

A NATIONAL REVIEW OF BOOKS

# IN CANADA

## THE PRIVATE LIFE OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE



Sex, God, and Rudy Wiebe  
Susan Crean on the CanCult business  
The literary life in Yellowknife

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BOOKS IN CANADA



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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY RICHARD ENGLISH

# Winter's tales: observations on the literary life in Yellowknife, N.W.T.

## Polar prose

IN EARLY FALL, when birds regroup and the caribou gather into vast herds for the migration south, Yellowknife residents also cluster together, as if answering their own innate call: they form the French Club, the Film Society, the Hockey Association. They join classes in Oriental Cooking, Dog Obedience, Tiny Tot Tumbling, and Dancercise for Larger Women. I joined the Writers' Group.

The founding meeting was on a Wednesday evening in the Northern Books Room of Yellowknife Library. Fourteen men and women in their 20s and 30s gathered around a long, veneered table, looking down at their hands or up at the bookshelves — rows of leather-bound volumes chronicling the rigorous lives of explorers and pioneers. One by one we introduced ourselves. Biologists, housewives, schoolteachers, and book-store clerks declared themselves poets, novelists, playwrights, short-story writers, and authors of children's books. One of us had actually published: she had written the text to a picture book.

As we went around the table, some felt the need to define the purpose of the group, beyond the unstated one of needing something to join for the winter. "I guess the reason is to get inspiration from other writers," said a woman named Mayo, "the way Hemingway and Durrell inspired each other." Another woman, named Laura, said, "I think my writing is terrible, but other people say it's good, so I'd like to really *know*."

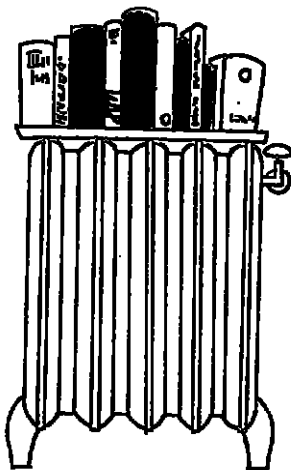
Somebody suggested we elect a chairman. Another moved we go for a beer. The latter motion was carried unanimously, and we retired to the Mackenzie Lounge, settling into soft couches beneath a black-and-white portrait of Sir Alexander Mackenzie himself, the Scottish explorer who pursued Canada's longest river to the Arctic Ocean, to his disappointment — he had been looking for the Pacific.

Talk turned to editors and publishers, how unimaginative they are, how slow to return manuscripts, how unhelpful in their rejection letters. We analyzed the poetry market. By the time the group dispersed at 10 p.m., most members had

decided to enter *Chatelaine's* short-story contest.

I wasn't ready to go home, and scoured the bar for a familiar face. The Mackenzie Lounge is long, low, and dimly lit, a depressing place in summer but an ideal winter refuge. I spotted an acquaintance at the other end, and she introduced me to a woman named Marion who turned out to be the co-owner of a local design and typesetting company called Outcrop. Marion ordered cognac all around and asked for more coffee. Outcrop, she said, is going into publishing. "We're looking for manuscripts that really express the North."

She had hired a former McGraw-Hill editor in Toronto to scout the market and come up with ideas. One was for an anthology of stories culled from diaries of early explorers and missionaries about how they spent Christmas in the North. Another called for a profile of Yellowknife, to appear in time for the city's 50th anniversary next year. "We want to publish four books over the next year but we're having trouble finding writers," Marion said. "Everybody up here seems to be so busy and so involved



in everything else they have a hard time getting down to writing."

The next writers' meeting was two weeks later at Carolyn's. She lives in a big house overlooking Back Bay, in the charming part of Yellowknife — Old Town — near where hopeful gold prospectors built the town's first cabins. The

group had dwindled to eight. I was the only male. We sat cross-legged around the fireplace, beside a coffee table neatly set with books on how to write. It was a "reading night": members read their poems about the Precambrian Shield, about wedges of Canada geese honking over Great Slave Lake, about pine-scented breezes blowing through boreal forests. I wanted to tell them about Marion and Outcrop, but I was afraid of sounding Philistine.

The meetings carried on every second Wednesday, always at Carolyn's. One night Sally enchanted everyone by reading from a children's novel she was writing — about a boy and girl on a quest to find the magic code to release a Thought trapped in bodily form. We applauded when she finished, but she stopped coming to the meetings. She phoned each time to say she was too busy writing.

One night we opened a book of photographs and wrote for 10-minute stretches about what we saw, comparing stories and discovering our disparate interests and writing styles. One night Debbie read a draft of her *Chatelaine* story about a woman who deliberately gets pregnant then tells her boyfriend, an oil-rig worker in Tuktoyaktuk, not to come to see her again. One night we discussed reports of U.S. plans to launch a cruise missile somewhere in the Arctic and send it on a test run through the Mackenzie Valley, over our heads, to Cold Lake, Alta.

By December, parties and shopping were taking their toll on attendance. By Christmas the group had dwindled to three. I left for a holiday and returned wondering if the group had survived. It had. We were to meet at Erica's that week.

By Wednesday, the temperature had dropped to  $-45^{\circ}$  Celsius. Ice fog had settled over the city. There was no wind. Above every chimney, smoke and vapour stood in narrow, motionless pillars. Pedestrians stalked like astronauts through the night mist, bundled up and unrecognizable. The scene was unearthly, lonely. I hurried to Erica's.

Her house is in New Town. It has a living room more like a medium-sized hall: a split-level floor carpeted wall to

wall, a well-stocked bar in the middle, and a huge stone fireplace at one end. The group was back to strength — eight people sitting around the fire on high-backed drawing-room chairs.

Erica said she had a great idea that would get us all published. We would negotiate a regular 500-word spot with the editor of the weekly *Yellowknifer* and take turns writing erudite, off-the-wall pieces of the kind that might run in the *New Yorker's* "Talk of the Town."

Carolyn said she could write about a friend who taught sex education and had had her vagina stolen. But there was one problem: what would we call ourselves? So far we were just the Writers' Group, but that wouldn't do. Suggestions were made. Yellowknife Writers' Circle. Mackenzie Highway Writers' Cooperative. Cabbages and Kings. Pen Inc. Tundra something. Arctic something. Little Sticks. Goldirocks. We finally settled on Yellowknife Writers, Eh?, a name some thought possessed an authentically Northern ring. The *Yellowknifer* columns were put off, however, with the approach of *Chatelaine's* deadline. Almost everyone was entering, and meetings were taken up with readings and criticism.

Meanwhile, Erica won a two-hour spot on the local cable station for late April and donated it to the group for a live reading. It was a busy time. And in the midst of it all, Joyce sprang a new idea that was to prove the highlight of the winter.

She had written to the Canada Council for money to bring two real poets to Yellowknife — Gary Geddes from Montreal and Lorna Crozier, formerly Lorna Uher, from Regina. The council said yes, but addressed the reply to "Yellowknife Writers," dropping the "Eh?"

