence of the situation might be summed up as ambivalence. But not, as the word might suggest, an apathetic, lazy ambivalence. Rather a biting, lively ambivalence, with plenty of teeth in it.

It begins with the general Newfoundland reaction to Joey Smallwood as a person. There are still some who

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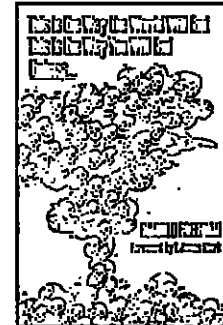


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think he is a saint. He brought us into the 20th century, into Canada, and into the baby bonus. What odds if he wasted a great deal of money on a variety of projects that never got off the ground. A few problems are inevitable for a man of heroic vision.

Then there is the "Joey as devil incarnate" school. This crowd immediately brings up resettlement, the policy through which isolated communities were emptied and people moved to "growth centres." A number of scholars have pointed out that Newfoundlanders have been resettling themselves since the 19th century, part of the general shift in western society from rural to urban. Joey's main sin was one of haste. But such simple logic offends nostalgic impulses.

Such as those of Ray Guy. One of the few Newfoundlanders reasonably well known on the mainland, his main themes as a writer have been "idyllic out-harbour delights" and a strident satire, often directed at Joey and his followers (see Ray Guy's Column in *Atlantic Insight* magazine). He reviewed the TV *Joey* for the local radio and became so enraged as to lose all of his Leacock Award-winning sense of humour. He simply kept fulminating about how it was pornography.



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I suspect he was more than slightly influenced by the recent controversy about the Playboy channel on Pay-TV, but that doesn't deny his vitriol. The "Joey as devil" league is alive and well. But far from ambivalent. That is left for the rest of us. And as I said it isn't anything namby-pamby. A woman I spoke to first attacked the many rotten things Joey had done to Newfoundland and then said how sad she felt as the TV camera panned at the end of the show to a tear-strewn view of the man himself in the audience. She loved him as much as she hated him.

The studio audience was similar. When the CBC announced that there would be two free performances for the taping at our local culture barn, the delightfully named Arts and Culture Centre (renamed by Ray Guy "the Tart and Vulture"), tickets were snapped up in a minute. When I watched the television I recognized in the audience a number of resolute young Newfoundland nationalists, waving their Joey posters when the cue cards called them into action.

It wasn't just free tickets. And it's not just Joey. It's part of an approach-avoidance reaction to Newfoundland that pervades the culture. I found it interesting that part of *Joey* is devoted to Smallwood's very shady adviser, Dr. Valdmanis. Alfred Valdmanis, pre-war German finance minister and freelance Latvian economist, influenced Smallwood in many of the more hare-brained industrial developments in Newfoundland just after confederation. His name became a watchword for political wrong-doing.

In fact, the elevation of Valdmanis, the foreign expert, was part of a long-standing Newfoundland tendency. It can be explained as follows: there are a number of positions for which a candidate must be a true Newfoundlander, at least born here, preferably with generations of sea-water behind him. Who could more properly man the helm of this unique ship but a native skipper full of those skills known only to the indigenous? The next level below, however, is often conspicuous in the absence of Newfoundlanders. Well, after a Newfoundlander has reached the top he can do better than to hire a dumb Newf.

Happily, both parts of this are passing, but they haven't gone yet. So when the culture is depicted, on stage, in books, or whatever, no one is too sure which side to take. There is the strident nationalist, usually labelled by mainland journalists as "feisty." And there is the quaint, befuddled, rural type hallowed by the Newfie-joke.

In general, *Rising Tide*, who created

*Joey*, have leaned in the direction of the former. One of their artistic directors, Donna Butt, has made a number of ardent pro-Newfoundland statements. But *Joey* places rather more emphasis on the latter. It seems to me rather unpleasant to search for jokes founded on assumptions of rural ignorance. I have heard a number of rib-tickers based on observations about the inadequacy of dental work in Newfoundland, but the one in *Joey*, about the dull-witted baymen who take the opportunity of confederation to have all their teeth removed and replaced with "store-bought," seems among the worst.

A possible explanation is that this is some kind of reverse humour. In other words, it is not a joke based on Newfie stereotypes but a joke about what people think of as Newfie stereotypes. If so it's too subtle for me, and I think too subtle for most mainlanders, whose knowledge of Canada's famed 10th province often doesn't go beyond some of John Crosbie's choicer *bon mots*.

I have had a slight bit of personal experience with this. I once did a piece for CBC's *Sunday Morning* about the *Ray Guy Revue*, a local theatrical anthology piece. The piece was never aired, however: I was informed that my work was all right but the excerpt from the show just wasn't funny. Apparently the piece had been passed around CBC Toronto to general agreement — no laughs. So I did the same at CBC St. John's to assorted smiles and even guffaws. It even got a few praising telephone comments when it was aired locally.

So who knows the national temper? Would CBC Regina think like Toronto or St. John's? I have no idea but I am left with the impression that even if all of Canada enjoyed *Joey*, different Canadas were enjoying different *Joey*s.

That's the problem when Newfoundland is exported, but how about when the rest of the world is imported? Travel expenses are such that we are not likely to get tours of the latest hits, so we are compelled to do them ourselves. Regardless of my comments about Donna Butt's Newfoundland nationalism, she has been one of a number of theatre people in St. John's who have been bringing us the best in new scripts from away. Among Canadians we have had Joanna Glass and Sharon Pollock. From further afield have come Dario Fo and Sam Shepard.

But they just don't sell. Audiences are slim except for Newfoundland topics. Recently on the national CBC-FM show, *Stereo Morning*, the other artistic director of *Rising Tide*, David Ross, and the painter Mary Pratt both complained about Newfoundland's tendency to not

want to look at art from outside. But Ken Pittman, head of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council, said, "We must maintain our indigenous roots."

When we look at Newfoundland culture we find ourselves split, not just from one another but within ourselves. Are Newfoundlanders feisty? Are they silly? Is either a stereotype we wish to

export? Is there any stereotype we wish to export? Will the mainland accept anything else? One actor said to me a number of years ago, "I'm sick of Newfoundland baroque," and that is certainly what *Joey* is. But to pursue the obvious pun, any theatre company — and almost anyone in the arts — who rejects the baroque is going to wind up that way. — TERRY GOLDIE

## ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

There's only one safe way to use  
'only': if it looks (or sounds) good, do it,  
only make sure you do it right

By BOB BLACKBURN

BECAUSE OF A particularly idiotic decision by the CRTC last month, my local cable-TV company posted this on-screen message: "Pay-TV is available in stereo for C-Channel music programs only at this time."

Here is the pesky *only* at its worst. Anyone who had been following the news about pay-TV would have understood the intended meaning of the message immediately. Anyone else would not have cared. And anyone who had pointed out that the *only* in that sentence belonged between "for" and "C-Channel" would have been termed a pedantic bore by most (and already has been by some).

But this must be pursued. The *only* could have been dropped into several comfortable spots in that sentence (and a couple of uncomfortable ones) without causing great confusion to the intended recipients of the message. Put in some other places, it might have befuddled many. The writer who thought he had placed it where it belonged would, I doubt not, have thought it equally efficient to place it between "stereo" and "for." It would have been no more confusing there.

It is a bad sentence. But, as it stands, there is only one proper location in it for *only*.

The wrong placement of this word is one of the most common errors in English syntax. I commit it frequently, and I'd bet that you do, too. It's so common, indeed, that we tend to condone its commission by the "well-you-know-what-I-meant" types and feel it incumbent on us to figure out (often without much difficulty) just what *was* meant,

and not to complain about it.

Even Fowler is uncommonly permissive about its placement. In a rather remarkable diatribe he rants about pedants whose "design is to force us all, whenever we use the adverb *only*, to spend time in considering which is the precise part of the sentence strictly qualified by it, and then put it there — this irrespective of whether there is any danger of the meaning's being false or ambiguous . . . ." He does go on. It would seem he had become enraged by some piece of pedantry even more arrogant than the one he cites at the beginning of the article. It's worth looking up, because you'll seldom find him so splenetic.

Eventually he calms down enough to offer this advice: "There is an orthodox position for the adverb, easily determined in case of need; to choose another position that may spoil or obscure the meaning is bad; but a change of position that has no such effect except technically is not only justified by historical and colloquial usage but often demanded by rhetorical needs."

After all the ranting he is saying what is eminently reasonable: put *only* where it seems to you to look or sound good — but be sure you're making your meaning clear. Orthodoxy should not destroy style, but style should not destroy clarity.

Still, we all should stick a red flag on *only*, and never use it without thinking, not about orthodoxy, but about the possibility of being misunderstood. I've never wondered what the songwriter meant by "I only have eyes for you," and I wouldn't for the world have had

him write, "I have eyes for only you," or even "for you only."

Theodore Bernstein, an authority who has been known to nod but whose advice is generally plain and sensible, is of some help in this matter. He allows that the "normally" proper position for *only* is adjacent to (and usually preceding) whatever it qualifies, but then goes on to list a bewildering number of exceptions. He does recommend "developing an *only* awareness," and cites a useful exercise: "Eight different meanings result from placing *only* in the eight possible positions in this sentence: 'I hit him in the eye yesterday.'" Try it, then tell me that it's pedantic to demand that writers take time to think about possible ambiguity every time they use that word.

Bernstein should have stopped there. Obviously, once a writer has developed his "*only* awareness," he will avoid using it ambiguously. It's equally obvious that too many writers either have not developed that awareness or are not qualified for their jobs (although this is so pervasive a trap that anyone must be excused for an *occasional* lapse — and how's *that* for a cop-out?).

Since acquiring a computer recently I've been exchanging notes electronically with a wide network of U.S. writers, and I transmitted a couple of examples of *only* misuse for their consideration. The most interesting revisions that came back were from writers who had deftly rewritten the sentences and eliminated the *only*s with no loss of clarity and vigour. Anyone finding that proper placement of the word is awkward and that improper placement causes ambiguity would be well advised to consider not using it at all.

Bernstein doesn't help matters at all when he goes on to say that *only* may be used as a conjunction in place of *but*, "although the use is more appropriate to speech than to writing," but that it should not be used in place of *except*. I venture to suggest that its use in place of *but* is more appropriate to gutter speech than to polite converse.

MY NEWSPAPER BACKGROUND makes me tolerant of sins committed by reporters working under pressure, but I couldn't tolerate the following sentence from a front-page story in the *Globe and Mail*: "Mr. Broadbent had to ask his question instead of Mr. Lalonde." The trouble is not only that it's a terrible sentence and one that forces the reader to grope for its intended meaning, but also that it spoiled the point of a quite amusing digression. An alert editor, by moving the *instead* to the end of the sentence, could have saved the joke. (I would relate the whole thing, only there ain't enough space here.) □



# PRIDE OF THE SOX

W.P. Kinsella's lyrical celebration of  
'the gentle, flawless, loving game' of baseball  
is the best first novel of 1982

THE SEVENTH ANNUAL Books in Canada Award for First Novels — and a cheque for \$1,000 — goes to W.P. Kinsella for *Shoeless Joe*, published in the U.S. by Houghton Mifflin and distributed in Canada by Thomas Allen & Son. A lyrical novel of baseball, vision, and love, Kinsella's book (already a prize winner — of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship last year) was a clear though not unanimous favourite of the judges.

Twenty-three novels were eligible this year, one more than last. The panel of judges (Toronto freelance journalist Anne Collins; West-Coast novelist and short-story writer Jack Hodgins; Toronto poet and novelist Gwendolyn MacEwen; and John Richardson of A Different Drummer Books in Burlington, Ont.) worked from a short list prepared by Douglas Hill, who writes a column about first novels for *Books in Canada*. Besides *Shoeless Joe*, the list included: *Coming for to Carry*, by Lorris Elliott (Williams-Wallace); *Dead Ends*, by Keith Harrison (Quadrant Editions); *Blue*, by Geraldine Rahmani (Coach House Press); *Preparing for Sabbath*, by Nessa Rapoport (Seal Books); and *The Bee Book* by Ann Rosenberg (Coach House Press).

The judges faced considerably more diversity than in previous years, with four of the novels (those by Elliott, Harrison, Rahmani, Rosenberg) offering radical experiments in structure, prose style, or typography. Rapoport's story of Jewish girlhood, on the other hand, is narrated more conventionally. Kinsella's prize-winner is, too, but it's strikingly innovative in its elimination of the barriers between fact and imagination; the dream, magically, is the reality in *Shoeless Joe*. A conclusion, then, from the year's reading: Canada's first novelists appear to have entertained a wider range of fictional possibility than in previous years; they've been willing to take some chances with their books. Here are the judges' comments:

**Anne Collins:** The judging was over, as far as I was concerned, half-way into *The Bee Book* by Ann Rosenberg. This startled me a little, because I found it hard to accept that Rosenberg had so thoroughly entranced me with an experimental novel that uses an obsession with the natural lives of bees to illuminate the sexual life of the main character, Habella Cire. Puns (see the foregoing), games, short plays, diagrams, concrete

poetry, photos, drawings: the twists and turns of Rosenberg's imagination are boundless and carried off with a surety and wit I've seldom encountered in first novels (let alone others). The clincher for me was that her tricks and oddities were integrated — they did enhance the narrative. Rosenberg wasn't just showing off (well, maybe a little). Habella's plight is rooted in her belief that somehow she will make a sexual connection that is "right" in the way that bee sex is biologically right. Considering the subterfuges of human sex lives, this condemns her to a condition of helpless romanticism. *The Bee Book* does what novels should

aspire to do: hold up a window through which its readers get a new view of the same old picture: human life.

So, *The Bee Book*, has my vote for number one. I did, though, keep thinking that I should have liked W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* the best, out of affection for the short story from which the novel grew. It, too, is about obsession — this time baseball — but I found the novel covered with a sticky-sweet nostalgia for simpler times that was hard to take in the long run. Of the others: All were difficult to get into, but all left me with respect for their authors. *Blue* is poetry at a masquerade, beautiful language pretending to be fiction. It was interesting in that it showed how minimal story could be to still work as a

narrative flow. But in the end I judged that Geraldine Rahmani had just not given me enough as a reader. *Dead Ends* sinks under the weight of political and social significance, and its own self-conscious attitude toward the "act" of writing. *Coming for to Carry* also suffers from some of that literary self-consciousness, where the adjective "Joycean" isn't a compliment. Cast aside a few of the book's trappings, though, and it's easy to get carried away by the story of Omoh, a young black medical student who comes from the warm Caribbean to the cold grey drizzle of Vancouver in winter and never makes it home again. But these other contenders just never let me forget for long enough the clanking gears of conception, construction, ideas. *The Bee Book* was the only one that flew: no safety net or guy wires attached.

**Jack Hodgins:** No one will accuse these finalists of lacking courage or imagination. Here we have pages divided for three voices narrating simultaneously, drawings of bees and arresting concrete poems, chapters entitled "A Nonbeginning" and



W.P. Kinsella



"A Nonending," a male writer writing a story about a female writer writing a story about a male character. Always eager to discover examples of risks paying off, I began all these novels with interest. Not all managed to keep that interest to the end, but I finished them all with a feeling of some satisfaction that publishers (especially the small presses) are willing to support

*'Shoeless Joe distinguishes itself not only by the energy of its prose and the entertaining developments of its plot, but also by the way in which it reveals itself to be a story about writing stories, about concerns of the spirit, and about the need for wonder'*

the risks of inventive writers. *Shoeless Joe* distinguishes itself not only by the energy of its prose and the entertaining developments of its plot but also by the way in which it reveals itself to be a story about writing stories, about concerns of the spirit, and about the need for wonder.

Gwendolyn MacEwen: W.P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe* is a wonderfully life-affirming novel that takes countless risks, and gets away with just about everything. A farmer, Ray Kinsella, responds to a magical voice that urges him to build a baseball stadium in his cornfield and await the coming of his hero, Shoeless Joe Jackson. He and other baseball stars from the past turn up, and we learn that "Within the baselines anything can happen. Tides can reverse; oceans can open . . . Colours can change, lives can alter, anything is possible in this gentle, flawless, loving game."

*Shoeless Joe* is a winner for me because it is inventive, unpredictable, and completely entertaining. It says much about the nature of human imagination and the role that magic plays, or should play in our lives. It is a careful blend of poetic description and good story-telling. Part of the fun of this book is knowing that we've all been invited to the game, and it's up to each one of us how much of the spectacle he wants, or dares, to witness.

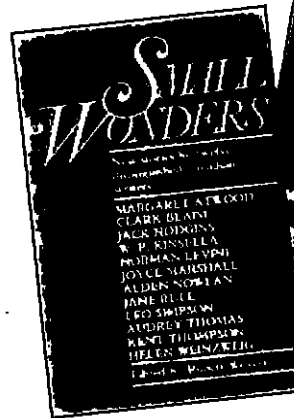
The narrator comments at one point: "It wasn't just the baseball game. I wanted it to be a metaphor for something else: perhaps trust, or freedom, or ritual, or faithfulness, or joy, or any of the other things that baseball can symbolize. I only wanted to make you happy." A great part of Kinsella's intention in this novel is to make the reader happy, and in this he succeeds beyond a doubt.