We booked a hall, took out ads, painted posters, and talked up the event with friends.

The poets arrived on schedule on a mild, sunny day (-20°) and I took them on tours — to the CBC for an interview, to the bush-pilot memorial in Old Town, across Yellowknife Bay on the ice road to Dettah, to the Legislature where they shook hands with the Commissioner, and to the museum to check out the lounge where they were to read. Everywhere we met people who had other commitments that night — a basketball game, a wedding shower, a class on filing income tax. In the end, 30 people showed — a good turnout.

Afterward half the audience adjourned with the poets to the Mackenzie Lounge, to the spot under the Alexander Mackenzie portrait where we had gone after our first meeting. Some of the group were talkative, others oddly intro-

spective, as if contemplating the reading and wondering if we could one day be as good. One line of Lorna's haunted me:

*It will take a blade  
Thin as love, sharp as dreams  
To open me.*

— JOHN GODDARD

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## West Coast letter

IT SEEMS entirely fitting that the headquarters for Women and Words is located in the B.C. Sports and Fitness Building, in an office labelled Special Olympics. At our meeting not only is the coordinator, Betsy Warland, wearing red rugby pants, a T-shirt, and runners, but she displays the kind of enthusiasm and *energy* (in women's movement parlance) that is necessary for so grand an organizational scheme. What is in the planning is no less than a national meeting of women "involved with all aspects of the written word: writers, editors, publishers, critics, academics, librarians, printers, typesetters, distributors, booksellers, translators, educational and cultural workers."

In this land of "too much geography" a conference that brings Canadians together is usually viewed as a positive force. At worst it is seen as innocuous or mildly frivolous. But any natural hyperbole that the organizers might have worked up has been so eclipsed by recent denunciations of Women and Words as a sinister plot to undermine Canadian letters that it has been elevated from just another conference to something of an *issue*. Last fall one Toronto columnist linked it to that virulent brand of West-Coast madness that produces mass murderers, religious cults, and assorted atavisms. "Maybe one of the reasons this conference is disturbing to some men," Betsy Warland speculates, "is that it calls into question the male concept of the Muse. Do men own the Muse?"

Beneath this cloud of controversy, the gathering — at the University of British Columbia June 30-July 3 — proves to be much more pragmatic. In an attempt to promote women's work, at least one-third of the time will be devoted to building a professional and regional "network." Another third is given over to basic how-to information. That's why the organizers (about 30 in all) felt it necessary to cut such a wide swath through the literary world, from poets to paste-up artists. "We felt we needed to hear from all points in the system," explains Victoria Freeman, the other

full-time coordinator. "We also wanted to initiate a cross-cultural exchange along English-French lines and with native women." The Muse comes in for only a fraction of the conference's attention, under the heading of new forms and breakthroughs, language and theory, and the craft of writing, "since writing is still the resource from which all these other things spin off," says Warland.

With membership topping 400 and growing weekly, a wide variety of women have committed themselves. McClelland & Stewart president Linda McKnight, Marian Engel, Audrey Thomas, Jane Rule, Margaret Atwood (who took out an institutional membership because she is, well. . .), Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, Mary Meigs, Carol Shields, Joy Kogawa, Judith Merrill, and so on. Almost \$20,000 (toward a projected \$90,000 budget) has been raised from grants, memberships, and donations.

At one level, it is all too easy to be skeptical or mocking — the program is incredibly ambitious. A glance at the guidelines for submission of papers: "Please keep in mind the theme of the conference: *how women who have chosen the medium of words are affected by the words and the choice on the subconscious, conscious, interpersonal, social, and professional levels.*" (Emphasis theirs.) Note the two, four, five dozen topics for panel or workshop discussion. But the idea has far-reaching appeal. Money is being raised in Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg to finance travel expenses. Car pools and charter flights are being organized. Eighteen months of planning, mostly by volunteers, have been devoted toward Warland's impresario vision.

There can be no doubt, despite the apparent "matriarchy" of Canadian literature, that women in this country are in a disadvantaged position in the literary marketplace. Studies from sources as diverse as the federal departments of communications and labour consistently produce a barrage of statistics from which such sad pronouncements can be made. Cold comfort that is. Governments have a habit of supporting such high-visibility conferences as a way of siphoning off pressure for effective measures. It's still open to question whether Women and Words can change things.

Warland is characteristically confident. "We're breaking the isolation, the sense of not realizing the resources we have and what women can do for each other. Some needs of women members in existing professional writing organizations are not being met. Now, you can set up a feminist caucus within the

organization or, as we are doing with Women and Words, meet on an alternate level, cutting across disciplines. Once we do this, it will never be the same in Canada again."

THE FEDERATION of B.C. Writers is an alphabet of acronyms. West-Coast members of ACTRA, PWAC, WUC, LCP, CAA, GCP — in other words, the poets, playwrights, journalists, and authors who already belong to various national (i.e. Toronto-dominated) professional associations — have been invited to shelter all their hats under one umbrella, the Fed. Membership — either as Ordinary (\$15 per annum) or Associate (\$10) — is also available to otherwise unaffiliated writers if they meet appropriate entry criteria.

"Some people were nervous that a provincial federation would weaken the national organizations," says founding president David Watmough, "but the opposite is true. There is so much skepticism toward Toronto-centric associations that we provide a release of pressure. We act as the sort of safety valve that holds Canada together. Besides, many people had already withdrawn from their national association. It has no sense of reality. You don't have any feeling of getting your

dues' worth sitting on the West Coast and hearing about meetings on Bloor Street."

The Fed's main thrust is to coordinate lobbying to raise both the profile and the income of B.C.'s writers. So far, the results have been mixed. A meeting with Vancouver *Sun* publisher Clark Davey won nothing more substantial than a hearing. "Local newspapers froth at the mouth about Canadian hockey teams or B.C.'s lumber interests," says Watmough, but when you turn to that oddly named section, 'Entertainment,' you find book reviews from the *Los Angeles Times*. Our newspapers are the last outpost of colonialism."

A \$5,300 federal-provincial employment grant enabled the Fed to initiate work in three priority projects: outreach workshops, a directory of members, and archives. But money dried up at the end of March, and an expected \$26,000 grant from the B.C. Cultural Fund failed to materialize. There is no paid staff or office, simply a post-office box and the occasional use of the Literary Storefront's facilities.

"We spent the first year persuading a disparate group of writers that they can work together," Watmough says. "Now we have to improve the image of the profession by encouraging members not to

undersell their work. The Fed enables people to put aside their mini-horizons and see a larger horizon."

THE STATE OF the Federation of B.C. Writers' finances will affect how the B.C. branch of the Writers' Union of Canada spends its newly acquired "conscience money." In an innovative move, Manhattan Books, which carries exclusively remaindered titles, has offered one per cent of sales — to a maximum of \$400 a month — to the union. "It's because of my sympathy for the writer," says Nick Hunt, co-owner with Celia Duthie (of yes, Duthie's Books, Vancouver's oldest, quality book-store group). "If we were going to make money out of remainders, then somehow we wanted part of that to get back to the writer."

In the first two months of the store's operation, \$517 was added to the chronically empty union coffers. "We had to close our office because of lack of funding," says branch president Richard Wright. "We're making tentative plans to re-open — depending on what the Fed does. But now at least we can afford a telephone and a mailbox. We're appreciative of the money."

But remaindered books are not an easy subject for writers. Although the



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union backed its executive in accepting Manhattan's offer, Audrey Thomas felt uneasy and cast the sole abstention to the otherwise unanimous vote. "The argument going around is that this is the way the world works, and we should be properly grateful. But as long as we accept the idea of remaindered books, then remaindered book stores will proliferate." Thomas is also wary of the union's receiving funds from a private book store. It feels too much like a publicity gimmick, and ultimately leads to "less money for writers. There's a strong feeling that publishers deliberately over-run books in order to remainder them, and now with new American tax laws on inventory, there's even more incentive for them to get rid of stock."

Nick Hunt assures that no foreign editions of Canadian-authored books will

be purchased as long as they are still in print in Canada. "The flak is about bringing in bootlegged titles. When Knopf remaindered Margaret Laurence and Pierre Berton, Coles bought the U.S. edition and sold it here while its Canadian counterpart was still in print. We won't do that." Hunt is throwing a wide net for his acquisitions — New York, London, as well as Toronto and locally — and carries a variety of Canadian authors, such as Patrick Lane and Dave Godfrey.

Audrey Thomas remains uncomfortable. "I not only won't buy remaindered books; if anyone gives me one for Christmas, I won't read it."

Concludes Richard Wright, "If it comes to a choice between that or pulping a book, I'd opt for remaindering."

— ELEANOR WACHTEL

### ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

## Whence came the redundant 'the' before *hoi polloi*, and what's its connection to the misused *hoity-toity*?

By **BOB BLACKBURN**

"[HE] FINDS IT humorous that he, the son of a Jewish manufacturer from Montreal, and yours truly, the son of a Newfoundland fisherman, hobnob with the *hoi polloi*."

That paragraph appeared in "Canada's national newspaper" under the byline of one of its most prestigious (I use the word advisedly) critics and feature writers.

Here we have no mere typographical error. Here we have a writer using a phrase whose meaning he doesn't know. The context makes it clear that he was looking for some such term as *upper crust*, or *elite*, or *crème de la crème*, and he made a compound boo-boo. *Hoi polloi* is Greek. It means, literally, the many. It is used properly to refer to the masses, the man in the street, the common folk, and so on.

It's unfortunate that the phrase crept into English use, or, rather, misuse. The *OED* itself ignores it, although the phrase finds a place in the Supplement that it should have found in the original. The first citation is from Dryden's *Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), and it is an ominous one: "If by the people you understand the multitude, the *hoi polloi*, 'tis no matter what they think; They are sometimes in the right, sometimes in the

wrong; their judgement is a mere lottery."

Well, that, I guess, is where the trouble started. Dryden used the redundant *the* before *hoi*, which means *the*, and other English writers of note followed his lead. I think we're stuck with the redundancy. If, in formal writing, you were to insert the phrase in Greek characters, doubtless it would go down well, but if, in informal writing or conversation, you were to use the phrase without the *the*, you would get funny looks.

Fowler, however, refused to buy the pleonasm. "The best solution," he wrote, "is to eschew the phrase altogether, but it is unlikely to be forgotten as long as *Iolanthe* is played.

"*Twill fill with joy and madness stark the Hoi Polloi (a Greek remark).*"

While I don't believe there's any point in being stuffy about the *the*, I can't buy the attitude affected on this (or any) subject by Jim Quinn in his sappy little book, *American Tongue and Cheek*, wherein, with more commercial acumen than serious purpose, he attempts to pander to *hoi polloi* by telling them they can't be faulted for calling themselves "THE *hoi polloi*," and by declaring that such "word snobs" as Fowler and

William Safire are really word *slobs*, and it's OK to speak lousy. Quinn is clever and amusing, but he draws heavily on the *OED* when it suits his purpose and fails to remind us that it is a historical dictionary and that its every citation is not to be taken as an example of desirable usage.

The fact that Dryden, Byron, and Cooper used the superfluous *the* does not make it right any more than the fact that a president of the United States — poor, ailing, thick-tongued Ike Eisenhower — couldn't pronounce *nuclear* makes it right for today's generation of thick-skulled TV newsmen to go on pronouncing it *nucular*. Anyway, the point of all this is not that the author of the words quoted at the top of this column used a redundant *the*. The point is that he (and, God knows, he is not alone in his culpability) misused the term in an attempt to convey the opposite of what it means. It troubles me that every authority I've referred to about *hoi polloi* really has nothing to say about it save to deplore or forgive the egregious extra *the*. None has mentioned the fact that it is becoming commonly misused by writers who should know better.

Surely there's nothing wrong with getting terribly upset when a commonly respected essayist misuses a phrase so grotesquely. This was not a matter of nuance. The man was saying black when he meant white; yes when he meant no; right when he meant wrong. He did not invent the mistake. Possibly it arises because of confusion with the term *hoity-toity*, which itself seems to have evolved in some confusion. To most of us today it connotes haughtiness or arrogance, but its first meaning is related to its origin in the verb *hoit*, which means to indulge in noisy mirth.

It's not hard to imagine some people associating *hoity-toity* with *high-and-mighty*, and the *OED* draws our attention to the variation, *highly-tighty*. Perhaps the syllable *hoi* is enough, in some minds, to evoke an image of *hoity-toitiness*.

At least this is something we can look up. Twice in the last few days I've been confused by writers who referred to a man as a *bimbo*. I know *bimbo* is a kind of brandy punch, and I know that in Mexico it's the brand name for a local equivalent of our plastic sliced bread. When I was a boy it was a sexist slang word interchangeable with *broad*. To learn what it meant in what to me was a strange context, I had to consult an editor considerably younger than I, who informed me, in a rather *hoity-toity* manner, that, to *hoi polloi* of 1983, a *bimbo* is a nerd.

I give up — for this month, anyway. □

# SANE ASSASSIN

The double life of Michael Ondaatje, mild-mannered professor of English literature and risk-taking celebrator of madmen

By JOHN OUGHTON

THE STRANGER rode in from the East with his typewriter blazing, and carved a permanent notch in Canadian literature. Like his native Sri Lanka, which gave the Western world its first taste of cinnamon, Michael Ondaatje has brought a special flavour to Canadian writing with his startling and often violent images, exotic settings, and elegant language.