John Richardson: It's hard to imagine that the six novels short listed in this year's competition represent the best of the new and upcoming Canadian novelists. With the exception of Nessa Rapoport's enjoyable but unexciting *Preparing for Sabbath* and the magical *Shoeless Joe* by W.P. Kinsella, this year's submissions ranged from pedestrian to pretentious to depressingly unreadable.

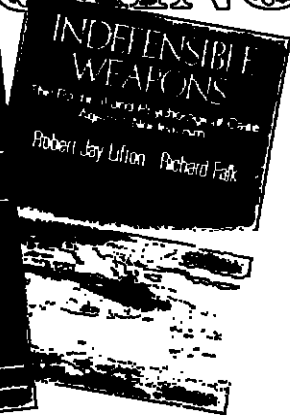
Although Kinsella's novel was mawkish and sentimental in certain passages, the book's ingenuity, humanity, and descriptions of baseball and Ray's love for the game shine through on every page. I found it even more enjoyable the second time around and my vote goes for *Shoeless Joe*.

I just hope that the submissions for 1983 return to the level of competence we've become accustomed to. □

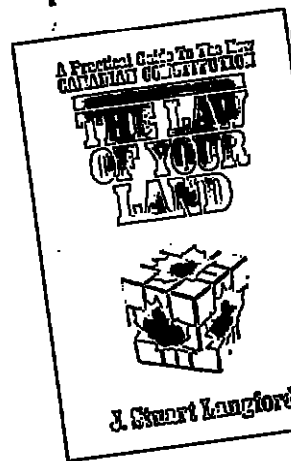
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# BLYTH SPIRIT

Paul Thompson's 10 years at Theatre Passe Muraille helped to generate ventures as varied as the Blyth Summer Festival and Newfoundland's Codco

By PAUL WILSON

IN THE SUMMER OF 1972 Paul Thompson took a team of carefully chosen actors to a small farming community near Clinton, Ont., a few miles from where he had grown up. They lived there for six weeks, helping out with routine farm tasks, talking to people, going to church, attending meetings. Thompson urged them to pay particular attention to speech patterns and gestures, to absorb as much as they could of the texture and rhythm of people's lives. His immediate goal was to make a play based on the community's life together, and then to play it back to them. Each day the actors brought their discoveries into rehearsal, where they would improvise scenes, dialogue and songs, some of which would eventually be worked into the show. Thompson had a long-term strategy as well: he wanted to develop a group of actors who could play with a vocabulary of characters and voices drawn not from movies or television or even classical theatre, but from life.

When the play — *The Farm Show* — was performed in an old barn that August, with the whole community in attendance, the reaction was electric. "Clinton Area Theatre Opening Left Audience Agog, Talking," read the headline in the Goderich *Signal-Star*. Thompson and his actors had somehow managed to "con-

nect": "What you were getting off in that barn," says Thompson, "wasn't narrative tension but the high level of connection between the actors and the audience. And the actors began to understand that they were playing with a great power, while not knowing quite what to do with it."

Looking for that connection and playing with that power has been the recurring motif in Paul Thompson's life.

OF ALL THE WORDS used to describe Paul Thompson — director, docu-dramatist, editor, scenarist, even his own expression, "gluepot" — the most accurate is still the least used: playwright. Thompson is a maker of plays. In the past decade,

he has "wrighted" at least 25 of them, enough to make him a major figure in Canadian theatre, though only a handful have ever been published as scripts. The way he goes about it, in collaboration with actors, writers, and visual artists, is unconventional, and sometimes controversial, and he occasionally fails on his own terms. But he has also provided the country with a lot of exciting and original theatre, theatre that has found its greatest resonance outside the boundaries of the traditional theatrical world.

In his 10 years as artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille

in Toronto — he turned it over to Clarke Rogers a year ago — Thompson's name and methods became synonymous with that "theatre without walls." And his achievements go beyond creating plays: he created new audiences as well. Before he and his actors barnstormed through southwestern Ontario with such early collective works as *The Farm Show, 1837*, and *Them Donnellys*, the rural population of that region thought of theatre (if they thought of it at all) as something distant and foreign to their lives, even though (or perhaps because) Stratford is literally on their doorstep. Today the Blyth Summer Festival, only a few miles from where *The Farm Show* was first performed

and less than an hour's drive from Stratford, draws 40,000 people a year to see original Canadian plays, many of them written, directed, and performed by such Thompson alumni as David Fox, Miles Potter, John Jarvis, Layne Coleman, Janet Amos (who now runs the Blyth Festival), and Ted Johns (who has written many of the Festival's biggest hits). The Festival, founded by James Roy in 1975, is an indirect outgrowth of those early Passe Muraille tours.

Thompson's vision and techniques drew many diversely talented people to Passe Muraille, certainly more than Thompson could ever use in his own shows. Instead he devised a system of doling out small amounts of money to these people



PHOTOGRAPHS, INCLUDING COVER, BY RON WATTS

to do their own shows. This Seed Show program, as it came to be called, turned Passe Muraille into a mini arts council. It brought us such individual shows as *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, written and performed by Passe Muraille alumni John Gray and Eric Peterson, and generated whole new theatre companies as diverse as Newfoundland's Codco and Toronto's Hummer Sisters. In his own work, in the reach and impact of his ideas, Thompson's influence on Canadian theatre has been profound.

At 42, Thompson is stocky and muscular, with a mobile, expressive face, grey beard, and wavy grey hair that not so long ago was a gingery brown. He loves sports and still runs and cycles to keep in shape, so it's no surprise to learn that he was an intercollegiate wrestler for his first two years at the University of Western Ontario, where he studied English and French literature. In his last two years there, as much out of a longing for something resembling a congenial social life as from a love of theatre, he joined the university drama club. "If I'd met wrestlers who were interested in talking about literature or ideas," Thompson says, "I might have ended up a jock."

When he graduated in 1963, with a scholarship to study in Paris, he sat in on classes at the Sorbonne and went to 30 plays a month, initially to attune his ear to good French. But he quickly realized that there was more to theatre than entertainment or diversion. Theatre for him was a public ritual, a way of thinking, a focus for the Parisians' strong and often arrogant sense of themselves as a civilized people.

When Roger Planchon, a radical director from Lyons, came to Paris the following spring with *une saison* of four plays, Thompson's mounting interest in theatre caught fire. It was, he says, his first real exposure to the theatre of the Left, although it appears to have been Planchon's mode of making theatre, the way he used theatre to challenge the city itself, rather than Planchon's ideas as such that excited him. He was thrilled, for example, by Planchon's *débats publics* — open forums on art in which critics, students, intellectuals, and workers all took part. When Thompson learned that Planchon permitted a small number of foreign students to "assist" at his theatre in Lyons, he made inquiries and was told he was welcome to come. He rushed back to the University of Toronto to complete "the fastest M.A. in history," and by the next fall was back in Lyons as a *stagiaire* to learn all he could from Planchon.

For two years Thompson sat in on rehearsals, helped out with translations of Shakespeare, pitched in ideas, talked endlessly about theatre in the bars, and supported himself after a fashion by teaching English to secretaries and taking an occasional walk-on role. During lulls in the season he visited other theatres in Europe. He spent three weeks with the Berliner Ensemble — Brecht's old company — in East Berlin, he went to Prague, and he even spent some time in London, where he found the theatre a disappointment after France, mainly because he missed the strong sense of a director's hand.

Thompson came back to Canada in 1967 with very specific notions about what the director's role should be. "When I started," he says, "I had a Platonic approach to directing. I used to have all the moves blocked in advance, and I knew every dimension of the play. I'd come into rehearsals and feed all this stuff to the actors, and they'd start working on it, but I kept getting disappointed because they could never do it the way I saw it."

After a season running an amateur theatre in Sault Ste. Marie, Thompson worked for two summers as an assistant director at Stratford, where he met actress Anne Anglin, who is now his wife and principal member of his troupe of actor/improvisors. One of the productions he recalls was an elaborate version of Molière's *Don Juan*, which he translated and directed himself; he placed the audience in swivel chairs so they could follow the action taking place all around them.

"Conceptually it was brilliant," Thompson recalls, "but it didn't connect. The actors were good and we got an audience, but in the end it didn't generate half as much enthusiasm as the first rehearsal."

There is something else Thompson remembers: "When I was in Stratford it was like I had to deny the fact that I came from 30 miles away. All the time I was there I visited my roots only once, and it was like going to the ends of the world, longer than the journey back from Lyons to Toronto. And yet the best stories I could tell were from there — my aunts and uncles, the ongoing nature and change of the farm, my maternal grandfather, a Scottish anti-monarchist blacksmith who was also a kind of ward-heeler for the Liberal party. These stories just sat there in my memory as individual qualities and characteristics in time. But still I didn't feel the immediate compulsion to go off and put them in a play. Instead, I felt a kind of misfitting. There I was at Stratford, in a set of forced circumstances where I would get excited about a Cuban play or something and it would get done, but it didn't have an end in itself."

In 1969 Thompson moved to Toronto and joined forces with Theatre Passe Muraille, which had been founded in the basement of Rochdale College by Jim Garrard. There was a base company of 15 people who were all paid the same amount of money (about \$50 a week at the beginning) and were committed to making theatre that was innovative and popular. Thompson found the place crackling with energy and ideas. In addition to himself and Garrard there were Martin Kinch, who was interested primarily in contemporary, urban, "uptown" material, and John Palmer, who, Thompson says, could make a play out of a pack of cigarettes. The artistic rivalry was intense. "There were popularity shoot-outs — or outshoots — where we'd each be going along in our work and then suddenly one of us would have a really popular show." When this happened the balance of authority would inevitably swing toward the director who was bringing in the audiences.

Thompson found himself being drawn more and more to Canadian subject matter and, at the same time, his mode of mounting a play began to loosen up. His first real collective was *Doukhobors* in 1971, which he says was as much about his aunts and uncles as it was about events in the 1930s. Then in the spring of 1972 Carol Bolt approached him with a play called *Buffalo Jump* about the On-to-Ottawa march of Western farmers during the Depression. Thompson quickly realized that Bolt's ideas were more exciting than her script. "So we reinvented the play. We had the actors improvise scenes, and Carol wrote from the improvisations while I tried to key in on what the actors were bringing in and utilize that energy. Somewhere in there I moved away from my Platonic conceptualization of theatre toward the notion of starting with just an impulse or a theme and drawing the rest of the material out of the actors and building the play from that."

Somewhere in there, too, Kinch and Palmer went off to form Toronto Free Theatre with Tom Hendry, Garrard left to teach in British Columbia, and Thompson took his actors into Huron County to make *The Farm Show*. The popularity of that show established the collective as the core of Theatre Passe Muraille for the next six years, until Clarke Rogers arrived as another contending energy, and the popularity shoot-outs (often in the form of creative debates taking place on stage) began once more.

*The Farm Show* was followed by a quick succession of new collectives. Early the following year, in 1973, he had another hit, *1837: The Farmers' Revolt*, centred on William Lyon Mackenzie's abortive rebellion. For this show Thompson and writer Rick Salutin worked together to provide a consistent point of view — in this case political — and a sense of narrative structure. Thompson also organized the first of several versions of *Them Donnellys* and two more community shows,

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*Under the Greywacke* — about silver mining in Cobalt — and *Oil*, about the town of Petrolia, Ont. Back in Toronto he devised a show about immigrants and a collective about sexual mores in the city, called *I Love You, Baby Blue*, which became a runaway hit when the Metropolitan Toronto police tried to close it down. He also staged an unusual experimental piece called *The Canadian Hero Series #1: Gabriel Dumont*, about the Métis uprising in Batoche in 1885. The play was improvised around a series of paintings (Thompson called it a "painted script") commissioned from John Boyle, whose work Thompson greatly admires.

Whether or not he uses the resources of other writers or painters, Thompson's playwrighting process is centred on actors. He chooses them with care, usually on the basis of their enthusiasm, their affinity for the material, and their ability to improvise. He rarely tells them in advance what he wants. He gives them the general subject and then lets them do their own research and come into rehearsal with the information, impressions, and obsessions they have gathered. Then they "jam" or improvise situations and dialogue while Thompson watches, intent and silent, sometimes for hours or even days on end, waiting for that glint of a good idea. At this stage the play has no central characters, no theme, no form — all that comes later, as the strengths of what the actors have brought in become clear. And in every rehearsal the actors come up against something difficult, which usually ends up being the core of the show.

Linda Griffiths, one of Thompson's second-generation actors, recalls one such impasse while rehearsing *Les maudits anglais*, a play they devised in Montreal in 1978 and performed in French. "We'd been working on one crucial scene in which I played an Anglo journalist trying to explain the English-Canadian position to a separatist. I'd tried everything — intellectual, political, and economic arguments — and nothing was working dramatically. Suddenly Thompson, who'd been sitting quietly at the back of the theatre all this time, said 'I think you're on the verge of something but you're not going there.' That's all he said. And I just cracked right down the middle and came out with this tremendous emotion, one I didn't even know I felt, and I stood there with my arms outstretched and my head back, crying out this image of a highway stretching right across the country. And that was the scene. When we did the show it shocked and moved Quebec audiences — they had no idea we could be as emotional about our patriotism as they are."

Somewhere in the mid-1970s Thompson began to move away from the broad canvases of his earlier shows and started focusing on events and issues through individuals in particular situations, aiming for more depth of character and complexity of narration. *The Horsburgh Scandal* (1976) dealt with a United Church minister in Chatham, Ont., who had gone to prison on a morals charge. In 1977 Thompson and his actors revisited the West, where they had taken the extremely influential *West Show* two years before, to devise a play called *Far As the Eye Can See*, about an immigrant family on the farm. Here Thompson used novelist Rudy Wiebe to fashion a script from the material generated by the actors in rehearsal. In the summer of 1976, with Bruce Kidd as a consultant, Thompson did a show about famous Canadian athletes and played it in the Olympic Village during the games. The following summer he returned to his home territory to do a play called *Shakespeare for Fun and Profit*, a comedy dealing with that vast gap between the Stratford Festival and the small southwestern Ontario towns that surround it.

When Thompson mounted a luscious stage version of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* in 1980, he departed from his usual approach by using a script written beforehand by Ondaatje. Thompson had a very specific aim in mind: "A lot of the excitement in working with actors now is

giving them better words to play with," he says. "The thing is, we're caught in a dilemma, which is that we live in an inarticulate society, where irony becomes the highest form of art possible — everything else is subtext. We came to the limits of what we could do by imitating people, and we had to go somewhere else. By using Ondaatje's words we start from a higher power point the next time we start using our own, because we've got used to playing with those rhythms. *Maggie and Pierre* has some passages with poetic intent, and I'm sure that's helped by our having submerged ourselves in Ondaatje for a while."

*Maggie and Pierre*, Thompson's tribute to the nation's first (broken) family, written and performed by Linda Griffiths using the classic Thompson techniques, was a huge success. Griffiths began by dancing with Pierre Trudeau at the Governor General's ball and ended by playing both Trudeau and his wife to large audiences right across the country. One of Thompson's favourite memories is of overhearing a man who had evidently not seen the show himself explain to some friends outside Toronto's Royal Alexandra Theatre what *Maggie and Pierre* was all about. Once again, he felt he had managed to connect with something in the national imagination.

Thompson's last three productions as artistic director of Passe Muraille failed to make this connection for several reasons. In *The Torontonians* and Rick Salutin's *Nathan Cohen: A Review*, Thompson returned to themes he had touched on before, but the plays lacked the sharp edge of excitement and discovery that had fired his earlier work. The third, *Studhorse Man* (based on Robert Kroetsch's novel) fared no better with audiences but was far more interesting and audacious an experiment. Here the language itself was the star. The actors spoke the tangled and raunchy lingo that is Kroetsch's trademark, but it was all improvised. For research, Thompson said, "the actors took a bath in Kroetsch, and the kind of word-delight that came out of that was a real gift. I think we have to put more of that element into theatre, because I don't think we have any plays in this country yet equivalent to the top writing in fiction or poetry."

When Thompson resigned from Theatre Passe Muraille it was partly because the balance of authority within the organization had swung toward Rogers, who had come in with a script-centred approach. But it was also because Thompson felt stymied. "As long as I was carting along the baggage of the theatre, it was getting more and more complicated to develop the collective in line with the givens we started with, the givens being: discovering ourselves, the exploration of the Canadian psyche in theatre terms, and the translation of that into some kind of popular presentational form. I wanted to take a non-centre position, to find out where it should go, so I could surprise by parachuting down from the gondola or coming around the left wing, rather than having to carry the puck down the centre."

THOMPSON IS STILL ON Passe Muraille's payroll, and is still very bound up in it as an institution. Program notes sometimes list him as "senator," sometimes as "scout." But most of all, to continue the hockey metaphor, he is a free agent.

One of the themes to which Thompson will undoubtedly return is Toronto itself, a city that fascinates and infuriates him. He is impatient with Toronto's lack of self-confidence, and perhaps for that reason is thinking of a play about Harold Ballard and the Maple Leafs in which the Leafs' decline becomes a symbol of the city's soul. "One thing that makes me very angry is Toronto's downright refusal to accept a leadership role vis-à-vis the rest of the country, and to start taking an interest in what's going on out there. Now this could be tied up with the problem of nobody coming up with a strong enough self-definition. New Yorkers have lots of films and plays to tell them who they are, and that's a good example of where art is


working. Art creates lies and half-truths and full truths and presents real choices to be made. One of the difficulties in Toronto coming of age and inheriting the fortune that's waiting for it has to do with recognizing enough of those senses of itself."

Since stepping down, Thompson has staged another collective (he calls them "collaboratives" now) with Linda Griffiths and a mixed cast of native and white actors. Called *Jessica*, the play is based loosely on Maria Campbell's autobiography, *Halfbreed*, and Maria herself was directly involved in the "wrighting" process. *Jessica* explores the character of a Métis woman who is torn apart by the pull of two civilizations in which she lives, and who is ultimately made whole again by the spirit world of her Indian grandmother. Thompson ran the play last fall in Saskatoon's 25th Street Theatre, in the heart of Métis territory.

*Jessica* represents both a return to Thompson's older concerns and a new departure. It is the first of his plays to have an overt metaphysical dimension, and it's an attempt to come to terms with magic, a word that Thompson uses frequently when talking about what excites him. "What I mean by magic is a recognition that there are a number of forces shaping and surrounding people and events, forces that we're normally not aware of most of the time. We live in this amazing sponge of a society that can swallow up great events like the rebellion of 1885, or the Quebec thing, and reduce them to nothing more than ripples in the great pond of Canadian normalcy. And you keep wanting to show that things really do happen here, and they happen on all kinds of levels. There are magic places here, places like the West where the ethos is very alive. And theatre is a way of plugging into that aliveness, of connecting with it and showing it and saying, 'Look at what else is happening! Look at these things around here! Maybe they're real.' □

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# Hearts of the West

From docu-dramas to 'collective' performances,  
the year's theatre publications are  
dominated by scripts from Western Canada

By RICHARD PLANT

FOR DECADES traditional dramatic modes have dominated Canadian theatre. Challenging experiments that might have extended drama's conventional boundaries — such as the agit-prop "workers' plays" of the 1930s and Herman Voaden's "symphonic expressionism" — were only small voices lost in the wilderness. But the plays published in 1982 demonstrate the innovative nature of recent theatrical activity. Docu-dramas and scripts derived through a collective process make up a large proportion of the year's most significant publications — which may indicate that these once-exotic modes have themselves become conventional. A second tradition has also been broken. Eastern Canada has long been the most active centre of Canadian theatre. This year's imprints — and there are far too many to cover in this survey — reflect the large contribution made to the nation's theatrical mosaic by the western provinces.

Talonbooks, the enterprising Vancouver house that for some years has offered the best of Canadian drama in English, has finally published John Gray's exceedingly popular (except in New York) *Billy Bishop Goes to War*. In an entertaining introduction Gray comments with gay abandon on matters ranging from the play's genesis and its Canadian tours through the foibles of Canadian theatre and *Billy's* New York run. Although the play's readers may be troubled by the inexplicable between-acts change in Bishop, from a down-home boy to a cold killer who sublimates his fears into a lethal carelessness, they will be caught up by its wit and insight — particularly by the horrible discovery Bishop makes as he watches two German flyers fall without parachutes from the aircraft he has just destroyed.

What readers may miss most in the *Billy Bishop* script is the virtuoso performance that brought it to life on the stage. That same vitality is missing from the printed docu-dramas and collective plays, which are, first of all, performance pieces. Paper Wheat (Western

Producer Prairie Books) is a case in point. Who can forget the blanket-folding scene that on stage so aptly captured the hardships faced by a Saskatchewan farmer and his wife, or the juggling act that cleverly represented the scanty financial rewards for farmers? Although the introduction goes a long way toward creating the necessary ambience, the script is likely to remain one-dimensional, even though it represents one of the most popular Canadian plays.

Also from the Prairies comes an excellent anthology, *Showing West: Three Prairie Docu-Dramas*, volume five of NeWest Press's series, admirably edited by Diane Bessai. Again, as in *Prairie Performance* and *Blood Relations and Other Plays* last year, Bessai provides an informative preface that leaves us wanting a longer piece of her incisive prose. The collection contains *The West Show*, which was put together in Saskatoon by Paul Thompson and Theatre Passe Muraille in 1975. Thompson also helped to shape Rudy Wiebe's *Far As the Eye Can See*, the second script of the three. Any play that contains such unique characters as Tom Sukanen, a visionary/madman who builds a steel-hulled ark on the prairie in order to transport wheat to starving people in his native Finland, or Sam Reimer, who heeds God's call to stop the war in Vietnam (Reimer records it on tape, though only he and the audience can hear it), is bound to provide imaginative theatre.

The third play, Rex Deverell's *Medicare!*, is a purer docu-drama, built on dialogue and incidents taken from the records of the battle to establish medicare in Saskatchewan. It is also the dullest on paper, to the point that readers will likely wonder about its success on the stage. Deverell's *Black Powder* (Coteau) also uses a documentary form in re-creating the Estevan coal-miners' strike in 1931, and suffers from a similar lifelessness when abstracted from the stage.

If the preponderance of titles has not convinced you of a power in the West,

there are more; they come largely from the past, and dispel any idea that the western theatrical phenomenon is only a recent one. Enid Delgatty Rutland has edited *The Collected Plays of Gwen Pharis Ringwood* (Borealis Press), which contains a whopping 25 dramas, as well as a foreword by Margaret Laurence and a preface by George Ryga, bibliography, and bio note. Suffice it to say that among the varied works are Ringwood's powerful 1930s classic, *Still Stands the House*, as well as her recent *Mirage*, which celebrates in an epic way the history of prairie settlement.

*Mirage* is also printed in *New Canadian Drama - 2* (Borealis Press) edited by Patrick O'Neill. But surprise, surprise, the other two plays in the volume are not from the West. *The Dollar Woman*, by Alden Nowlan and Walter Learning, uses Atlantic history to fashion an interesting drama about the "poor auctions" in a New Brunswick parish at the turn of the century. *Pogie*, by Chris Heide and Al Macdonald, is a weak attempt to explore the world of the unemployed within a tavern, cabaret-style.

Another unconventional play is *No Big Deal* (Exile Editions), written by the theatre group of Quebec's Archambault prison. It too derives from a collective process, and shows a documentary influence in its episodic structure and desire to set history right. At the same time, it makes a powerful, raw appeal for humane treatment of prisoners, and presents a convincing picture of the isolation, fears, and suffocation that inmates experience. It was banned in the prison, which suggests that at least some truth is on the inmates' side, but the play's vicious attacks on penal authorities, drawn in grotesque caricatures, are likely to alienate, rather than amuse most readers.

Unconventional in the sense that they are a departure from 1970s neo-naturalism (as well as the collective and docu-dramas), the plays in *Popular Performance Plays of Canada, Volume 2* (Simon & Pierre) illustrate the prolifera-

tion of commercially oriented scripts in recent years. *Mayonnaise*, John Ibbotson's first play, is a light situation comedy with some very humorous dialogue. But the play is short, and likely to leave a reader feeling that the situation (or the author's inventiveness) has not been large enough to sustain a full-length piece. Peter Colley's *You'll Get Used to It: The War Show*, while entertaining, will undoubtedly remind readers of Joan Littlewood's *Oh What a Lovely War!* — even though these soldiers are Canadian. The first act captures a manic frivolity that may accurately represent a natural escape from the tensions of war; the second act takes a more serious look at death in battle. But the play's dramatic growth and effect are undercut by the staccato of too many gratuitous one-liners. The third script in the anthology, Sandra Dempsey's *D'arcy*, a one-man show about D'arcy McGee, is wholly ignorable. Two children's plays, *Happy Holly/Christmas Cards*, by Beth NicMester, round out the collection.

Macmillan, undoubtedly hoping to capitalize on the popularity of the author, has published five plays in *Dramatic W.O. Mitchell*. Each contains an interesting idea that, unfortunately, is allowed to remain underdeveloped. *The Devil's Instrument*, for example, is

about a Hutterite youth who rebels against his religion — a topic (centred this time on a Mennonite youth) that has recently been given much more satisfying treatment in Anne Chislett's *Quiet in the Land*. Mitchell's light, wry humour is on display in *The Black Bonspiel of Wullie MacCrimmon*, and his penchant for sentimentality in *The Kite*. In all, these plays, despite their popularity on the stage, do not stand up well to critical scrutiny.

Among the many plays offered by Playwrights Canada are a reprint of Munro Scott's engaging *Wu-feng* and Larry Fineberg's *Montreal*, which was staged by a splendid cast during the Toronto Theatre Festival in 1981. The script let them down, and it has not improved in this printing. Effective moments of clever dialogue, satire mixed with seriousness, are overwhelmed by a sophomoric quality in the thought and writing, as well as by a convoluted plot. Ted Johns's *The Death of the Donnellys* is yet another play on the Biddulph murders. But Johns offers a different approach from either James Reaney or Peter Colley in their *Donnellys* plays — and deserves a bit of attention for it. Rene Aloma's Cuban immigrant/exile play, *A Little Something to Ease the Pain*, while it speaks largely to a specific

audience, is worth a look, as is Aviva Ravel's *Second Chance*, a light-hearted romp through middle-aged extra-marital affairs. The saccharine ending would make good fun for a summer theatre.

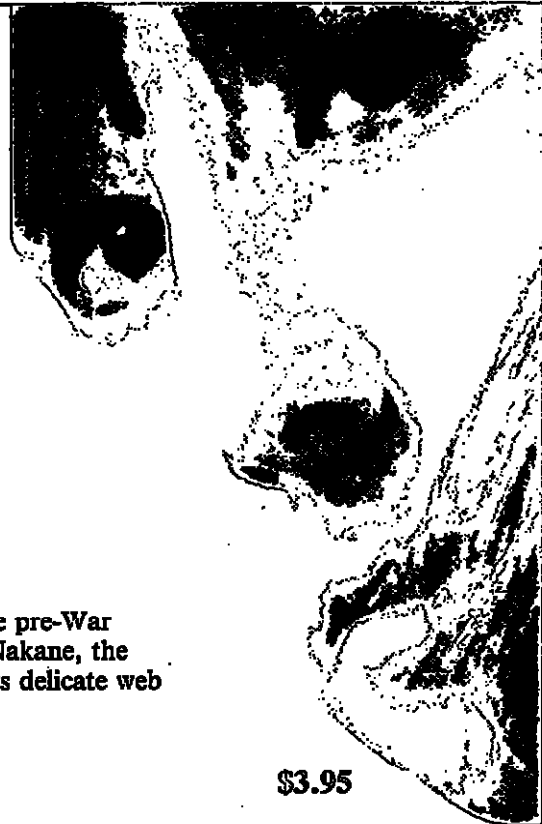
One of the most challenging publications of the year is *Entrails* (Coach House Press), a collection of 26 "dramatic objects" by the Quebec poet Claude Gauvreau, who has become a cult figure since his death in 1971. Unorthodox to the point of being revolutionary, these pieces provide rich poetic imagery and surrealistic effects that will create an exciting confusion for the reader. Another French-language play, Denise Boucher's controversial *The Fairies Are Thirsty* (*Les fées ont soif*), has recently been translated and published by Talonbooks.

The variety of the drama is also reflected by the books published about the theatre. In *The Work: Conversations with English Canadian Playwrights* (Coach House Press) Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman have compiled interviews with 26 leading dramatists whose comments shed much light on their own work and Canadian theatre in general. And Adrian Pecknold's textbook, *Mime: The Step Beyond Words* (NC Press), outlines the fundamentals of the art and exercises for the student to

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use in developing his skills. There is also a section of mime pieces, many of which Pecknold has used in his own performances.

Two equally welcome books, these also are from the West, are scholarly studies in theatre history. John Orrell's enjoyable *Fallen Empires: The Lost Theatres of Edmonton 1881-1914* (NeWest Press), reads well, and is full of informative detail. Chad Evans has an even larger study in *Frontier Theatre* (Sono Nis Press), a handsomely printed history of theatre in the Canadian far west and Alaska.

Finally, lest everyone get an impression that the theatre world is simply rosy, and publishing not suffering from economic cutbacks, I would do well to point out that the invaluable *Canadian Theatre Review*, founded in 1974 by Don Rubin at York University, has had to suspend its next issue. Although the editors have managed to publish their invaluable *Canada On Stage: CTR Yearbook 1991-02*, CTR's book publishing program may also be suspended, and unless financial support is found, the whole thing may disappear. An active theatre remains active and healthy only when it is supported by a forum that devotes critical attention and encouragement to its doings. We must not let CTR fold, because it has been, and should continue to be, a large part of that forum. □

## REVIEW

# Something missing

By ALBERTO MANGUEL

The Plays, Volume 4, by Edward Albee, Atheneum (McClelland & Stewart), 150 pages, \$15.95 paper (ISBN 0 689 70616 2).

AFTER THE CRASHING success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 1962, Edward Albee (aged 34) turned his hand to adapting a novella by Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. Other adaptations followed: in 1965 *Malcolm*, from the novel by James Purdy, and in 1967 *Everything in the Garden*, from the play by Giles Cooper. The three have now been collected in volume four of the Atheneum edition of his plays. To the

reader (not the playgoer) they present a curious problem.

What are we reading when we read a play? Devoid of the actors' voices, of the movements, of the setting, of the framework of the theatre, we are in effect reading the basic instructions for a performance yet to be set up. These instructions (speeches and stage directions) carry a different stress on the page than on the stage; instead of a continuous flow of human voice and action, a play on paper stops time, allows us to go back, reread a passage, shift the stress from the moment of surprise to the moment of comprehension. If any, the pleasure of reading a play — as opposed to seeing it — comes either from reading it as poetry or prose, or from being the director of our own amateur production.

In some of Albee's plays — in *A Delicate Balance* and *Tiny Alice*, for example — the reader is rewarded by vigorous and beautiful passages. (In the theatre these same passages can either touch or offend the public, depending on the skilled voice of a Katharine Hepburn or the shrill hysterics of an aged Elizabeth Taylor.) The three adapted plays in the volume here contain no such passage. They are starker; they depend on movement and the tone of words rather than on the words themselves. The reader needs to stage them.

*Everything in the Garden* (in Albee's version; I am not familiar with Giles Cooper's play) is a farce. In a suburban estate someone discovers that all his neighbours are involved in the planning of a bordello — madam and all — and is murdered in the interest of decent silence. *Malcolm* follows Purdy's picaresque novel very closely. It tells of an adolescent boy in a search for his father through bizarre schools of early sex up to an early grave. *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, like *Malcolm*, sticks close to Carson McCullers' poetic story about Miss Amelia's dark love affair set in the American South.

I haven't seen any of these plays on stage, but the possibilities they offer seem to be endless. *Everything in the Garden* can be read to the rhythm of slapstick comedy, metallic pianos chinking by the light of silent movies. *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* flows firm and straightforward on the verge of realism, begging for actors who invent and not live their fictional parts. *Malcolm* cries out to be staged. It suggests quick changing sceneries, subtle background characters, inventive casting for those love-thirsty whores and elderly ladies and gentlemen, above all for the almost too naive Malcolm himself, who "didn't have the stuff." Albee has taken Purdy's nightmarish story and kept the

precise, deliberate language, preparing it for the stage with almost no trimmings, ready for a director with a flair for the grotesque.

For 25 years now (since *The Zoo Story* in 1958) Edward Albee has written plays that, each in its own way, enlarge the possibilities of the stage, using traditional methods to create new forms (classic tragedy in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, medieval mystery plays in *Tiny Alice*, rhetoric theatre in *Box*). The adapted plays probably result in spectacles just as remarkable, but this cannot be judged by simply reading them. All three need another dimension, they need to be seen — and that is a requirement the printed page cannot provide. □

## REVIEW

# Monsieur Universe

By ANDREW BORKOWSKI

Michel Tremblay, by Renate Usmiani, Douglas & McIntyre, 177 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 88894 304 0).

THE STATE OF Canadian drama criticism is such that the appearance of any book on any playwright is cause enough for celebration. The end of the 1970s marked the culmination of a period of furious literary activity on Canadian stages. Now that that energy has subsided, it's time for the academics to break out of the reticence they have maintained toward the theatre community. Our fledgling dramatic tradition is in need of the definition and legitimacy that can only be achieved through informed criticism.

Renate Usmiani's book is a step in the right direction. It's the first full-length treatment of Tremblay's work to appear in English. As though conscious of her pioneering role, Usmiani has attempted to provide as broad an introduction to her subject as possible. The opening chapters furnish the reader with a solid grounding in the development of the theatre in Quebec. They also include a survey of the province's social and cultural history as well as a delightful discourse on the vagaries of *joual*. The

# The king and I

By KEITH GAREBIAN

*Every Inch a Lear*, by Maurice Good, Sono Nis Press, illustrated, 230 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919203 26 4).

WE DON'T HAVE a rehearsal journal for the very first production of *King Lear*, so we won't know if Shakespeare and company had Stonehenge touches to the production or had Britons running around in woad. Did the first stage Lear start his crawling descent into the grave in Scene One or later? Did he compete *against* the storm on the heath, rage *with* it, or suffer *under* it? How did the death of Lear feel in the Globe Playhouse? Had there been a recorder in those times of the calibre of Maurice Good, we would have had, I am sure, many intriguing answers without in the least losing any of the mystery of the play.