By 1970 he had established a reputation as something of a poet's poet with his first two collections, *The Dainty Monsters* (1967) and *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969). But it was *Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* (1970) that really seized the public imagination and proved Ondaatje's ability to create a collage of many different genres with a consistently high level of excitement and perception.

*Billy the Kid* uses fact, fiction, poetry, song fragments, historical photographs, and even comic-strip parodies to double-barrelled effect: it adds a hallucinatory reality to the well-worn myth of Billy as the Rimbaud of gunfighting, and comments on the myth-making process itself. Although the book proved difficult for reviewers to categorize (resembling more the experimental *nouveau roman* fictions produced by such French authors as Michel Butor and Alain Robbe-Grillet than anything being done at the time in Canada), *Billy the Kid* won the 1970 Governor General's Award for poetry.

The dramatic possibilities of the book were realized in successful productions — directed by Paul Thompson and others — at Toronto Free Theatre, Stratford, and London, Ont. A dozen years later the book is still going strong: Ondaatje estimates that it has sold about 20,000 copies, including a U.S. trade edition. Ann Wall of Anansi Press says that "it's going to be in print forever. We started with an edition of 1,500 or 2,000 copies, which took a while to sell. The second year was the same, and then it started to do better. As people heard of it, it just took off and got bigger and bigger." It is still one of

the most experimental works to win a Governor General's medal.

Ondaatje's work continues to evade easy categorization. *Running in the Family*, a "fictional biography" published by McClelland & Stewart last year, details his return trips to Sri Lanka to discover his family's past and recapture his "lost childhood." As Bharati Mukherjee wrote in a *Quill & Quire* review, it is "part family saga, part the typical North American roots search, part travel account and part social history, delivered with the conciseness and intensity of poetry."

It is also a search for Ondaatje's own identity, which he has previously kept out of his work to a large degree. For a writer who turns 40 this year and has published a dozen books — including a critical study of Leonard Cohen and anthologies of long poems, animal poems, and short stories — his public personality has been as elusive as the genres of his work. In an age of motor-mouthed authors touting their tomes on talk shows, Ondaatje is a private person, far more comfortable creating his work than making public appearances.

He has plenty of reasons to feel confident about his writing. His new and selected poems, *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Poems 1963-1978*,

won him a second Governor General's Award in 1979. *Coming Through Slaughter* was a co-winner of the 1976 Books in Canada Award for First Novels. His writing is well-respected both by his literary colleagues (the Coach House Press poster of the cover of *Rat Jelly* was probably the number-one refrigerator door decoration in other Toronto writers' houses during the 1970s) and by the public at large.

But Ondaatje often seems ill at ease in public. In Ron Mann's film *Poetry in Motion* he keeps his eyes focused on the page he's reading, only looking up at the end of the poem; nervousness animates his voice, in considerable contrast to the



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL OREASTEIN

confident performing style of such of his contemporaries in the movie as the Four Horsemen and Ed Sanders. Ondaatje reads the way he speaks: softly, quickly, almost apologetically.

IT'S HARD to connect the characters — the instinctual killer Billy, the crazed jazz genius Buddy Bolden, Ondaatje's own alcoholic father — with the author. "Write what you know best," beginning novelists are usually told, but a survey of Ondaatje's life reveals that (until *Running*) he has not honoured that dictum. Born in 1943 in what was then Ceylon, of Tamil, Sinhalese, and Dutch background, Ondaatje left with his mother and three siblings for England 11 years later (his parents separated when he was four). In 1962 he followed his brother Christopher, now a successful stockbroker and publisher at Pagurian Press, to Canada. He taught at the University of Western Ontario until 1970, when a disagreement over whether he should be a creative or Ph.D. writer resulted in his moving to Glendon College, part of York University. After having two children — Griffin and Quintin — he and his artist/filmmaker wife Kim separated in 1981. He has been a Coach House editor for a decade.

Very little in Ondaatje's published interviews or public appearances really illuminates his double nature, exposes the common bond between the retiring professor/family man and the celebrator of rats and passionate madmen. That paradox is evident in his poetry, which eschews concrete effects, eccentric spelling, and neo-surrealism, but delivers in its formal, correct language a complex vision of a world of danger, transformation, humour, and pain. His poem "White Dwarfs" begins: "This is for people who disappear/for those who descend into the code/and make their room a fridge for Superman —/who exhaust costume and bones that could perform flight."

Glendon is an appropriate setting for an academic Clark Kent. It is set apart from both the main York campus and from the Toronto traffic that speeds along Bayview Avenue outside its antique gates. This little world suggests Cambridge, with its green, tranquil lawns and trees, although its main building is blandly functional. Ondaatje's office is secluded within this edifice, at the end of a second-floor corridor. As befits a professor of English literature, his office is crammed with books and paper. Posters depicting the birds of Australia and celebrating the works of Paul Bowles decorate the walls. In the course of an hour, the only other visitor is a student asking for a deadline extension. Ondaatje, anxious to get on with his writing, grants it guardedly.

Ondaatje is a handsome man, with a trim beard, expressive eyes, and silvering sideburns. He speaks in a rapid, staccato rhythm, with a vaguely English accent. The reaction to *Running*, he says, has been gratifying: "Basically, I think I was lucky. I had no idea what the reception was going to be. It was a very difficult book to balance in terms of an imaginary audience. I was writing the book for myself, for my relatives in Sri Lanka, as a Canadian . . . and thinking, 'Will this be of interest to anyone apart from me or my direct family?'"

As the youngest child, Ondaatje had few personal memories of his father and older relatives. The book documents his search for anecdotes, photographs, and other keys to a remarkable family that includes scientists, scholars, and eccentrics in its lineage. The family name had been in Ceylon for 300 years, so *Running* is not a total break with Ondaatje's concept of research balanced by imagination, found in *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. "Some people say this is quite different," he says, "but in the basic situation with historical characters it's similar. I don't mean that I see my family as historical characters . . . but after you work on a book like that for a while you begin to forget if you made this up, or if that was a true story." On the acknowledgements page he adds a charming disclaimer: "And if those listed above disapprove of the fictional air I apologize and can only

say that in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts."

The major characters are his maternal grandmother Lalla — a liberated and idiosyncratic spirit — his mother, and his father. The senior Ondaatje frittered away his inheritance and several careers in a series of alcoholic binges. Charming, witty, and dignified when sober, he became a gin-powered terror on the bottle: as *Running* recounts, he once halted one of the island's principal train lines by running naked into a tunnel and threatening suicide. He finally left when his wife, with a borrowed suit and considerable patience, talked him out.