Good's backstage view of the famous 1979 Stratford production by Robin Phillips is a compendium of contrasts — offering technical minutiae, quiet but eager reflections on the play and its director, and a fund of anecdotes, jokes, rehearsal photographs by Jane Edmonds, production stills by Robert C. Ragsdale, and cartoons by Peter Ustinov worthy of *Punch*. This is no gossip trove or glitzy showbiz souvenir, but a painstakingly rich logbook of theatrical exploration and discovery in the general tradition of *Stanislavsky Rehearses Othello*, William Redfield's *Letters From an Actor* (about Burton's Broadway Hamlet), Kenneth Tynan's book on Olivier's *Othello*, and Grigori Kozintsev's diary for his 1972 film of *Lear*.

Good's book, however, is unique in that it is not the product of a critic or director; nor is it strictly the autobiographical memories of a production-player. Although an understudy to Ustinov, Good, who never had a chance to substitute during the Stratford run, is no apprentice. Having worked at the Dublin Gate, Abbey, Old Vic, and Oxford Playhouse Company, he has been in *Lear* on three different occasions, and has seen the *Lears* of Wolfitt, McMaster, Gielgud, Hordern, and Scofield. As a member of the Stratford Company (and a winner of the Tyrone Guthrie Award, which helped to pay expenses for this

book), he has an actor's intuition, insight, knowledge, and spirit, and his book is "a special gift" not only for actors or those who have liked or detested Phillips's production, but especially for those "who prefer to stay at home and read the play."

In his introduction Ustinov praises Good for his "fine Irish mind," and while there is little distinctively Irish about *Every Inch a Lear*, the book is filled with "loving yet mordant comment" on a rare theatrical event, when a director of genius, surrounded by actors and actresses "whose generosity matched their inspiration," submitted one of Shakespeare's greatest plays to a profound re-interpretation.

The opening sections for this seven-and-a-half-week rehearsal journal focus chiefly on Ustinov's personality and Phillips's style. Like a latter-day Socrates pretending ignorance (but with greater humour and whimsy), Phillips gathers his company in a questioning. His imaginative games and exercises lead to a disavowal of rigid preconceptions; instead there is the luxury of "sniffing" around. The starched, corseted costumes (reminiscent of Phiz) and claustrophobic set are already designed by Daphne Dare, but little else is beyond the speculative stage.

Phillips provides photographs, cartoons, and ideas to suggest the look and feel of the production (reminiscent of Thomas Hardy), but insists that he still doesn't know what the play is about. He encourages the cast to find their own voices for the roles, and while keeping an open mind to most things, rejects at once "the passé postures of tragic bravura," frequently cautioning his actors not to force conviction or characterization, and to avoid emotionalism. He rings a handbell when an actor is guilty of empty conventionalism, and he probes with unrelenting curiosity. "Why do you think they do it?" he asks of the blinding of Gloucester. He helps Rodger Barton's Poor Tom identify sex as the Foul Fiend that so troubles him. He urges Marti Maraden's Regan and Tom Wood's Oswald to play a scene as "Southern . . . just post-Dallas," in order to achieve a chilling, very calculative menace, "a barely throttled-back hysteria lurking in every syllable."

There is much of what Hugh Hood would call "sportive play of the imagination" in both Phillips and his star, but whereas Ustinov's gaiety is a frolic of mimicry and wordplay (especially with William Hutt), Phillips's jests are more cognizant of practical limits to their purpose. We suspect that even Phillips's most imaginative "improvs" are meant to extend his sense of work as "a conspiratorial collaboration."

author then proceeds with a thorough analysis of Tremblay's major works.

The task of analysis is a formidable one. Tremblay is one of the few Canadian playwrights to have breathed life into the nationalist dictum that universality can be attained only through regionality. His plays resonate on every level of meaning. Usmiani ascribes this resonance to the playwright's knack for synthesizing an eclectic matrix of influences into dynamic entities of his own.

The variety of Tremblay's influences makes the process of synthesis difficult to trace. Usmiani does so with remarkable agility. On matters of form, she neatly guides us through a maze of Greek, American, Brechtian, absurdist, and operatic influences. She duplicates this feat in relation to Tremblay's content, scrutinizing the derivations of his themes on their literal, socio-political, and metaphysical levels.

The detective work pays off. By stressing Tremblay's technical agility, and his sensitivity to universal issues, Usmiani succeeds in elevating his work beyond the political context in which so much Tremblay criticism has heretofore mired itself. She establishes her subject as an international playwright of the first rank.

But there is one question this otherwise comprehensive work does not answer: what does this *québécois* playwright have to say to us, his English-Canadian audience? I feel a twinge of irony whenever I accord Tremblay, an avowed separatist, the status of "our" finest playwright. I believe that much of what Tremblay has to say about Québec society has its applications in English Canada. Usmiani appears to take these applications for granted, but I don't think the average Canadian reader does. A few pages dealing with the issue of



Tremblay's national relevance were called for, but I'll rest content with this book's accomplishments — and wait for the next one. □

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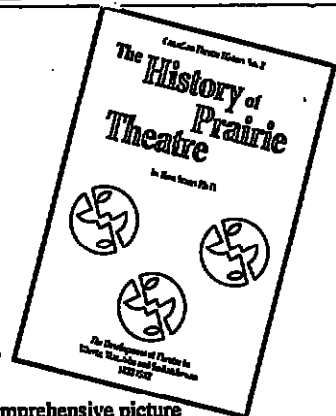
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"Vontz Murr, Plizz," he requests in mock-Teutonic accent, and his "troopies" begin their nth rehearsal without demur. The play gradually inflates like a huge, grand balloon, and becomes poignantly affecting as Ustinov and Phillips carry us into Lear's mind, which erodes with suffering. The mid-Victorian costumes bring it closer to us, and the humanized approach makes it contemporary in feeling.

Good's book, despite its typos, misspellings, occasionally awkward syntax, and flood of minutiae that sometimes sodden the main design, lets us ascend to the top of documentary achievement. This is not a fawning or hyperbolic book. It gives generous attention to all the supporting players, and it always respects the private self-penetrations that actors perform in rehearsal. Errors are recorded without malice and leapthroughs celebrated with *esprit de corps*. There are many who are better stylists than Maurice Good. There are many with firmer judgement. But I doubt that there has been a more acute or continuously concentrated demonstration of the sheer navy work and delicacy of detail that contribute to a great theatrical production. □

## REVIEW

# Primal screen

By GERALD PRATLEY

**Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretative History of the National Film Board**, by D.B. Jones, Deneau Publishers, illustrated, 240 pages, \$21.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919096 21 2).

WRITING ABOUT the National Film Board and the films it makes has always been difficult, for two primary reasons: one, reviewing its films is a full-time job, because, working mainly in the short form, it makes so many of them; and two, what goes on behind the scenes in the making of these films does so in an atmosphere of considerable secrecy, as is common with most government departments. Add to that the fact that newspapers, magazines, and television are not interested in reviewing short films; only when the NFB makes a great effort to arrange press showings for a film about to get a rare special showing on television or in a cinema do the media respond. And so the NFB has carried on for 43 years. The older it becomes, the harder it is to detail its working procedures and analyze its films.

Now, in the aftermath of the Applebert report — which would disband the NFB — comes this valuable book, which takes a shot at examining the battered

board without firing on it anew. The author is an American, a professor of communications at Drexel University in Philadelphia, who came to admire the NFB and over a period of 10 years wrote this study. It is obvious from his somewhat complicated introduction, in which he worries over the definition of history, that he, too, was overwhelmed by the work and methods of the board, and throughout the following chapters, in spite of some brave attempts at order, his text often becomes confusing, long-winded, repetitive, and tedious. But these are, after all, the qualities to be expected these days from academics (particularly in film), and the results of such labour are dutifully labelled as being scholarly.

Within this mass are many apt, revealing, and well-written observations, including critiques of certain films and the chapter on the Challenge for Change series. Among the disappointments are the cavalier manner in which the board's feature-length films are brushed aside; the amount of space given to the 20 or so war horses (*Corral*, *City of Gold*, *Paul Tomkowicz* etc.), to the exclusion of many other very fine documentaries among the 20,000 titles that cry out to be rediscovered; and the amount of attention given to some film-makers to the exclusion of others. In trying not to write a book that ends up being a list of names and titles, the author has left out much that a study such as this should have included.

In the main this is a much-deserved tribute to the NFB. Jones clearly shows how difficult it has been for the board to survive the bureaucracy imposed upon it while enjoying the benefits of state sponsorship and attempting to cope with the

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unpredictable nature of film-making and the artistic temperaments of those involved. He is sympathetic, but does not hesitate to point out that the board has been the cause of many of its own misfortunes.

The book's great strength, however, is the striking manner in which Jones has read and studied the NFB's founding commissioner, John Grierson, has examined his statements about documentary and its relation to politics and society, and shown convincingly how relevant his theories and observations have been throughout the years that followed his departure. Grierson, once again, remains the pre-eminent figure in the world of interpretative cinema. □

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## REVIEW

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# Of magnums and opera

By M.B. THOMPSON

**Lotfi Mansouri: An Operatic Life**, by Lotfi Mansouri with Aviva Layton, Stoddart, 120 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7737 2007 3).

**Eernsteln**, by Paul Robinson, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 152 pages, \$14.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919630 11 1).

"THIS CITY IS growing. It is a community on the verge of an explosion." Vienna? London? Paris? Tehran? Population? Race riots? Stock markets? Software?

Nope. Toronto. Opera. Now.

So says Lotfi Mansouri, general director for the past seven or so years of the Canadian Opera Company, that varicoloured elephant quartered in the distinctly white and elephantine mausoleum known as the O'Keefe Centre. Iranian-born American citizen Mansouri, who succeeded the founding father of the company Dr. Herman Geiger-Torel, is as qualified as anyone to know, responsible as he is for the COC's excellent financial and spotty artistic achievement during his septennate as overlord.

This coffee-table, black-and-white flamingo is, as its subtitle fesses up, his "operatic life," seemingly as dictated to Aviva Layton, 120 slight pages including about 50 of photographs and another dozen of pauses between chapters. Man-

souri comes across as a rather jovial chap who has lots of rattling good thrills and spills ("What a shambles!" "Right in the middle of the performance, I wet my pants!") in the international and Canadian worlds of opera, on intimate terms with all sorts of eminent figures, not averse now and again to a spot of earthy naughtiness ("The wife of the Finance Minister was in this one too, but all she had to do was show her legs, thank goodness"), firm about his likes and dislikes of singers, works, and ways of the world.

That life began in a privileged corner of pre-Khomeini Iran, where this incipient Farsi *vendu* took, in adolescence, to popular American music "like a duck to water." Mansouri got himself to California, to singing and directing in musicals and opera, to American citizenship and an American wife, then to Zürich whence he was plucked by Geiger-Torel and the COC's Search Committee chairman Rod Anderson (to whom he pays warm and sincere tribute) to the rebuilding job in Toronto.

Mansouri is a funny mixture, in these pages, of hard professional knowhow and half-baked silliness. He harps throughout on a "kismet," which he claims has guided him at critical junctures down the right primrose paths, drops names egregiously all over his book ("I remember, for instance, that Schoenberg's daughter was a classmate of mine"), offers political gaucheries ("The Soviets sat back, manipulated everything and let the Poles slug it out with the Poles"), and misspells the names of people like Max Reinhardt.

He cannot help feeling that "the sense that people are waiting for you to fail seems to be a peculiarly Canadian trait." He supplies voyeurs with the usual menu of yummys: Klemperer in a whorehouse, Klemperer with his hand right up a comprimario's skirt, awful Renata Scotto, awfuller Franco Bonisolli ("probably the most difficult singer I have ever worked with"), wonderful Joan Sutherland, wonderfuller Maureen Forrester, awful-wonderful Renata Tebaldi, such a colourful lot.

By far the most cogent chapter is the brief one on his work at Toronto, which rightly emphasizes the excellent COC Ensemble project, the Harbourfront Summer Festivals, the school tours with "capsule" *Barbers* and *Butterflies*. Unfortunately the other side of this bustling pioneer energy is trendy drivell equating *Evita* and *JC Superstar* with *Boheme* and *Wozzeck* ("We have baroque opera, rococo opera and now we have rock opera"). Still, Canadian opera owes Lotfi Mansouri a great deal, and this book reminds us what.

The Canadian connection with *Berns-*

*tein* is limited to its authorship and publisher, Paul Robinson being music director of CJRT-FM and author of the other three books in this larcenously overpriced series (Furtwängler forthcoming) on Karajan, Stokowski, and Solti. We have a sketchy bio followed by an assessment of Bernstein's achievement as maestro (mostly on records), and a comprehensive discography.

Fans could argue endlessly about Robinson's value judgements — presumably a main aim of the volume — of Bernstein as interpreter, composer, educator, popularizer, and leading proponent of radical chic. The osmotic debt to the Vienna Philharmonic is well emphasized.

*Bernstein* originated as a series of CJRT programs and, as Robinson acknowledges, loses a little in the transcription. It's a handy reference guide and a useful beginner's introduction, drably though adequately written and, as already noted, alarmingly expensive for so small a monograph. □

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## REVIEW

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# Climactic order

By I.M. OWEN

**A Sound Like Laughter**, by David Helwig, Stoddart, 230 pages, \$15.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7737 2010 3).

WITH THIS BOOK David Helwig completes his Kingston tetralogy, which began in 1976 with *The Glass Knight*. *A Sound Like Laughter* bridges the gap between *Jennifer* (1979) and *It Is Always Summer*, which appeared last year. Now that it's possible to read the series straight through, in sequence, it proves to hold together surprisingly well; surprisingly in view of a couple of handicaps Helwig gave himself. One of these is that the series got off to a false start, I can't help thinking, by the intrusion into *The Glass Knight* of the October Crisis and the proclamation of the War Measures Act. It's sad how often a generous political passion will make an artist lose his artistic judgement — as in some of Shelley's political verse ("Men of England, wherefore plough/For the lords who lay you low?) or Beethoven's unintentionally comic "Wellington's

Victory." What this does to *The Glass Knight* is to make it veer between a promising novel and a didactic political pamphlet.

But the more serious handicap, this one deliberately imposed on himself by Helwig, is that Robert Mallen, the main character of the tetralogy, is an unappealing dry stick: of a man, for whom it's hard to feel much sympathy. *The Glass Knight* is about Robert's futile affair with Elizabeth Ross, who is repelled by men. *It Is Always Summer* shows the aftermath of this. 10 years later, when Elizabeth, now a distinguished poet, returns from England and her lesbian lover and meets Robert again. It's an achievement to have made one readable and one compelling book out of this dispiriting story, by providing a full cast of living characters to surround the pallid pair.

In the two middle books, *Jennifer* (which is about Robert's ex-wife) and the present one, Robert is relegated to the supporting cast. *A Sound Like Laughter* is dominated by new figures: Marianne Jones, another ex-wife looking for a new mate; Michael Remnant, a petty crook looking for a way to stay out of jail; and Anne Clarkson, a Queen's University student whose twin goals are to achieve orgasm and to gain admission to law school. Actually we have met Anne before, casually. Near the end of *The Glass Knight* Ray Statler, the raffish designer at the university press, introduces her to Robert, "a pretty girl with a slightly round face and light reddish hair." And at the party on Wolfe Island that forms the climax of *It Is Always Summer* we overhear her resisting the advances of a lawyer with whose firm she has refused to article — thus we know that she actually did get her law degree, against all likelihood.

For *A Sound Like Laughter* is about the disastrous messes we can get ourselves into in the pursuit of what seem to us reasonable goals. Marianne achieves marriage with her lodger, a voice coach at the university, by exercising blackmail to get him tenure; once married to him, she sees what a slob he is and falls for Robert Mallen, of all people. Her pursuit of Robert comes to disaster in a ludicrous incident that also results in the exposure to the police of Remnant's drug-dealing. And Anne's quests lead her into a temporary criminal career.

All this is exuberant comedy — and also very sad. Hence the title, which comes from the moment when Anne achieves one of her two goals — with Remnant, who was impotent the first time they tried: "She came with a sound like laughter." Throughout, the reader makes sounds very like laughter.

The four books form themselves into a tetralogy less from the characters and their stories than from the constant domination of the physical setting: Kingston, with its two cathedrals, its prisons, its university and its military college, the limestone buildings that make it seem so much older than it really is; and always the strongly felt presence of the lake and the islands, portrayed through the changing seasons — Helwig, like C.P. Snow, makes frequent and effective use of weather.

For years I've had my private criterion for recognizing the really good poets: they all write beautiful prose. By this standard, David Helwig is a very good poet indeed. □

## REVIEW

# Northern journeys

By BARBARA NOVAK

*The Ruined Season*, by M.T. Kelly, Black Moss Press, 106 pages, \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88753 085 0).

M.T. KELLY'S THIRD book, *The Ruined Season*, is a disturbing, moving, yet ultimately maddening work of fiction — maddening because it is both so powerful and so flawed.

Kelly's courage in pushing beyond the limits of his previously published fiction is to be admired — many writers, having met with Kelly's early (though modest) success, would have been content to write more of the same. But Kelly is clearly more interested in taking a risk and stretching his literary imagination. In this sense *The Ruined Season* can be seen as a transitional work. It has greater depth than his first novel, *I Do Remember the Fall*, and greater scope than his novella, *The More Loving One*. But stylistically it is more problematical than either of these earlier works.

It is a novel of landscapes — internal as well as external. The brutality and isolation of the Ontario North — the near north, two hours north of Sudbury — provides the setting for the story of Michael Leary and the people who shape his experience: his wife Bev, his friend Charlie Ruggles, and Grant Hunter, who runs the pulp mill in Bev's home

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town of Barton, where they settle after they're married. One of the few differences between the physical and emotional landscapes is that the former is "indifferent." The characters are isolated as much by their interior landscapes as they are by the vast wilderness of the Ontario North.

The novel begins and ends with a leave-taking, giving the overall structure a balance. It opens in the spring when Michael leaves Toronto to work on a geological exploration crew in the bush. "What had mattered to him then was leaving, getting away from where he came from." This first trip north provides a background to the main action of the novel, which begins in the second chapter, some five years later, after Michael has finished university, travelled throughout Europe, returned to Toronto and teacher's college, and settled down with his girlfriend Bev, another graduate of the bachelor of education program. Together they head to Barton, where they are married, and where they have accepted teaching posts in order to qualify for their permanent certificates. It is here that Michael re-encounters "the country of his imagination" and discovers, too late, something about the nature of humanity. When the novel ends Michael is again leaving, heading south this time for Key West and taking with him "a place that couldn't be touched," and memories of "air and water and light."

Stylistically the novel is strained and the narration self-conscious. Part of the problem has to do with the brevity of the work: it is overpopulated with points of view. The story is primarily Michael's; he is the only character who undergoes a change. And our interest, therefore, is in his point of view. But we are ushered into the consciousness of each of the central characters and many of the minor ones as well, flipping from one to the other, from one paragraph to the next. It's confusing; more than once I found myself turning the page and having to turn back to make sure I hadn't turned two pages by mistake. Adding to the confusion is the fact that the narrator's point of view is not only judgemental, but inconsistently judgemental. At one point the narration actually switches from third person to second person, suggesting somehow that Michael and the narrator are one and the same person:

"Wait a sec." Taking his shirt off, Mike gasped. He'd put it back on in a minute, but the warmth made him feel that he couldn't breathe . . . "I can't take this heat." But you took it, and took it.

The style undergoes a further strain by its grammatical idiosyncrasies, the most annoying being the punctuation of

dialogue. For some reason commas appear where one would expect full stops:

"Shit," as he followed the pack, Charlie stumbled.

"I don't think this run makes much money," Grant's condescension was forced, as if he was gulping.

Similarly, full stops appear where one would expect to find commas or ellipses:

"It's the only way in and out of some of these communities. Still." Mike paused. "They have to run it."

Given these idiosyncrasies, it is surprising that the novel works as well as it does. Its power, despite its problems, testifies to the integrity of its creative impulse. I look forward to Kelly's next novel, to see where *The Ruined Season* will prove to have led him. □

## REVIEW

# The glory that was Greece

By GAIL PEARCE

*Trailing Pythagoras*, by George Galt, Quadrant Editions, 200 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 86495 016 0).

*Ricordi: Remembrances of Italy*, by Joyce Meyer, Queenston House, 283 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919866 65 4) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 919866 66 2).

IN THE OPENING chapter of his account of an Aegean summer George Galt talks of the need for "faith in the possibility of islands, a faith we must all keep to live well." That faith has drawn so many people to the Mediterranean that the contemporary travel writer's path is booby-trapped with clichés. Is there anything new that can be said?

Galt uses two devices to give a fresh angle to his account. The first is the more interesting. His great-great-grandfather John Galt travelled extensively in the Aegean in the early 19th century, writing and attempting to set up a clearing-house for British goods that would circumvent the Napoleonic blockade of Europe. George Galt looks at his ancestor's experiences and muses on what his reactions would be to 20th century conditions, trying to find "a perspective, a layer of history that might

otherwise remain concealed."

The second device is strained. The book starts in Samos, where the philosopher Pythagoras was born in the sixth century B.C., and a quotation attributed to Pythagoras forms its epigraph. So far, so good. But Pythagoras is a hazy figure. He is more closely associated with Italy, where he founded his famous school, and his thought is known only at second hand. Galt's scattered attempts to use Pythagoras's philosophy to illuminate his own experience and provide an answer to the problems of the world are unconvincing, and break the flow of the book.

Galt and his wife spent a leisurely summer visiting Paros and Samos in search of a retreat, eventually living for two months in a village on the north coast of Chios and returning to Athens by way of Lesbos. Galt then set off on his own for quick visits to Rhodes, Karpathos, Crete, Mykonos, and Delos. This change of pace three-quarters of the way through the book is disconcerting for the reader. One can appreciate Galt's reluctance to waste material, especially the isolated village of Olimpos on Karpathos, where the women still wear traditional costume and a Doric dialect is spoken. However, more discrimination would have resulted in a more coherent and satisfying book; the most significant observations in the account of Galt's solitary travels could easily have been inserted as asides in the main narrative. The book's main weakness, in fact, is its pacing; the exclusive use of the historic present creates a dream-like effect and wastes potential vitality.

But enough cavils. Galt's descriptions are full of delightfully unexpected images and flights of whimsical fantasy. A policeman is dressed "in the manner of an impoverished New York hood"; on the coast of Samos "Turkey is so close that any minor Greek god could land a pebble on its forbidden purple slopes." Anyone who has travelled in the Aegean will instantly recognize a village that is "a jumble of sparkling white cubes like an evaporated sea-pool of perfect salt crystals."

The changing moods and light of Greece are ever-present; background history and social comment are introduced effectively and unobtrusively; and the extraordinary cast of incidental characters provides constant entertainment. Particularly memorable are the septuagenarian landlady who wrote obituaries for the local paper and offered to take Galt and his wife up in a small plane; the plate-smashing restaurateur whose method of serving dessert was to hurl the fruit at the diners piece by piece; the soldier whose reaction to



the mention of Canada was "Makret Droodo" — her memoirs having been serialized in the Greek press.

Galt was lucky enough to live on an island as yet unspoiled by tourism; for anyone who remembers what the Aegean was like before the tourist boom it is a relief to learn that such places do still exist. He realizes that "we are, in a way, last witnesses of this place." In contrast, he describes "the once-lush city of Rhodes," now "a grey garden of stillborn, concrete blocks, hotel after hotel after hotel, the transient castles of our aged," and Mithymna, after "the

mysterious removal of the harmless local lunatic who, it was feared, might disturb the tourists. Nothing disturbing can be found here now, and nothing compelling either." In these warnings lies the main value of his book.

Joyce Meyer went to Italy for a vacation in the early 1960s and stayed for 11 years, working for the United Nations in Rome and later selling farmhouses and castles in Tuscany. Her book is a lively personal memoir of a people and a way of life. (At times too personal: if even she was frustrated by her affairs with a series of unsatisfactory or unavailable

men, why should the reader care about their tedious details?)

Meyer's writing is competent and generally entertaining but not in the same class as Galt's poetic prose. *Ricordi* is a much more trivial and ephemeral book than *Trailing Pythagoras* but one message is the same: the rapid destruction of much of the richness and beauty of Mediterranean life. Perhaps the most important task for a contemporary travel writer is to bring home to his readers, before it is too late, the devastating side-effects of tourism. □

#### FEATURE REVIEW

## A treatise on lovers

More subdued and economical than his earlier work, A.N. Wilson's sixth novel ends with a feeling of cold irony

By RUPERT SCHIEDER

*Wife Virgin*, by A.N. Wilson, Secker & Warburg (Collins), 185 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 436 57608 2).

A.N. WILSON'S second-last novel is called *Who Was Oswald Fish?* The question is quite as applicable to the author and his works. Having discovered Wilson's novels only two years ago through British reviews, I saw an advertisement for the latest and eagerly combed the half dozen book stores I ordinarily find most helpful, only to draw blank reactions. The libraries could produce his earlier works, but this one — no, not even an order slip. The local agent didn't do anything to help solve the mystery.

Details about Wilson himself are just as hard to come by. I've managed to assemble about 10, not including his given names: born 1950, Staffordshire; grew up in Wales; educated at Rugby and Oxford; received several prizes, including three for his fourth novel; teaches English literature (where?); married, two children; literary editor of *The Spectator*; a writer of penetrating reviews; author of a biography of Milton, a study of Scott, and most pertinent, six novels, published in six successive years.

The first three relatively short novels, *The Sweets of Pimlico* (1977), *Unguard-*

*ed Hours* (1978), and *Kindly Light* (1979) (the latter two with titles from Victorian hymns) present the sometimes bizarre experiences of a single upper-middle-class character of limited perceptions, and stake out what has continued to be Wilson's territory: intricate personal relations. Evelyn in the first and Norman Shotover in the linked second and third are involved with a number of people, each relationship marked by competition, power struggles that include both dominance and dependence. These are epitomized in varied sexual relations: heterosexual, homosexual, gerontophilial, sadomasochistic, and incestuous, often casual, usually enacted off stage. Two other interests inhabit Wilson territory: church matters, often comic, and details of urban, often London, Victorian architecture. The somewhat static characters are involved in coincidences, misunderstandings, surprising interlinkings, reappearances, confrontations that suggest chaos and incoherence as the centre of existence. The result is not comedy, but the comic; highly entertaining foibles and idiosyncrasies presented in farce, caricature, with some elements of satire. They lack the balance and control of comedy in its comprehensive sense. These early novels are reminiscent of some of the lighter

aspects of the early Waugh — such phrases as "too shaming" and perhaps the name of the heroine of the first work, Evelyn — Ronald Firbank, bits of Corvo, and Anthony Burgess of the *Enderby* series.

In his fourth novel, *The Healing Art* (1980), Wilson occupies the same territory but shifts his emphasis in dealing with personal relations. The central figure here, Pamela, intelligent, sensitive, strives not for domination but for communication; sex is presented, again in some variety, but this time as a means to or part of that communication. The stress falls here not on the events, although they are crucial — two intertwined mastectomies — but on character. Farce and caricature are less evident, overshadowed by Pamela's concern for truth, kindness, and serenity. The structure follows the pattern of comedy: error, self-discovery, "epiphany" (Wilson's word), ending in renewal and new beginnings. Wilson replaces the chaos and incoherence of the earlier novels with decorum, form, and moral standards. One of the characters says to Pamela: "But you aren't characters in Austen," voicing one of the comparisons that become increasingly apt as the novel progresses: no longer with Waugh and company but, in the pairing

of taste and conscience, aesthetics and ethics, with such writers as Jane Austen and Henry James.

The next year, 1981, Wilson's longest novel to date appeared, *Who Was Oswald Fish?* It's a puzzling work. Like *The Healing Art* it is a forward-moving novel, but the process here is not in growth of character but in the unscrambling of the relationships of six generations of the Fish family. The tangled intertwinings, familial and sexual, the parallels and contrasts, recall the farce of the earlier novels. Gothic revival architecture is central. Varieties of love recur; romantic love is an obsession. These subjects are not powerful enough to bear the weight of the complicated ironies, satire, and what one character labels "hectic comic melodrama." In addition to echoes of early Waugh and Firbank, there are two loathsome, entertaining, destructive children worthy of William Trevor. Wilson's first novel bears the dedication, "For John Bayley and Iris Murdoch," husband and wife, and the novel suggests the superficial side of Murdoch. Perhaps the reference to Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* is more relevant. After the balance and control of *The Healing Art*, *Who Was Oswald Fish?* is entertaining but, for me, it was

also a puzzling disappointment.

So, I began *Wise Virgin* with some apprehension. The sudden opening — "Marry me," said Louise Agar" — is followed by two and a half pages in which the two central factors of the novel are established: the obsession of Giles Fox, librarian and research editor, with a medieval tract, "an extended meditation on the Gospel parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins"; and the position of four women — Mary, first wife, a beauty, guilty of unpardonable infidelities, dead in childbirth; Tibba, their daughter who inherits her beauty; Carol, second wife, beautiful, sexually desirable, killed by a passing car; and now Louise, his research assistant, plain, "lumpish." These facts are established by sound, touch, and reflection. One detail is withheld for 14 pages: a calamity for a scholar, his sudden blindness.

The concerns of the five earlier novels are continued here: the power struggle, sexual rivalry and variety, architectural details. If *Who Was Oswald Fish?* resembles Wilson's first three novels in its plot complications and elements of melodrama and farce, this more economical, more subdued latest work is related to *The Healing Art*. It is not coincidental that the *Tretis of loue*

*heuenliche* on which Giles and Louise labour provides the prefatory quotation for the earlier novel. Again the form is that of comedy, here with two lines of development: that of Giles and that of



Tibba, his daughter. Both seem to realize their self-deception and learn to face reality: his corruption and her sexuality. Seemingly renewed, near the end, Giles can whisper to Louise, "Marry me." Neat.

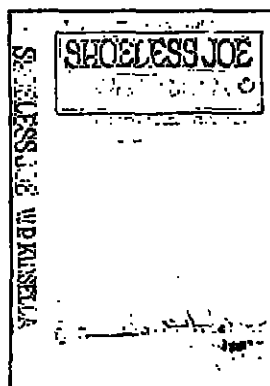
It is, somehow, despite its economy and control, a less satisfying work than *The Healing Art* perhaps because of a coldness, unrelieved by the devices used by Wilson to bring about Giles's self-discovery: a dream and meditation. Whereas the earlier novel ended with the warmth of a fairy-tale "Envoy," this is concluded by two small ironies and perhaps a levelling, all-encompassing third — the in-fighting prevalent in the field of British Middle-English scholarship. A narrower novel, it still occupies part of that Wilson territory in which he operates, when at his best, so successfully. That territory and its effects are indicated by a quotation from Conrad that Wilson uses to preface a review of another novelist:

Conrad's Marlow, in *Chance*, expounds the idea that fiction and gossip spring from the same wells of curiosity in the human mind. "Is it merely that we may amuse ourselves by gossiping about each other's affairs?" he is asked; replying in characteristically sonorous vein, "It would still be a very respectable provision if it were only for that end. But from that same provision of understanding there springs in us compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and in minds of any largeness, an invitation to that indulgence which is next to affection."

At his best, in *The Healing Art*, Wilson accomplishes the effect Conrad indicates. In any of his works the reader can expect writing that is precise, graphic, each person and object sensually realized, and the reflection of a witty and inventive mind. Wilson would seem to enjoy writing and to set out to make the reader enjoy his work. □

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# Three graces

By JOHN OUGHTON

*A Sad Device*, by Roo Borson, Quadrant Editions, 64 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 86495 011 X).

*Giving Back Diamonds*, by Marilyn Bowering, Press Porcépic, 96 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 88878 200 4).

*Power Sources*, by Carolyn Smart, Fiddlehead Poetry Books, unpaginated, \$6.00 paper (ISBN 0 86492 018 0).

IN CAROLYN SMART'S FIRST book of poetry, *Swimmers in Oblivion*, she observed that her woman friends "speak like poets, and when I think poets, / I think men, and the way they speak like women, / and I can understand them." She suggests that, although poetry is traditionally regarded as a masculine art, in fact it comes from a state of mind or world-view that is essentially feminine. We've come a long way, baby, from Robert Graves's assertion in *The White Goddess* that women (at least heterosexual ones) don't really belong in the poetic ranks by virtue of the Muse's femininity. The most exciting development in 20th-century North American poetry may, in the long run, not be Projective Verse or Imagism but rather the number of good woman poets who have been published. How much poorer the poetry shelves would be without Avison, Atwood, HD, DiPrima, Levertov, MacEwan, Plath, and Rich (to name just a few).

The same is true of this later crop of poets. As each is around 30, their technique will no doubt refine and mature with age. But they already have individual voices, ways of relating their perceptions, that are subtly different from the pronouncements of male poets.

Roo Borson's lines throw off the most sparks and surprises. Her meditations on the mysterious forces behind nature and male-female relationships are ripe with sensual detail. These are her major themes, and she often combines them in images that are exact and alarming. Witness this from "The Hour of Wind":

*The lilac slaps against the window  
the wind shakes it the way a man  
sometimes  
throws his wife against a wall.*

Like Margaret Atwood, Borson

seldom finds the physical world to be fixed or stable. Under the deceptive facades of field or sky wait chaos or alien beings. This approach can produce Houseman's verification of poetic effect — the hairs rising on the back of the neck — with lines like these from "October, Hanson's Field":

*frost chains the pumpkins,  
like planets run aground, or  
buoys the dead hang onto,  
their eyes lit in the loam  
... I look at the ground  
as if it were one-way glass.  
The dead can see me.*

Most of *A Sad Device* depends heavily on similar tropes for its effect. Borson sometimes leans too heavily on them, with the result that her less sure control of line-breaks and structure begins to show. Too many riches sometimes sink her ships. This is evident in the title poem which begins:

*A rat, his eyes like glycerine,  
like galleries of landscape paintings,  
genitals like a small bell, he,  
siphon of smells ...*

There are brilliant images in there, but they lead off in too many directions for one rat. Borson is most successful when her metaphors are allusive rather than elusive; in "Night Walk, Thinking of One Who Could Have Been a Lover, Now Miles Away" she builds a haunting portrait of an incomplete relationship without directly comparing either it or the non-lover to anything.