In the early part of the century the Ondaatjes belonged to a privileged class in Sri Lanka. Unlike the snobbish British, they adopted some native ways and cared little about keeping track of racial backgrounds; but they also had the time and money to indulge in horse-racing (one Ondaatje forebear was killed by a horse), tennis, mountain retreats, and wild, drunken parties. One of the institutions of the era was the road-house. Roads were dangerous and badly maintained, so road-houses offered welcome respite. Writing one's comments in the establishment's guest-book was a tradition, and when one day Sammy Dias Bandaranaike (a relative of a future Sri Lankan prime minister) spent half a page disparaging the food, drink, and service, Ondaatje's father wrote underneath: "No complaints. Not even about Mr. Bandaranaike." The exchange was soon public knowledge, and the two men took to writing lengthy accounts of the vilest gossip available about each other's families in other guest-books. Some pages were even removed from bindings by the alarmed proprietors of the inns.

This amusing feud is now threatening to develop into a multi-generational Hatfield-and-McCoy affair, according to Ondaatje. One review of *Running* in a Sri Lankan paper was, he says, "very interesting. Bandaranaike's daughter reviewed the book and, oh God, it was just a devious, vicious thing. It was a very favourable review," he adds with a wry smile, "but she continued the attack on my family. So now I have to write a letter complaining about her."

The quality that all members of the Ondaatje clan seem to share is taking risks. Ondaatje does it in his writing, but his relatives walk along the edge in their lives. His mother refused alimony, determined to support her four children although she had never worked before. Her mother, Lalla, talked a friend into hiding a servant whom she didn't want to lose even though he had just murdered a rival. After embarking on a motorcycle trip at the age of 68 with her 60-year-old brother, she was carried away by a flood. One aunt, at the age of 25, volunteered to have an apple shot off her head "by a complete stranger in the circus profession." Ondaatje also recalls his brother Christopher piloting a sort of home-made soap box racer down steep hills, a preparation for his place on the Canadian Olympic Bobsled "B" team in 1964, when the Canadian "A" team surprised the world by taking the gold medal.

For Ondaatje, attempting the book was a risk. "It's quite the most difficult thing to do, I think, to write about your own family," he says reflectively. "I'm really glad that I wrote *Billy* and the others first."

Several critics have detailed the two-way traffic between fact and fiction, history and imagination in Ondaatje's books. He says he has tried for a different balance in each work: "With *Billy* there was already quite a myth. You didn't have to give too much information about Billy to your audience. With *Coming Through Slaughter* it was more difficult because, although there were a few manic jazz aficionados who knew Bolden, in general Bolden wasn't as well known. So I had to create a story, create a background. It was improvising. With *Running* how I used fact was totally alien, somehow."

ONDAATJE HAS MADE three films of his own, and the cinematic influence shows in the structure of his works as well as in the way he discusses them. "Usually my first draft is chaotic, all



over the place. What I've got is 400 pages which I've got to edit down to 200 pages and somehow structure. At that point I see the editing process as the way you want to edit film, reshaping things where you want to kind of bring in an undertow of fear or something like that," he says, illustrating a flow of emotion with his hands.

Film is an important medium for him. He calls movies "the main source of mythologies we have," and in his introduction to the *Long Poem Anthology* he wrote, "In a country with an absurd history of film, real film goes underground. And it comes up often in strange clothes — sometimes as theatre, sometimes as poetry."

Film allows an alternation between fluid and frozen images, and Ondaatje frequently uses or alludes to still photographs in his work. He works the photographer E.J. Belloq into *Slaughter* (correctly portraying him a black, deformed dwarf rather unlike the Keith Carradine version in Louis Malle's film *Pretty Baby*), includes photographs in *Billy the Kid* and *Running*, and even a photograph of sound — a sonograph — at the beginning of *Slaughter*. "The frozen image is like punctuation, or the way I use white space; a pause, or something like that."

Ondaatje is also working on his own corrective to the absurd history of Canadian movies, collaborating on a screenplay with Paul Thompson. The project, which Ondaatje began in 1976, is a screen version of Robert Kroetsch's 1975 novel *Badlands*, which concerns an epic and aimless journey on a raft through Alberta's badlands. He and Thompson "can work well together because we're so different," he says laughing. "I think that if we had exactly the same tastes it would be disastrous, but I can see great fights ahead, and involvement with actors. The hope would be that it would happen next summer. Paul and I have always said that if we do this thing we'll use actors whom we know and trust, and begin on a very minimal scale. Do it the best way that you believe you can, then you can leave it to someone else. So at the moment we've got the cook lined up, and we have someone building the raft."

The project with Thompson continues the collaborative method that has marked the stage productions of *Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ondaatje can't see himself writing a play of his own ("I can't write like that"), but his experience in the theatre to date has "influenced me a great deal, especially with *Running*." Lalla, for example, is almost a Sarah Bernhardt figure, with a false breast instead of a wooden leg, making grand gestures — she once presented a friend with a fresh bouquet stolen from the recipient's own garden. Ondaatje's father is an unpredictable master of ceremonies, hijacking a train and then alternately terrorizing its passengers and entertaining them with spontaneous limericks. The theatrical experience seems to have helped Ondaatje to supply motivations for such characters, and to see them from the necessary distance.

**ANOTHER PARADOX:** although Ondaatje is evidently at home with a multiplicity of media and genres, he is suspicious of state-of-the-art writing aids. "The ideal book for me would have Smell-o-vision, everything," he says, but states firmly that for the process of creation, "paper and pencil are best."

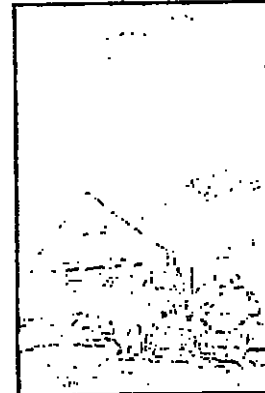
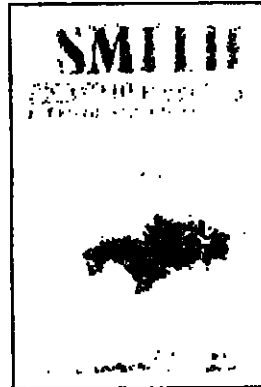
"I've been accused of being a Luddite by George Bowering," he says with a sigh. "I totally disapprove of all these people buying computers to work on their books. All these Coach House people like David McFadden, George Bowering, and Brian Fawcett have computers, and they chat to each other on them. I must say that I can't stand that idea." He confesses to owning the self-correcting Selectric on his typing desk, but adds: "That's my one buy. No further."

A traumatic episode at Coach House is responsible, he confesses: "When I first came to Coach House and got involved, I

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tried using the linotype machine. I pressed the wrong button and all the type flew across the room and smashed into the wall. At that point Stan [Bevington] banned me from using any machines."

So, with paper, pencil, and occasional forays to the typewriter, he now is working on his other long-time project, a novel set in modern Canada. He dislikes discussing work in progress, saying "I'm a very superstitious person. I tend to think of every book as the last one and put everything into it. Maybe I'm not that confident about writing in the sense that I don't feel the security that in another two years I'll be doing another book. Even with something I'm working on and almost finished I'm very nervous about whether it's working right. I expect to fall on my face one of these days."