The back-cover blurb compares her to Hopkins, perhaps prematurely. She has not yet found technical innovations to equal his quirky rhythm, but there is at least one basis for the comparison. Like Hopkins she is tremendously sensitive to the small and large things of nature. One of her poems describes her spending three hours simply walking in a field, and her work shows that she does indeed have the vision and imagination to find much more there than most of us, and to wrap those treasures in memorable lines.

Marilyn Bowering's fifth collection, *Giving Back Diamonds*, must be one of the few poetry books with dress and jewellery credits. Marilyn, in a dress by "Chloe, from Creeds" and diamonds by Tony Calvetti and others, stares out from her cover with a wry deadpan befitting her epigram borrowed from Zsa Zsa Gabor: "I never hated a man enough to give diamonds back."

Bowering does give diamonds back, moulded from the coal of her experience. In contrast to Borson's lush bouquets of imagery, Bowering's lines are honed, her words deliberately and deceptively simple. Like her West-Coast colleague Susan Musgrave, Bowering is fascinated by elemental things — bones, blood, the pull of the grave — but she prefers a finesse where Musgrave would

go for the grand slam. Bowering writes elliptically, sparsely, from a sensibility that might serve as a model for the younger woman poet, both delicate and tough. A single reading of these poems gives the sense that you have just missed something:

*There is no name for a thought which  
like rain, follows the line of growth  
down to the root  
and undermines from there.*

That perception makes sense in reflection rather than immediacy; it pulls you back to follow its own line again.

The poems indeed have a logic of their own, mirroring and amplifying each part and then ringing changes before the echo sours. The best ones have the impact of a dream or fairy tale. She even manages one more pressing from old grapes in "Penelope's Halls":

*It is a difficult time,  
the future branches like a candelabra.  
In the dark hall the suitors lie  
across the tables like sick hens.  
Is there a choice, after all,  
in the kind of beggar the gods send?*

Occasionally she removes a bit too much of the connective tissue between idea and image, making the poem difficult for the reader to explore: the two serial poems "Mary Shelley" and "Sea Changes" suffer from this. But most of the single poems are, without flashy effects, singular.

Of the three poets, Carolyn Smart comes closest to writing in the confessional mode. Most of her poems are first or second person, and the "you" is someone close to her; a lover or her dead mother. Reading too many of them at once produces a feeling of constriction, from being locked behind one set of eyes. When she does adopt a persona or write in the third person (as in "Grace," about her governess) it works; she should try it more often.

This overly personal tone may stem from her view that Toronto is not the place to wear one's heart on one's sleeve:

*If you're raised in a place  
where it's better to hide your face  
than show you're crying,  
then a place like this has too much  
wind.*

Through her armour she watches her friends for evidence of the emotional life underneath — the way Borson watches fields — and the strongest moments in *Power Sources* are when she captures such a flash of self-revelation:

*Every day I'm approaching the dark  
place,  
measuring the distance between us:  
you get into your car in the morning  
and never look back.*

When she successfully transmutes her personal concerns the result can be

powerful. "Blood Is Sap Is Desire" is a sustained metaphor that becomes both erotic and illuminating. "Now" captures the questioning energy inside a woman friend.

The certainty with which she handles feelings sometimes deserts her when she strains for an image. Her occasional ventures into end-rhymes are not always successful either:

*In the city, someone is dying.  
I wish to God those frogs  
would stop their crying.*

Smart has the sensibility and ear of a poet. If she can broaden her range and improve her techniques she could produce work in the class of Bowering or Borson. One minor production quibble: her book is blighted not only by a pallid cover design but also by the absence of page numbers, although it has a list of titles. Borson's has numbers but no titles list. Publishers should serve readers better. □

## REVIEW

# Pistil-packing prodigies

By BRUCE WHITEMAN

*New Poems*, by Henry Moscovitch, Mosaic Press/Valley Editions, 128 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 88962 170 5).

*Capitalistic Affection!*, by Frank Davey, Coach House Press, 88 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 88910 244 9).

*Black Orchid*, by A.F. Moritz, Dreadnaught, 96 pages, \$5.95 paper (ISBN 0 919567 13 4).

HENRY MOSCOVITCH was a prodigy. His first book, *The Serpent Ink*, was published by Contact Press when he was only 15 years old. He was scarcely 20 when his second collection appeared, and by that time he was also an editor of *Cataract*. He was included in *Poetry 64*, where John Robert Colombo called him "surprisingly accomplished and classical." Charles Olson remembered Moscovitch as an ex-wrestler poet who heckled him for not writing like W.B. Yeats at a reading that Olson gave in Toronto in the early 1960s. After that Moscovitch seems to have disappeared from the poetry scene in Canada, and

*New Poems* is in fact his first book since the publication of *The Laughing Storm* in 1961.

Moscovitch's early poetry owed an enormous amount to Layton: it was cocky, self-declarative, and somewhat rhetorical. I wonder, for example, if many readers could guess the authorship of "How to Use an Envious Poetaster" if they were given a list of names to choose from that included both Layton and Moscovitch. Of course most 23-year-old poets display some degree of derivativeness, and if in retrospect it is the heavy load of indebtedness in Moscovitch's poems which stands out, that is perhaps because until now there has not been any further work available by which to measure his progress.

*New Poems* exhibits a poet much changed from the author of *The Serpent Ink*, but I am not sure that the change could be called progress. The apparent self-centredness is still present; there is scarcely a poem that does not revolve around the word "I." The raucous voice, however, has been toned down to the point where the poems read largely like diary entries. Clearly a good deal of pain lies behind the constant soul-searching, the persistent references to a woman who comes into and leaves the poet's life again and again, and the recurring concern with poetry itself. But none of this, finally, has much body except for the figure of the poet himself, and Moscovitch's language is not powerful enough to convince us that his musings are important. Leonard Cohen's prefatory poem speaks of "art so pure" and "refined address," but I do not see that the prosaic, unrhythmic line Moscovitch has chosen to use can be defended on the basis of purity and refinement:

*On Sycamore road  
my beloved waits  
for me.  
I will never arrive.  
The angels detain me.  
She will seek me  
in all the city.  
I won't be there.  
When I see her  
next I will  
have a hard  
time explaining.*

As I read Frank Davey's *Capitalistic Affection!*, Moscovitch's lines ran through my head more than once: "I will never learn new/languages/My mind is too slow." It is being perhaps too generous to label comic strips (on which Davey's book centres) a language, but certainly they constitute a broad basis of reference or (God forbid) a body of knowledge with which some readers will be familiar and some (the younger ones?) not. I rather enjoyed the

book, though it left me a little puzzled. Former *Tish* writers have been criticized for their earnestness, but Davey, like Bowering, can be funny, and it is the humour — *recherché* though it is to some extent — that appeals in this new book of poems. For example, Davey provides comments on his book from seven critics ("What the Reviewers Have Said"), and they sound accurate enough to be predictions. I only hope that the journals supposedly cited are game enough to send their review copies to the persons Davey has so neatly recommended. The circle of life imitating art imitating life would then be complete.

Davey is of course after more than an extended joke, and *Capitalistic Affection!* is also an exploration of the extent to which comic strips did not merely reflect a culture but also helped to mould its attitudes:

*That month I wanted to grow up  
& wear a tweed sports jacket & tie  
& drive a Ford sedan like Kerry's  
home to a carport, a broadloomed hall,  
& find a virginal chorus girl like Kerry's,  
or maybe Julia Meade or Betty Furness,  
waiting with martinis in the kitchen  
doorway.*

This will surprise no one. Comic strips are about fantasy, after all, and if the objects of fulfilment they offered now seem stereotypical, misdirected, even unhealthy, at least in some ways, they differ little from most other artifacts of popular culture. Furthermore, Davey is not writing a sociological tract, and his text is so contrived that no one can pin on him any rigorous point of view. One of the "Editorial Reports" he offers as part of the book runs as follows: "I think he's trying to tell us that the old coloured comics formed his view of the world. Indeed, that is silly." So the poet, finally, is ambivalent, or he has it both ways. The names of the comic-strip characters occur almost like words in a magic text, despite the sex-stereotyping and violence that were endemic to the strips and which Davey makes no effort to hide or deny. *Capitalistic Affection!* is meant to evoke, not to judge, and at that it succeeds well.

A.F. Moritz's *Black Orchid* occupies a kind of middle ground between the day-book personalism of Henry Moscovitch and the more obdurate surfaces of Frank Davey's poems. Moritz is a romantic to the extent that the formal centre of his poetry is the image conceived as a mediator between language and reality. He goes so far (in his afterword) as to use the word "sacramental" to describe the nature of poetry, a word that unavoidably puts one in mind of the basically egocentric artist who seeks a measure of objectivity for his art by appealing to its religious function. This

is partially true of Moritz's poetry, and though Michael Cameron, in his foreword, suggests that "it might be our age rather than the poet that is at fault," I am not so sure. The afterword is full of opinions about such hoary generalities as free will, faith, reality, and contemporary thought. Poets are of course entitled to have opinions about such things, but I'm not convinced that they belong in their books. Opinions, after all, are debatable, and poetry should be anything but debatable. I finished Moritz's afterword with the feeling that the poet doth protest too much.

*Black Orchid* is a handsome book, but it is also overproduced. It includes an introduction by a critic, an afterword by

the poet, is illustrated throughout, and the small format and narrow margins combine to give the reader little breathing space. Perhaps these things make the poems seem somewhat claustrophobic, or perhaps it is Moritz's reliance on quasi-surrealistic imagery to carry his poems forward:

*A black orchid convokes bees  
at your body's centre,  
a stem of urine  
connects it to the ground.  
Near where you stand, the fishes  
leap up an arc of light  
and hang in a rainbow  
over the disgorging cleft.*

This approach to language always seems manifestly to do the opposite of

what it intends; that is, while it is meant almost to speak itself, it nevertheless sounds contrived, almost staged. Despite Moritz's contention that "a poem, once created, stands before us as an enigmatic being which reveals that expression is a phenomenon of presence," passages like the one cited above strike one as commonplace events poetized in a crafty manner. Moritz can write well, but much of the time his poems get clogged with their own high imaginings. As William Carlos Williams once put it, "the minute you let yourself be carried away by purely 'architectural' or 'literary' reasoning without consulting the thing from which it grew, you've cut the life-giving artery." □

#### FEATURE REVIEW

## Beyond the barbed wire

Canada's wartime interment of political dissenters is another reminder that our civil liberties are not as secure as we may think

By MARGARET LAURENCE

**Dangerous Patriots: Canada's Unknown Prisoners of War**, by William Repka and Kathleen Repka, New Star Books, 249 pages, \$14.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919573 05 1) and \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 919573 07 X).

AS A PEOPLE, we Canadians tend to take our freedoms for granted. Yet time and time again it has been shown that our civil liberties are not as secure as we would like to believe. The War Measures Act, needing only cabinet approval to be put into force, in 1942 sent some 21,000 innocent Japanese Canadians — men, women, and children — into internment camps in the interior of B.C. Their property was seized, and none of those people ever received adequate compensation. The same act invoked in October, 1970, sent hundreds of innocent Quebecois to jail. *Dangerous Patriots* tells the story of another instance of the use of the War Measures Act, a story virtually unknown until now, except to the persons involved, their families and friends — and of course the RCMP and the government, who sought to keep the matter secret. This episode did not in-

volve anything like the numbers of Japanese Canadians who were incarcerated, but that is not the point. It involved the same violation of civil liberties.

In the spring of 1940, more than 100 left-wing and labour activists were rounded up by the RCMP in various parts of Canada, and were interned in prisoner-of-war camps, first in Kananaskis, Alta., or Petawawa, Ont., and later in Hull, Que. Some had previously been charged with distributing leaflets, and a few received jail sentences for this activity. Upon release, they were at once re-arrested and interned. In no case were charges ever laid against any of those imprisoned in P.O.W. camps. There was quite obviously no case against them. Yet they were labelled "prisoners of war" and "enemy aliens." They were interned without trial. In most cases they had no access to legal help or to their families. They were simply carted off, usually late at night or very early in the morning, apparently with no civil rights whatsoever.

William Repka, a few years ago, interviewed 16 of these men and three of their wives. After his death in 1980, his wife

Kathleen Repka completed the book. It is a chilling reminder that civil liberties can never be taken for granted. After more than 40 years, it is not surprising that some of the events are recalled in slightly different detail by those interviewed. What is striking, however, is that after so many years these men and women remembered so vividly and with such bitter hurt those long-ago times.

What complicated their situation in the early years of the Second World War was that many of them were communists, and the Communist Party of Canada opposed the war at first, seeing it as an attempt on the part of an imperialistic Britain to involve Canada in a European war. They were, however, all passionately opposed to the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. This anomaly must have caused a lot of agonized debate. When the Soviet Union came into the war on the Allied side, in June of 1941, the Canadian communists gave their full support to the war effort. Nevertheless, the last of the interned men were not released until 1942.

Although the Canadian communists

## Getting beyond structure

By ROBERT KROETSCH

*Montage for an Interstellar Cry*, by Andrew Sukniaski, Turnstone Press, 75 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 88801 048 6).

*The Mossbank Canon*, by E.F. Dyck, Turnstone Press, 87 pages, \$7.50 paper (ISBN 0 88801 077 X).

TWO RECENT BOOKS of poetry from Turnstone Press illustrate two very different ways of structuring content in the long poem. Andrew Sukniaski's *Montage for an Interstellar Cry* is a fast-paced projectile on the edge of uncontrol, and Ed Dyck's *The Mossbank Canon* is a tightly-sculpted reflection of the structure of the *I Ching* and of the musical "canon" or "round."

Dyck's book consists of "sixty-four poems, six lines each, in eight parts, delineating the parallel lives of Mao Tse Tung, founder of revolutionary China, and Jong, a Chinese immigrant in Mossbank, Saskatchewan." He tells us it is an "experiment in form" to provide a "resonance otherwise lacking from my telling of a particular story." The experiment is engaging. Besides the *I Ching* structure Dyck collages Jong's story chronologically. The story of this Chinese immigrant along with the history of Mossbank and Moosejaw are the central threads, with allusions to Mao's biography juxtaposed alongside. The advantage of this method provides otherwise unavailable confluences. Thus the images feel fresh and support imaginary narratives: "The wind blew two blossoms across the ocean/from the People's Republic to the White Dove Cafe."

But the way Dyck uses his set structure tends too often to undercut the movement of the poem. The lines seem choppy and frequently too contrived. The following hexagram, for example, though it offers interesting image-relating possibilities in the context of the whole poem, is overburdened with the preponderance of the structural conception.

*Defeated in Changsa :annihilated in cities  
the Red Army disproved the red star's theory  
Lure the enemy :Penetrate deeply  
Jong's boat steamed on through the ruby sea*

were no doubt overly optimistic in their belief that the Soviet Union was the workers' paradise, they had never advocated the overthrow of the Canadian government by violence. Most of them were union organizers or journalists and editors of left-wing and labour papers, some of which were Ukrainian-language publications. As such, they were, of course, viewed with hostility by the establishment and the government for trying to improve appalling working conditions, especially among ethnic minorities, during the hungry '30s. Most of them had either been born in Canada or had become Canadian citizens. More than a third of them were of Ukrainian or other Slavic descent, and a sizeable proportion were Jewish. One of them was Jacob Penner, a respected and much-loved alderman in North Winnipeg — a post to which he was promptly re-elected upon his release and in which he served for many years thereafter. One of them was Dr. Howard Lowrie, a well-known Toronto physician. One was Joe Wallace, the labour poet, who was both a communist and a practising Roman Catholic.

It is not difficult to imagine how these men must have felt, labelled as "enemy aliens" in their own land. Standard procedure in the internment camps was to place one of these young men in a hut with 11 captured German Nazis or Italian fascists. They ultimately won the right to have their own huts. They were forced to wear P.O.W. uniforms with a large red circle on the back of the jacket, which could serve as target for the guards' rifles if anyone had tried to escape. Their letters to their wives and families were heavily censored, and they were not allowed visitors. Many of their wives were left with no support, with young children.

They kept their spirits up by organizing craft classes, language classes, literature classes, and by composing and singing their own songs. Some of Joe Wallace's best known poems were written in the internment camps. Humour was another survival tactic. Bill Repka taught English to some of the Ukrainian Canadians who needed fluency in the language, and in turn he improved his own knowledge of Ukrainian. At one point one of his "students" tried to translate the English proverb, "The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak," into Ukrainian. It came out as "The vodka was good but the meat was terrible." The men were starved for news and could only get newspapers in which all war news had been scissored out. Pat Lenihan's wife once sent flower seeds wrapped in copies of *The Canadian Tribune*, the left-wing paper. Being by this time adept at evading the censor,

Lenihan wrote back "saying that the tribunias and petunias had arrived in very good shape."

But there is little enough of humour here. The young Bill Repka had been an organizer among the scandalously underpaid and exploited sugarbeet workers in Alberta when he was arrested in 1940 at the age of 25. In his own words, remembering the two years of his unjust imprisonment, "You can't get away from feeling hurt and alienated when you are locked up in your own country. I was born in Canada, but coming out of school in the Depression meant I was locked into a permanent state of poverty. For youngsters leaving school in the thirties there were very few alternatives. You could go into business and begin to rip off your own people or work with other poor people to climb out of that poverty. These thoughts were constantly on my mind...."

These men's wives had other struggles: to keep their families fed, to work for the release of their husbands, to protect their children (insofar as it was possible, and mostly it wasn't) against the taunts of other neighbourhood children. They were tremendously supportive of one another. They didn't call it "sisterhood" in those days, but that was what it was. Some of their older sons ultimately joined up. Mary Prokop says, "Imagine how the mothers felt with their husbands behind barbed wire and their sons joining the Army." What courage and heartbreak are implied in that statement.

After their final release in 1942, many



of these men joined the Canadian Armed Forces and fought in Europe. Some of them died there.

I think of something F.R. Scott said in *Essays on the Constitution*, in an essay written in 1933 and published once again in the 1977 collection. "The time, it is to be hoped, has gone by, wrote John Stuart Mill, when any defence would be necessary for the principle of freedom of speech. His hope was vain. The time for defending freedom never goes by. Freedom is a habit that must be kept alive by use."

Lest we forget, *Dangerous Patriots* is a book that may help us to remember. □

to a broken market :to departing whores  
to turning propellers :in the White Dove  
Cafe

The lines are broken or not, I assume, according to the cast or throw. At times this works well, but I miss the play of possibilities around it. Some of the language comes through as simply too derivative of the *I Ching* language. Though I admire what Dyck is attempting I feel he too frequently sacrifices the energy of the language to the idea of the form.

The major problem with Suknaski's poem, on the other hand, is that it sometimes feels over-edited. The poem has such energy that at times I wish editors David Arnason and David Carr had let more of the wildness in. Nonetheless it is through their editing that the prolific scattering of Suknaski's continuing poetic investigations was given some manageable shape. The book feels very much together despite its urge to kick out the jams.

Like Dyck's book, *Montage for an Interstellar Cry* works at the juxtaposition of coordinates. The jacket blurb says "Suknaski draws on his roots in the experimental poetry of the '60s to produce a pyrotechnic collage encompassing the MX missile, Wood Mountain, Pinochet's Chile, prehistoric man and the world of urban fringes." Where Dyck's experiment tends to delimit connections by its focus on structure, Suknaski's approach generates connections because the method of composition is more open, which allows more possibilities, and also because of the intense energy and freedom of the poet's voice.

The range of Suknaski's voice here moves through incantation, asyntactic jive, non-linear outburst, Latin, Sanskrit, Norse etymologies, voice theatre, song, and lyric. He uses big words like "rites of passage" and "universe" and spreads his poetry over the whole page to notate a variety of chunks of thought and rhythm.

and after *The High One remembers*  
the magnificent hall near  
a spring flowing under  
*The Great World Ash*  
home of three fabled maidens:

urd  
verdandi  
skuld

"past  
present  
and future"

The poem is full of legend, story, roots, archetypes, "the spell of words decoding the sacred cypher." His voice seems to confront a material and implode it so that it not so much goes off in all directions but connects a multitude of

things. The poem's primary locus is Winnipeg and it ends with a "cry" by the Seine River in St. Boniface: "my woman has/the right of the cry/ . . . you have/the right of the cry/we all have the right of the cry." The whole piece is a wonderful ground in which the real felt need of "the cry" is activated.

Suknaski, with the help of his editors, has made a very successful poem, and Dyck has carried through an intriguing experiment. Because of the different approaches Suknaski's poem offers a more intense and articulate energy than Dyck's, which seems constricted. But both writers are worth our attention for their intelligences and the chances they take. □

## REVIEW

# Narrow minds

By MARK KENNEDY

**The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada 1850-1950**, by Leslie Armour and Elizabeth Trott, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 548 pages, \$17.00 cloth (ISBN 0 88920 107 2).

THIS UNIQUE REFERENCE represents the culmination of a trend evident in other areas of our culture for at least a decade: the attempt to discern or create specifically Canadian identities through resurrection and contemplation of historical material. It was perhaps inevitable that this tendency should finally manifest itself at the most general level of theoretical rationalization and scholarship — namely, in philosophy. The co-authors are professional philosophers: Leslie Armour (*Logic and Reality, The Concept of Truth, The Idea of Canada and the Crisis of Community*) is a professor of philosophy at the University of Ottawa and past chairman of the department at Cleveland State University; Elizabeth Trott, who earned her Ph.D. in philosophy under Professor Armour's supervision, has taught at several institutions and has written about Canadian philosophers for CBC-Stereo's *Ideas*. Their welcome effort, the product of nearly 10 years' labour, will form an indispensable part of any serious Cana-

dian intellectual library from now on.

*Faces* is organized around a belief that reason and the Canadian environment have combined to produce "philosophical federalism" — a characteristic use of reason directed toward reconciling conflicting values. Thus is broached the existence of a Canadian philosophy, in somewhat the same sense as there is German or French philosophy. Biographical sketches and densely argued summaries of the positions of philosophers who spent significant portions of their working lives in Canada are presented in context with major influences and competing positions of the time. Standard philosophical notions (i.e., Utilitarianism) are explained in considerable detail, so that the summaries make sense to the general reader. This may also help the specialist in estimating the accuracy of the summaries, as a good deal of the authors' own understanding of philosophy is thereby disclosed.

The 1850 starting date marks the publication of James Beaven's *Elements of Natural Theology*, the first expressly philosophical book produced in Canada. Among other philosophers considered are William Lyall, George Paxton Young, John Clark Murray,



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John Watson, George Blewett, George Brett, and John Irving. Of these, Watson is by far the major figure and the only one to whom two chapters are devoted: the dominant presence at Queen's University for more than 50 years from 1872, he was ultimately Gifford lecturer and an important influence in the formation of the United Church of Canada. Another unduly neglected Queen's professor was Murray, a social and labour theorist and feminist before his time, to an extent that nearly cost him his job. Several of the thinkers are notable for their achievements in other fields: Young, for example, played a role in establishing the Ontario high school system, while Harold Innis made his mark as an economist and historian. Irving is justly celebrated as creator of the University of Toronto's traditional excellence in the history of philosophy.

While the book is indispensable, it is not unflawed. The "philosophical federalism" thesis depends on successful delineation and subsequent blending of a number of elements, two of which are an acceptable general notion of the philosophical enterprise itself and a convincing analysis of the interrelation supposed to exist between thinker and the Canadian cultural environment. Apart from some rather contentious generalizations the latter analysis is entirely absent, while the authors' positivist idea that philosophy amounts to "the spread of reason" seems hardly adequate to the first task. Their curious inability to deal with 20th-century developments except in 19th-century terms leads them to call Nietzsche a "romantic nihilist" and Husserlian phenomenology "a fashionable import" (Martin Heidegger is mentioned only as an example of how "irrationalism" can lead one astray politically). This unexpected narrowness combines with a familiar truth disclosed by the summaries themselves — namely, that the work of Canadian philosophers only makes sense in the context of European ideas and tradition. The determination to show that genuine philosophy has sprung from Canadian soil thus degenerates into an artificial unity imposed on monographs whose internal evidence persistently contradicts this view. That the authors continue to affirm it indicates their nationalist conviction that some such organizing principle is required to justify the investigation in the first place.

Most of the so-called Canadian philosophers turn out to be transplanted Scottish theologians, or idealists of the post-Hegelian British type. None enlarged the frontiers of philosophical speculation in any radical way, and those wishing to discover their names in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

(Macmillan) will search in vain. Fewer than half have so much as a single book surviving in print. Since part of the meaning of a body of work lies in what people subsequently make of it, the musings of these gentlemen cannot reasonably be held to constitute "Canadian"

philosophy in the sense that Cartesianism is "French" philosophy, or Absolute Idealism "German" philosophy. Armour's failed attempt to force this relation, however, proves that the book's value lies in its historical contribution rather than its philosophizing. □

## INTERVIEW

'It stems from my childhood,' says Peter Colley, who has killed thousands on stage. 'I can intrigue people or scare the hell out of them'

By DONALD MARTIN

PETER COLLEY was born in Scarborough, England, in 1949, and came to Canada in 1972 to study geography at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont. While there, he worked for a local theatrical group, Theatre London, which produced his first play, *The Donnellys*, in 1974. Among his other plays are *The War Show* (re-titled *You'll Get Used to It*), *The Huron Tiger*, and a musical review, *The Vaudevillians*, but he is best known for his comedy thriller, *I'll Be Back Before Midnight*, which opened at the Blyth Summer Festival in 1979 and has had more than 40 productions in Canada, the U.S., and Europe.



Peter Colley

*Heads You Lose*, a "pre-quel" set 15 years before *I'll Be Back*, was performed at Blyth last summer. "Nobody can make a living writing plays in Canada," Colley was told when he set out to be a playwright. Now a resident of Toronto, he talked to Donald Martin about his response to that challenge:

**Books in Canada:** *Before I'll Be Back Before Midnight*, you wrote a different type of play. Why?

**Peter Colley:** I wrote historical

documentary dramas with a bit of comedy thrown in, mainly because I had seen the birth of docu-drama in England, and it was really popular. I was fascinated by the style. My mentor was actually Allan Cullen, who wrote *The Stirrings in Sheffield*, a play about the rise of the unions in the late 1880s. That style was firmly implanted in my mind when I came to Canada. I went to Theatre London with such an idea. Heinar Pillar suggested I do a play about the Donnellys. I resisted the idea of doing it because a lot of books had been out on it. I didn't realize then that everyone and his dog was doing a play about it. Eventually, Heinar convinced me it would make a good drama. It was interesting how the parallels to Cullen's play came in . . . dramatic songs and music. It was quite a hit in London.

**BIC:** *Were all the historical plays well received?*

**Colley:** For the most part. I've never really had much of a problem with the commerciality of my plays. I've always seemed to write plays that were popular somehow, so much so that they've almost become an albatross around my neck. You get known as a commercial writer, which I don't mind — I have tried to nurture the image that my works do make money. At the same time, there's always the image that if it makes money, it's not art. It may or may not be true. From my own perspective, my plays have a lot more craft in them than art — at this point in my life. *I'll Be Back Before Midnight* is a well-crafted play.

**BIC:** *Do you want to strive toward more "artistic" and meaningful plays?*

**Colley:** Yes. I've got some in the works

PHOTOGRAPH BY RON WATTS

right now. The problem is feeling ready to do them. It's difficult when you don't feel philosophically profound, if you haven't been through any great traumas in your life. I've a tendency to wonder if I have enough profundity to say something truly meaningful. I've had a very good life. I did have problems with sibling rivalry, like anyone else, and I do wish to do a play about brothers and their differences. I just don't want to go and write pretentious, "heavy" stuff about things I don't understand.

**BiC:** *What made you turn away from the historical docu-drama and go for something like I'll Be Back Before Midnight?*

**Colley:** It was one specific experience, at the Blyth Festival in 1976. I was commissioned to write *The Huron Tiger* — about a local character. It was a good play; I put a lot into that one. Yet nobody wanted it. That's the only play I've ever written that has had only one production. Nobody seemed to want historical stuff. I got a sniff of what was about — I was close to becoming quite bitter about it. So I thought to myself, sitting in my damp basement somewhere in Toronto, that I have to write myself out of this rut. I wanted to write something which no one could turn down because it was either historical, or a

costume drama, or it was too expensive.

**BiC:** *Why did you write a murder-thriller when you planned a commercial vehicle? Why not a love story?*

**Colley:** Well, I just love killing people — on stage. I've killed thousands on stage so far. It stems back from my childhood — I had the ability to intrigue people or to scare the hell out of them. My twin brother and I were always at odds; he was stronger, so he beat me up a lot. To get him back, I'd scare him silly. I discovered it was a good way of protecting myself. I used to love Friday the 13th at school in England. It's still a lot of fun, like pulling a prank.

**BiC:** *Have all the scares you've so carefully crafted into I'll Be Back Before Midnight been retained production after production?*

**Colley:** It annoys me sometimes when I go to see a production and I discover that many directors just don't know how to scare people, to make them jump right out of their seats. There's a science to it, you see. So when I wrote *Heads You Lose* I decided to make the frights a little more foolproof, more basic, bigger. The biggest disappointment about having a show done so often is to see just how badly it can be done when certain people get their hands on it.

**BiC:** *Why have you not yet had I'll Be*

*Back Before Midnight published?*

**Colley:** Because I'm still changing the script. I might want to change something else two and a half months down the road. Another very important reason, however, is that with a successful play, as soon as you get it published you're sharing all your royalties with the publisher. It costs me \$6.00 to photocopy the script and send it off to a theatre company — I authorize them to reproduce their own copies. Say that production brings me royalties of \$2,000; there'd be 10 per cent gone to some publisher . . . and for what? *I'll Be Back Before Midnight* alone will make me over \$20,000 in royalties this year. Obviously it'll get to a point where I'll have to have it published, but not yet.

**BiC:** *It's been noted that there are several endings to I'll Be Back Before Midnight. Why?*

**Colley:** After the play was first produced in 1979 at Blyth, the response was very positive, but some people suggested the ending needed a little work. A little work. So that winter, I decided — as an exercise — to write a series of alternative endings. I ended up with four endings. There were four theatres producing it the following summer so I sent the four endings to each company, expecting there to be a consensus on the best end-

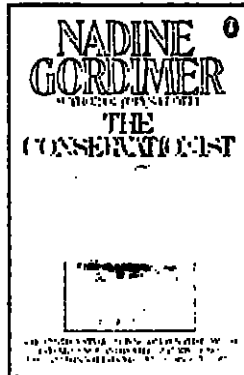
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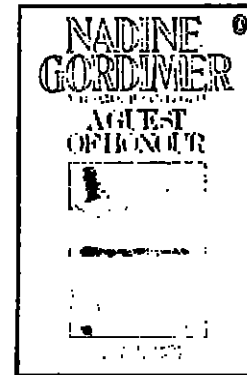
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ing. They each chose a different one. I could've insisted on one, but I didn't really know which one I liked best. I've finally made the choice — it's quite close to the version done at the Tarragon in summer, 1980.

EC: *Why did you write a pre-quel to I'll Be Back: Before Midnight and not a sequel?*

Colley: Because during rehearsals for *I'll Be Back: Before Midnight* actors would always ask me, What happened to this and that? To George's wife and son? So as I spent all this time explaining the history of the characters I realized I had another play there. I set it back 15 years, and *voilà*, the story was in motion. A very simple process. *Heads You Lose* did well at the box office last summer, even though I felt it was a bit too camp. I'd like to complete a trilogy, but — oddly enough — *I'll Be Back: Before Midnight* would be at the end. The last show I write will be somewhere between *Heads You Lose* and *I'll Be Back: Before Midnight*.

EC: *Would you like to write for any other medium? The screen? or a novel?*

Colley: The option has been purchased for a screen version of *I'll Be Back: Before Midnight*. I'm very interested in film and less so in television. Television is an anonymous profession of committees. Who are today's great television writers? I'm not the kind of person who writes something to be anonymous. I don't think I could ever write a novel. You have to write what you know. And I don't read novels — maybe once every two years. But I do see plays. Lots of them. And I see films. And I read many, many scripts. I write instinctively. I've had no writing training. I think I'd written three or four plays before I had even heard or understood the words "exposition" or "denouement." □

## LETTERS

### To Atwood, with love

John Hofsess's review of Margaret Atwood's critical prose and *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, edited by Atwood, was a nice piece to include in your February issue so close to Valentine's Day. It's obvious from the review Hofsess has a strong crush on women writers in general and Atwood in particular. I suspect it's just a

silly infatuation much like school-children go through with their teachers, but it was heart-warming all the same. When Hofsess sneers at male writers *en masse*, suggesting they cannot "transcend the paltry compulsions of ego and penis" he can be forgiven easily enough. Winter is a lonely time of the year, especially in New York, and a journalist must always remember not to bore anyone. His further suggestion that adher-



ence to a particular morality must precede good literature is a little less easy to find humorous. Book banners and their friends in assorted pulpits have been preaching this line for years.

After being so bold as to assert that women poets have an almost exclusive monopoly on social awareness why didn't Hofsess quote a few lines from some of their poems? There are hundreds of good poems by men and women in the Oxford anthology, but not one line was quoted in the review. Does Hofsess really like poetry?

Robert Eady  
Kanata, Ont.

I have just read John Hofsess's review of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, and though I find it quite sensible, I would like to add two further points. Number one is that Hofsess, probably like most readers, assumes Margaret Atwood has actually read the entire works of each poet anthologized. Hence, he can state that Robin Skelton's "lifetime output" is "boiled down to three entries." This may well be true, but only maybe. Having attended a reading at the University of Toronto to launch the book, I offer the following example of how, perhaps, this book is not all it appears to be.