Throughout his work on prose projects he continues to write poetry. "I really need to go back and forth between poetry and prose constantly," he explains. "The distinction is in how intimately you think. That's a problem with some writers when they write prose. They think that prose is a kind of public forum for ideas and emotions. I don't believe that. Certainly one can write a poem about a very small thing, and that's what it is, that fragment of emotion, and writing about your own immediate surroundings, getting back to that; not losing touch with that immediate landscape."

He visibly relaxes when discussing other poets he admires. He feels that the work of Phyllis Webb, Roy Kiyooka, and, yes, Leonard Cohen have been underrated. Generally he feels that "one of the big problems still in Canadian writing is that the really interesting new stuff is ignored. You're not going to see Roy Kiyooka reviewed in the *Globe and Mail*." In prose he prefers Elizabeth Smart, John Glassco, Sheila Watson, and Howard O'Hagan in Canada; the American critic and novelist John Berger; and the Italian Italo Calvino. "One of the books I wish I'd written is Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*. It's a kind of tall tale like *Gulliver's Travels*."

One suspects that *Running in the Family* is the kind of book that many other writers would like to do: at once personal and universal, informative and poetic. A hasty perusal leaves the reader with a wonderful assortment of stories and characters, but a closer look shows just how much Ondaatje has at last revealed of himself. He describes the heightened awareness called fear as common to his family, telling his father: "Whatever controlled the fear we all share we would have embraced."

*Running* also removes some of the veils of mystery about his style of writing. His violent and colourful imagery has a source in Sri Lanka where, as he details, everyday risks include falling coconuts, floods, lightning, giant monitor lizards, cobras in the house, and the 55 local poisons listed by his botanist ancestor William Charles Ondaatje. The sense of threat, of potential instability in nature and man, is at least partly drawn from his past.

Another major source, he reveals, lies in his dreams. The book began with a dream: "I saw my father, chaotic, surrounded by dogs, and all of them were screaming and barking into the tropical landscape." A friend of his father tells him of witnessing just such a scene: his father naked, dangling five black dogs from one arm held out straight. It is unimportant which came first to Ondaatje, dream or story. They are equally valid. His perception that "he had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it" applies equally well to Billy, to Buddy Bolden, and the convict Potter in *The Man with Seven Toes*. Ondaatje is committed to finding that kind of truth in dream images and translating them into literature. It seems improbable that this constantly developing and experimenting writer will realize his fears of "falling on his face" with his new novel. More likely he will present his readers with unexpected new delights, and the reviewers with yet another undefinable but accomplished work. □

# For the love of God

Rudy Wiebe's new novel — about a married professor's affair with a student — sets out to put the genitals back in the Bible

By *MAGDALENE REDEKOP*.

*My Lovely Enemy*, by Rudy Wiebe, McClelland & Stewart, 262 pages, \$13.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 8989 9).

RUDY WIEBE has been known to mock novelists who people their fiction with "pipsqueaks" and who write fiction about fiction that affirms nothing. It is startling, then, to find him making a radical shift to what seems, on the face of it, a hackneyed theme: a middle-aged professor's affair with a young student. The theme may be an old one, but the fictional method is innovative. Despite his success with more grandiloquent historical themes, Wiebe here breaks new fictional ground and takes new risks. Abandoning the realism with which Canadian readers are so comfortable, he turns to a fictional technique that mixes the realistic with the fantastic.

This lusty, subversive, bizarre, and disturbing novel is more than a turning point; it is a revolution. But like his twin protagonists — Chief Maskepetoon and the Mennonite history professor, Dyck — Wiebe himself makes a "circle of contortion" in which he is twisted "three hundred and sixty degrees so that his body is again facing in the traditional direction . . ." For this is really the same old Wiebe, come once again to remind us that Jesus came to upset the structures that be, not to reinforce them. Nothing if not ambitious, Wiebe sets out to de-platonize Christianity and to put the genitals back into the Bible. (It is no coincidence, I think, that the professor's name is Dyck.)

In the first half of the novel we enter into Dyck's double life; the first-person narration moves us back and forth from rendezvous with his "lovely enemy," Gillian, to domestic scenes with his wife Liv. While the sex is explicit, the main emphasis is philosophical. This intellectual level is most arrestingly focused in two marvellous Dostoyevskian episodes where a diaphanous Jesus appears to the startled professor. The angry Dyck waves his penis at Jesus and challenges him to say whether he ever knew the

frustration of being overwhelmed by the "big schlong." Jesus admits that "to love genitally is a beginning," but urges Dyck to go beyond genitals and think of love as a divine fire. Since the world is created (so says Jesus) by God being head over heels in love with it, and since a Father-God does his creating by talking (so says Dyck's precocious daughter), it is appropriate that the professor, in imitation of Christ, is a talking lover.

Like Amado's Dona Flor, Prof. Dyck has two spouses. Did this Jesus come to destroy the institution of marriage? Are the fantastic effects merely evidences of fictional irresponsibility used to justify moral irresponsibility? Are we being asked to participate vicariously in the glee of a professor who is having his cake and eating it too? Hasty readers may well conclude that this is so (and damn Wiebe for it), but the novel will not support such a reading. Something in the book prevents us from simply lusting along with Dyck. That something is death.

The novel's first sentence sets the tone: "There can be nothing on earth as peaceful and rewarding as working with the dead. I know, for I once was a public school teacher . . ." Dyck — a mortician on many levels — works with computers and then becomes a historian, observing those who are serenely unconscious of him because they are already dead. In the entertaining opening pages, Dyck is challenged (at a cocktail party) to prove that his God could change the past and reverse Louis Riel's death. He wins the argument with his sudden realization that for God all time is simultaneous. The repudiations of narrative sequence that follow seem to be affirmations of that transcendence, but they cannot dispel the odour of death.

The death of Dyck's father, early in the novel, is followed by the knowledge of the impending death of his mother. Although often manic in tone, the first half of the novel (entitled "May") is suf-

fused with a mood of post-coital melancholy. The effect is a little like making love while hearing footsteps walking on your grave. A one-page bridging passage joins the two halves of the novel. Entitled "The Black Bridge," the passage is horrific precisely because it deliberately fails to bridge. It isn't even a hyphen. It's the black hole at the heart of the novel, made up of the singing "voices of all those who have fallen" from the bridge.