Upon introducing Roo Borson, Atwood offered the usual well-mannered praise that such an occasion requires, then went on to say that she thought Borson's collection, *A Sad Device*, was a wonderful "first book." The subsequent blush on Atwood's face when Borson stepped up to the podium was the result of Borson informing Atwood, quickly and discreetly, that this was not her first book. Indeed, by my

count, there are three others — *Landfall*, *In the Smoky Light of the Fields*, and *Rain*. Surely if one were going to include a new poet in such an anthology, one that Atwood is betting her money on to produce a few literary chestnuts, as she herself has said, one would glance through a poet's complete works (only four!) or, at least, read the back cover of *A Sad Device* where the other previous books are mentioned. Yes, in this particular case, it may be a small omission on Atwood's part — but it is a telling one.

Point number two is more predictable: namely, the poets who were not included in this anthology. Maclean's has already mentioned George McWhirter. It seems to me that *Books in Canada* could provide a wonderful forum for readers to list other candidates. Maybe you could keep a list or survey to see who wins the most mentions and send it on to Atwood, who no doubt anticipates some protests.

My own nominees: George Amabile — one of the handful of Canadian poets who has published not only in the best CanLit mags but the best American mags (*Poetry*, *New Yorker*, among others) as well; Leona Gom — a poet whose gifts are still growing, deepening at a thrilling rate; Joy Kogawa — her book *A Choice of Dreams* speaks for itself; and Erin Mouré — why this fine poet and fellow Anansi compatriot wasn't included is a mystery. Luckily, the Governor General's committee thought better of her than Atwood when they nominated Mouré (along with Musgrave and Ondaatje) for her first book.

Jacquie Coulson  
Toronto

### Win some . . .

I suspect I may be speaking for a lot of readers when I say I always enjoy I.M. Owen's reviews. I find him informative, quietly insightful, reasonable in his judgements, entertaining, and trustworthy from a consumer's point of view. If he can't be enticed into doing more reviews for you, perhaps he can be held up as a model for other reviewers. Or maybe both.

David McFadden  
Toronto

### . . . Lose some

After reading I.M. Owen's exceptionally stupid aside on Joseph Conrad in his review of Josef Skvorecky's *The Swell Season* ("Though Skvorecky is a professor of English at the University of Toronto, he wisely continues to write in his native language. How often I've wished that Joseph Conrad had fol-

lowed this sensible course.”), may I suggest you assign him works to review where his obvious talents would be more aptly squandered. I think the novels of Barbara Cartland might present an appropriate challenge to his obvious abilities.

It should also be pointed out that Owen's remark, though purposely intended to slander Conrad, demeans Skvorecky as well with the implicit suggestion that emigrés should be deterred from writing in any language other than their mother tongue. The arrogance inherent in such an attitude indicates a literary and linguistic xenophobia that is excusable only to the extent that we are reminded there are still some among us who prefer the comfort of the colonial mind to the probing and troubling uncertainty of their own.

Bradford Robinson  
Comox, B.C.

*J.M. Owen replies:* It's an interesting point, which is why I raised it. My opinion is that Conrad's style is often more pompous and stilted than he intended, and that he would have been an even greater novelist if he had written in the language he knew best. I'm aware that there's another opinion, and (unlike some) I don't dismiss those who disagree with me as necessarily stupid. I'm also aware that there are exceptions to my general rule: notably, in this country, George Jonas in English and Naim Kattan in French. And I sometimes wonder if it's significant that their native languages are not Indo-European. As an occasional translator from French to English I'm acutely conscious of the traps set by the basic similarities of the two languages.

By the way, since Bradford Robinson considers me incompetent to review anybody higher than Barbara Cartland, I presume he doesn't share my admiration for Josef Skvorecky. Well, that's his right. I don't share his evident passion for unanimity.

#### Statistics Canada

More power to your essayist Paul Stuewe (February) who says things about the state of criticism in Canada that ought to be said: that Northrop Frye's theoretical stance about Canadian "literature" is flawed and that Margaret Atwood's conclusions are nonsense; that the legitimate mode of literary analysis is the traditional one, the mode that bases its judgement on "stylistics, fidelity to reality, or richness of imaginative invention." I drew some quantitative judgements in my excursion into this critical area in my essay in the University of Toronto Press's *The Arts*

*in Canada: The Last Fifty Years*, but that was out of a love of the distinction of Canadian writing, and its conclusion evolved on the side of God, that a poem is a poem and not a statistic.

Would you please deny further access to your pages of that moronic critic Christopher Levenson who finds my *Gradations of Grandeur* statistically constipated.

Ralph Gustafson  
North Hatley, Que.

#### CANWIT NO. 82

O CLA  
J E RK

LAST MONTH'S *Books in Canada* carried a review of Robert Zend's "drop poems," in which he divides the letters of people's names into two lines in order to comment on their personalities. (His remark on Joe Clark is reprinted above). Contestants are invited to compose similar comments — positive or negative — on well-known Canadians, living or

dead. The prize is \$25, and the deadline is May 1. Address: CanWit No. 82, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9.

#### Results of CanWit No. 80

OUR REQUEST for new euphemisms produced a baffling array of bureaucratic obfuscation, much of it, unfortunately, drawn from everyday usage. The winner is Stephen Elliott of Peterborough, Ont., for a list that includes:


- Unrealizable fiscal disequilibrium: a balanced budget
- Expected fiscal disequilibrium: a budgetary deficit
- Uni-role familial unit: single-parent family
- Interoccupational remuneration: unemployment cheque
- Post-occupational remuneration: welfare cheque
- Controversial anatomical representations: pornography
- Post-coital contraceptive: abortion
- Trade mission: especially well-timed business holiday taken by a politician
- Uncontainable intrinsic radiation superfluity: nuclear meltdown

#### Honourable mentions:

- Terminal child-care: abortion
- Society norms enforcer: policeman

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- Verbal infelicity: lie
  - Between careers: unemployed
  - Cosmic reordering: nuclear explosion
  - Temporary personality change: drunk
  - Industrial action: strike
- Barry Baldwin, Calgary

- Hearing handicapped: deaf
  - Palliative care unit: ward for the dying
  - Terminally ill: dead
  - Inner city: slum
- Andrew G. Gann, Sackville, N.B.

### 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:

#### NON-FICTION

**For Services Rendered: Leslie James Bennett and the RCMP Security Service**, by John Sawatsky, Doubleday. As an objective, exhaustive reporter, Sawatsky leaves the conclusions up to the reader, but his examination of the counter-espionage cases that led to the "retirement" of Leslie James Bennett — the Welsh-born civilian who was forced out of the RCMP Security Service in 1972 — strongly suggests that Bennett got a bad deal.

#### POETRY

**Winter Sun/The Dumbfounding**, by Margaret Avison, McClelland & Stewart. *Winter Sun* (1960), Avison's first book of poetry, won a Governor General's Award, and *The Dumbfounding* (1966) established

her reputation as one of the most accomplished poets in the country. With their republication in a single volume, a new generation of readers can experience her power of perception, which penetrates apparently discrete facts and arrives at the transcendental nature of reality.

### 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:

- An Acceptance of Paradox/Essays on Canadian Diplomacy in Honour of John W. Holmes, edited by Kim Richard Nossal, Bryant Press.
- Aggressive Transport, by Brian Fawcett, Talonbooks.
- Alfred, The Dragon Who Lost His Flame, by G.M. Buckaway, illustrated by Sorie Jenkins, Three Trees Press.
- All for Margarita and other stories, by David Wanstley, Datwax Press.
- The American Reel, by Peter Sanger, Pottersfield Press.
- As For Me and My House, by Sinclair Ross, McClelland & Stewart.
- From Asylum to Welfare, by Harvey G. Simmons, National Institute on Mental Retardation.
- Baker's Heaven, by Wence Horat, illustrated by Sorie Jenkins, Three Trees Press.
- In Bare Apple Boughs, by Tim Merrill, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- Barometer Rising, by Hugh MacLennan, McClelland & Stewart.
- The Black Bird, by David Halliday, The Porcupine's Quill.
- A Bonus, by Elizabeth Smart, Polygonic Press.
- British Columbia Disasters, by Derke Fethick, Mr. Paperback.
- Canajan, E.M.T., by Mark M. Orkin, illustrations by Isaac Bickersstaff, General Publishing.
- Charge, by Leigh Faulkner, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- As Close As We Came, by Barry Callaghan, Exile Editions.
- Cogwheels and Other Stories, by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, translated by Howard Norman, illustrated by Naoko Matsubara, Mosaic Press.
- Cold Comfort: a play of love & bondage, by Jim Garrard, Talonbooks.
- Continental Trance, by bp Nichol, Oolchan Books.
- Critics Be Damned, by Paul Surdin, Three Trees Press.
- Cruise Ships: The Inside Story, by Gary Bannerman, Collins.
- Culture and Adult Education: A Study of Alberta and Quebec, by Hayden Roberts, University of Alberta Press.
- The Developing West, edited by John E. Foster, University of Alberta Press.
- Diet Strategy: How to Win the War Against Weight, by Malcolm Dean with Ronda Clanfield, Seal Books.
- Does She Know She's There?, by Nicola Schaefer, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- Don't Call Me Sugar Baby!, by Dorothy Joan Harris, Scholastic-TAB.
- Duet, by Gertrude Katz, Mosaic Press.
- Eleven Exiles, edited by Phyllis R. Blakely and John N. Grant, Dundurn.
- Eleven Poems, by Elizabeth Smart, Owen Kirton.
- Escape: Adventures of a Loyalist Family, by Mary Beacock Fryer, Dundurn.
- Excerpts from an Anonymous Life, by Donna O'Sullivan, Primary Press.
- The Follies Are Thirsty, by Denise Boucher, Talonbooks.
- False Shuffles, by June Urquhart, Press Porcupine.
- Fast Living, by Lesley Choyce, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- Feeding Your Child, by Louise Lambert-Lagace, General Publishing.

- Folktales of the Canadian Sephardim, by Andre E. Elbaz, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- A Fountain Sealed, by Margaret Epp, Kindred Press.
- Four Contemporary Novelists, by Kerry McSweeney, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Frontier Theatre, by Chad Evans, Sono Nis Press.
- Fugue Bancus: A Poem, by J. Michael Yates, Sono Nis Press.
- Gold Mountain: The Chinese in the New World, by Anthony B. Chan, New Star Books.
- Goodbye, Carleton High, by B.J. Bond, Scholastic-TAB.
- A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend, by Ralph Mould, Talonbooks.
- Has Anybody Seen My Umbrella?, by Max Ferguson, Scholastic-TAB.
- Hidden River Poems, by Allan Cooger, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- The History of the Canadian West #2, Mr. Paperback.
- In the Blood, by Helen J. Rosta, NeWest.
- Interlude, by Robert Marceau, translated by Barry Callaghan, illustrated by Bernard Huin, Exile Editions.
- Intimate Friends, by Charlotte Vale Allen, McClelland & Stewart.
- Labyrinths of Voices: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch, by Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, NeWest.
- The Last Hiding Place, by Terrence Heath, Oolchan Books.
- Letter to the Past: An Autobiography, by George Woodcock, Fitzhenry & Whiteside.
- The Lion's Mouth, by Caterina Edwards, NeWest.
- Little Loon and the Sun Dance, by Dianne L. Common, illustrated by Carol Kemp, Permian Publications.
- Little Wild Onion of the Lillooet, by Diane L. Common, illustrated by Carol Kemp, Permian Publications.
- Love and the Universe, by George Kunnasek, George's Publishing.
- Loyalist Literature, by Robert S. Allen, Dundurn.
- Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System, Edited by Sherrill E. Grace and Lorraine Weir, University of British Columbia Press.
- Marie of the Méfis, by Diane L. Common, illustrated by Greg Pruden, Permian Publications.
- Microcomputers for Libraries, edited by Jane Beaumont and Donald Krueger, Canadian Library Association.
- Mount Royal, by Robert Marceau, translated by David Homel, Exile Editions.
- The Mountain and the Valley, by Ernest Buckler, McClelland & Stewart.
- Mr. Wurtzel and the Halloween Bunny, by Anita Krumin, illustrations by Brian Fay, Three Trees.
- The Northern Isle of Dreams, by Christine Laporte, illustrated by Judie Shore, Three Trees.
- Pack of Parables, by Lillian Marcus, illustrations by Lisa Wood, Scholastic-TAB.
- Partners in Furs: A History of the Fur Trade in Eastern James Bay 1600-1870, by Daniel Francis and Toby Morantz, McGill-Queen's.
- Portrait of Canada, by Jane Callwood, PaperJacks.
- The Prodigal Sun, by Boscha Layton, Mosaic Press.
- Puzzle Party, by Pauline Philip, designed and illustrated by Lesley Wood, Scholastic-TAB.
- Quebec and Its Historians: 1840 to 1920, by Serge Gagnon, Harvest House.
- Reshaping Your Investment Strategies for the 1970s, by Henry B. Zimmer and V. Jeanne Kaufman, Collins.
- Rolls Royce, by Giorgio Bassani, Aya Press.
- The Solist and the Warrior, by Crawford E. Dewar, Highway Book Shop.
- Samaritan, by Philippe Van Rjndt, Lester & Orpen Dennys.
- Sarah and the Persian Shepherd, by Margaret Epp, illustrated by Ruth Wiens, Kindred Press.
- The Second Scroll, by A. M. Klein, McClelland and Stewart.
- The Servant in German Enlightenment Comedy, by Alison Scott-Pretorenzios, The University of Alberta Press.
- Seventeen Odes, by Patrick White, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- Singing the Stars, by Toby MacLennan, Coach House Press.
- Songs and Sayings of an Ulster Childhood, by Alice Kane, edited by Edith Fowke, McClelland & Stewart.
- A Steady Hand, by Mike Doyle, The Porcupine's Quill.
- The Stone Angel, by Margaret Laurence, McClelland & Stewart.
- Stone Wear/A Sequence of the Blood, by Dianne Joyce and Eva Tibanyi, Aya Press.
- Such Is My Beloved, by Morley Callaghan, McClelland & Stewart.
- The Sudbury Incident, by Frank Southern, York Publishing & Printing.
- Swamp Angel, by Ethel Wilson, McClelland & Stewart.
- Symmetries, by Marin Sorescu, Hounslow Press.
- Technological Risk, edited by N.C. Lind, University of Waterloo Press.
- Toward the Light: Wood Engravings by Michael McCurdy, The Porcupine's Quill.
- Townswomen and Other Poems, by Rosalind Eve Conway, Mosaic Press.
- Traditions, by Heather Cadby, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.
- Undertow, by George Swede, Three Trees.
- The Vision Tree, by Phyllis Webb, Talonbooks.
- A Voiceless Song: Photographs of the Slave Lands, by John Paskievich, Lester & Orpen Dennys/National Film Board of Canada.
- What can I do this summer?, by Carl L. Bedal, Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, U. of T.
- Where Have We Been, by Jan Zwicky, Brick Books.
- Who Cares About Kurent?, by Alison Lobans Piro, Scholastic-TAB.
- Winnipeg 8: The Ice-cold Hothouse, edited by Charles Wilkins, photographs by John Paskievich, Queenston House.
- Your Teen and Drugs: A Parent's Handbook on Drug Abuse, by Norman Panzica, McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
- Zimmer's Quick & Easy Guide to Doing Your Own Income Tax, by Henry B. Zimmer, Totem Books.
- Zok, translated by Robin Skelton, The Porcupine's Quill.

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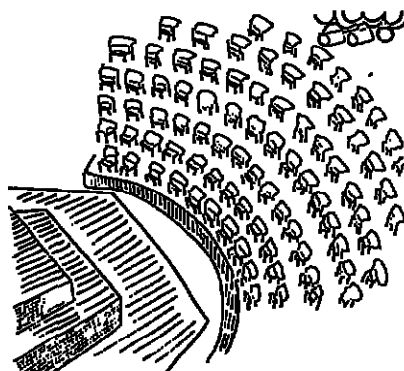
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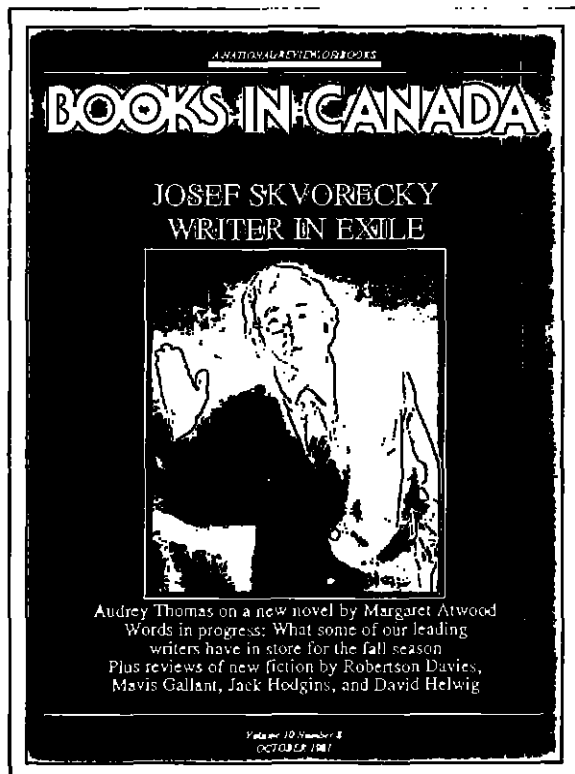
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