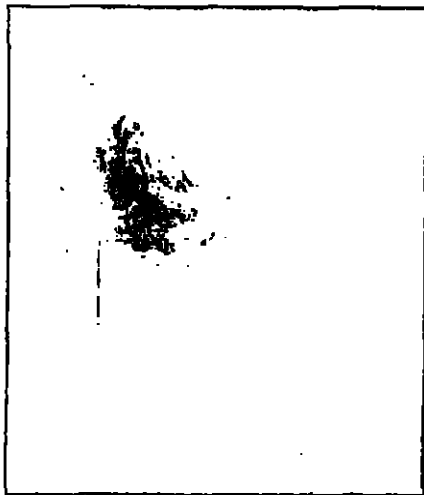
In the second half of the book (entitled "September") the sinister tones begin to dominate, reinforced by a switch to third-person narrative, which distances us from our intimacy with the professor. A journey through clouds of dust into a coal-streaked valley is interrupted by a collision with the rear end of a "hearse," a "black message" that leads down into an underground restaurant in an abandoned mine lined with mirrors. Here Dyck and his wife join Gillian and her husband in a meal that is totally Albertan, down to the wine: Dandelion, 1974 ("An excellent year, sir"). Social satire moves into fantasy when all lights are extinguished, and the couples find themselves drawn as if by suction into the black emptiness of frustrated desire at the centre of their table. In this "Long Darkness" all four are transported from dystopia into a utopian world of light where they are good and happy and naked in "the land on the other side of waking, where we may sleep with all our five and wilful senses open."

In the remaining pages of the novel, a mortician becomes master of ceremonies at the funeral of Dyck's mother. Here, presumably, we are asked to move beyond genitals to the divine fire, as sexual desire merges with a longing for heaven most powerfully represented by Dyck's mother. Even as he rejects his mother's otherworldly Christianity, Dyck shares in that longing. The funeral procession to the accompaniment of mournful Mennonite funeral songs, leads inexorably to a hole in the ground.

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After all the preceding reversals of death (beginning with that of Louis Riel), one ought not to be, but is, shocked by the last reversal. Resurrected like Lazarus, the mother rises from the grave to turn the wake into a wedding feast, joining Dyck and Gillian and Liv in a supper of endlessly multiplying Mennonite potato salad. Here is wish-fulfilment with a vengeance, but the laughter it produces is of the hysterical kind heard after funerals.

Such fantasies are followed by a renewed awareness of loss — unless, the novel suggests, there is the faith that those who "die in Christ" are blessed and not dead. That religious affirmation is there in the words of the preacher at the funeral, but what the novel actually creates is an aftertaste of dust and ashes mingled with the knowledge that lust makes the world go round. So much exuberant delight in the limitless possibilities of the imagination in the end makes us acutely aware of the ultimate limit of silence and death. It is surely paradoxical that this, the funniest of Wiebe's novels, should also be the one that leaves one with the most profound feeling of emptiness and loss.

We are left with ambiguity, as the title suggests. Are we to see Dyck's Lawrentian ecstasies as a means of glorying in the possible impossibilities of a God who exceeds the human imagination? Or are we, rather, to see these as the clichéd products of the male menopause? I found myself longing for some flaws to heighten the contrast between reality and fantasy. Dyck needs a bigger stomach or perhaps a double chin; Gillian needs some pimples; Liv needs a generous dose of wrinkles; all three characters need a crash course in evil.

The novel insists that we take responsibility for our dreams, but Dyck concludes that he should not have to choose between the two women. Moral issues, however, are inevitably issues of choice and, once raised, they refuse to go away. The reader cannot resist joining in the fun of the miraculous reversals, but the same reversals often serve to confront us squarely with a moral dilemma. On the one hand, imagination is extolled as of God; on the other hand, we see the dangers of an illusory world.

There remains a yawning gap between these two tendencies in the novel. If he were Robertson Davies, Wiebe would paper over this crack with Jungianism, and we could all go back to sleep with the assurance that all that matters is what the women represent in Dyck's inner world. Instead, Wiebe makes of his very failure a success by using our awareness of the gap to create his tragicomic effect. At times my dissatisfaction was *with* the novel but, on the whole, it

was in the novel, absorbed into a fiction that re-creates the longing for what is never really there and the pain of the distance between what is and what ought to be. □

## REVIEW

# White nights

By WAYNE GRADY

*Ararat*, by D. M. Thomas, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 191 pages, \$16.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88619 007 X).

IN 1835 PUSHKIN, virtually a prisoner in St. Petersburg, hopelessly in debt, insanely jealous of his beautiful but brainless wife Natasha, unable to write, managed to steal a few weeks of seclusion on his mother's estate at Mikhailovskoe in order to wrestle with his recalcitrant muse. The results were one short poem and 17 pages of an unfinished story, "Egyptian Nights," about an aristocratic native of St. Petersburg named Charsky who "was unfortunate enough to write and publish poems." Charsky was so irritated by the social obligations of fame that he endeavoured in every possible way to rid himself of "the intolerable appellation." One day he is visited by an impoverished *improvisatore* from Naples, who begs to be introduced by Charsky into the literary salons of Petersburg. Charsky arranges for a demonstration of the Italian's skill in the ballroom of a certain Princess N—, and on the appointed evening all of literary Petersburg is enthralled by a long impromptu poem about the love-life of Cleopatra — a theme provided by a member of the audience — and the fortune of the *improvisatore* seems assured. Thus ends the fragment.

It is impossible to say why Pushkin left the story unfinished, but it's safe enough to note that the material itself seems unpromising, little more than an exercise forced out of a reluctant pen. Apart from his mountainous personal problems, Pushkin was also fighting a losing battle against the growing fashion for literary realism — one of the principle practitioners of which was Nikolai Gogol — and "Egyptian Nights" might have been intended as a defiant Romantic gesture: the

alien, impassioned artist championed in the glittering aristocratic salons of Imperial Russia. But in the first number of the literary magazine *Contemporary*, edited by Pushkin later that year, Pushkin included two other stories of his own and "The Nose" by Gogol — which suggests either that he was desperately short of material for the magazine (in which case why not use "Egyptian Nights"?) or that he was willing to concede at least one literary battle to the realists (although "The Nose" is hardly a realistic story). At any rate, when Pushkin was killed in a duel less than two years later, "Egyptian Nights" remained unfinished.

D.M. Thomas uses what amounts to a straight translation of the "Egyptian Nights" fragment as the core of *Ararat*, his fourth novel — really more a series of interconnected sketches than a novel, reminiscent as it is of Italy's other great *improvisatore*, Boccaccio. Between the Prologue/Epilogue framework, Thomas presents three stories told by a Soviet writer, Sergei Rozanov, at the request of his blind mistress Olga. Rozanov spends one whole, sleepless night "improvising" the three stories — one by a Russian poet, another of an American woman, "a writer of romantic fiction," and a third by an Armenian story-teller whose "proud skill had been challenged by a disreputable Muscovite."

The stage is first given over to the poet Victor Surkov who, despite a serious illness, is setting out on a tour to Armenia via America. On the ship Surkov, in a high fever, weaves in and out of the character of Pushkin, and writes or rather "dreams" Pushkin's "Egyptian Nights" complete with two versions of a continuation that incorporates many details from the last two years of Pushkin's own life, especially the pathetic haggling over his final duel with d'Anthès (though in Thomas's continuation it is the *improvisatore* who is the subject of these negotiations). In America, Surkov stays with the American writer — who has somehow metamorphosed into a sculptress — and a week later he turns up in Armenia, snoring drunkenly in a hotel room adjacent to that of the Armenian story-teller.

*Ararat* is a complicated and ingenious *jeu d'esprit*, the product of a cultured and passionate writer flexing his talent — much as the real Pushkin did — in order to keep it in tone. Though it is full of literary references, of writers and poets, it is precisely about *not* writing — about being unable to write (or sleep) and about being able to tell brilliant stories without writing. At a certain obscure level it is about the mystery of creation ("The spontaneous creation of order, like the *improvisatore's* 'Cleopatra'!" Surkov muses at one point. "No,

I can't believe it.") It is not a novel, but then Thomas is under no obligation to write novels. In style it follows that dictated by Pushkin — the whole book reads like a translation. The unity imposed on the stories by the repeated references to Armenia and Ararat is largely superficial: Ararat, the site of the landed Ark, is a fairly transparent symbol of the kind of new beginning promised by the Russian revolution — i.e., a symbol of doomed hope, of idealism turned into grim reality. A more potent symbol for Thomas seems to be the unicorn (he uses it in his second novel, *Birthstone*, as well), the Armenian creature that refused to go into the Ark and so, like Pushkin, never saw Ararat. □

## REVIEW

# Recollections of things past

By ALBERTO MANGUEL

*The Education of J.J. Pass*, by T.F. Rigelhof, Oberon Press, 198 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 463 9) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 464 7).

THE SUBSTANCE of fiction is memory. Plots, characters, and moods are built of past experiences, whether real or imagined. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that, in a very broad sense, all literature is autobiographical.

*The Education of J.J. Pass* is a chronicle of times remembered. From the vantage point of the present, Alex Ready, a lapsed priest, reconstructs the story of Josef Jacob Paszlerowski, his half-brother, and of their childhood and youth in the Canadian Prairies. J.J.'s father, a Roman Catholic Polish immigrant, marries Alex's mother, and the boys share nine years in discovering the world (or that mirror of the world known as The Crescents). The novel begins when the brothers meet in England as grown men; it ends when Alex learns the true nature of J.J.'s father. The 190 pages in between are a brilliant, moving depiction of the world as seen by a child drifting into manhood.

J.J. arrives in Canada from a German internment camp, with an immaculate sense of wonder. He wonders at his new house, "snug as the ship's cabin he had stayed in on the Atlantic crossing"; he

wonders at the children in the neighbourhood and at their incomprehensible hostility ("He thought that they might be like the old man who did not always hear what was said when the old woman spoke to him"); he wonders at the angry faces of adults who call him, in words he does not understand, "prospective delinquent"; he wonders at the discovery of the English language, taught to him by a Scottish gentleman, Mr. David, who can recite Tennyson and Lear by heart, and who is building his own coffin, measuring himself against it and treating the boards "with the same sort of familiarity with which he handled his jacket and hat"; he wonders at the unfulfilled miracles of the Virgin Mary's statue in the garden, the statue "that had taken the place of his dead mother in his affections." J.J. has only one wish: "To be gloriously happy."

But it is difficult to be "gloriously happy," even in Canada. As Alex remembers it, J.J. fades from ecstasy to secrecy, developing "a passion for the very things that were forbidden," trying to achieve a sense of freedom in breaking rules. J.J. feels trapped. In the mornings he burrows "deeper and deeper beneath the covers of his bed until his feet touched the very end of the

bedstead and he could burrow no deeper. The touch of the iron of the bedstead against the soles of his feet felt like the iron bars of a cage to him and served to remind him even before he was awake of just how circumscribed his existence had become."

Alex's memory switches from J.J. to Paszlerowski Sr., J.J.'s father. A hoodlum called Kovak is murdered; Paszlerowski, who had driven Kovak back to his hotel after a game of cards, is accused of the murder. There is talk of Paszlerowski's criminal past, and in court his defence is shaky: "The jury convicted him. The judge sentenced him to life imprisonment. Murders between thieves were not hanging offences in his judgement."

The affair remains a mystery in Alex's mind, a mystery that demands the unwinding of the story backwards. In the end, past and present meet. Alex has become a priest; J.J. has settled in England; they talk, exhausting their "common store of memories." And then the character of J.J.'s father emerges, strange and clear. "Paszlerowski was a thief to the core. His name and his nationality and even the religion in which he died were not his own. All had been stolen from a kindly corpse by the banks of the River Bug."

He escapes from Stalin's Ukraine to Cracow, meeting other runaways on his flight westward. "Being stronger and fiercer, he stole for them and discovered that his thefts brought him the most extraordinary return — love. And this was his undoing."

Love brings him a wife and a child. When his wife dies he makes his way to the New World and allows Alex's mother to make an honest man out of him. But "the more honest he was, the less love seemed to come his way." Finally he seeks love in his adopted religion, bringing to Christ the only gift he has: strict adherence to the Gospel. But "a man who lives by the Gospel in the middle of a prison is a marked man. A man who lives by Truth is very like a stool-pigeon to liars." When an escape in his cell block fails, his fellow inmates kill him.

The story of the child and the story of the thief make up a coherent vision of the world. The magnificent quotation at the beginning of the book (from the works of Dov Baer, the Mazid of Mezeritch) is worth transcribing in full:

In the service of God, one can learn three things from a child and seven from a thief. From a child you can learn: 1, always to be happy; 2, never to be idle; 3, to cry for everything one wants. From a thief you should learn: 1, to work at night; 2, if one cannot gain what one wants in one night to try again the next night; 3, to love one's co-workers just as thieves love one another; 4, to be willing to risk one's life for a little thing; 5, not to attach too much value to things even though one has risked one's life for them — just as a thief will resell a stolen article for a fraction of its real value; 6, to withstand all kinds of beatings and tortures but to remain what you are; and 7, to believe that your work is worthwhile and not be willing to change it.

*The Education of J.J. Pass* brings to mind that other quest for the past, Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*. Of course, Rigelhof is not Flaubert — and yet, as in Flaubert's novel, the writing recaptures the senses of the years gone by, rebuilding with words a world of smells and sights and sounds. J.J. Pass is a younger brother of Frédéric Moreau.

Some of Rigelhof's writing needs pruning, some of his plot needs tightening up, but as a first novel (he has previously published a novella) *The Education of J.J. Pass* is a remarkable achievement. A lesser writer might turn his own experience into the equivalent of family films on a rainy afternoon, produced strictly for personal consumption. Rigelhof instead has taken his experience apart and rebuilt it into a fiction true to life, both moving and revealing. By imagining these memories, he has made our own wiser and richer. □

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# Papal fallibility

By I.M. OWEN

*Samaritan*, by Philippe van Rjndt, Lester & Orpen Dennys, 416 pages, \$18.95 cloth (ISBN 0 919630 16 2).

I MUST BE losing my grip. According to no less an authority than *Publishers Weekly*, Philippe van Rjndt's *Samaritan* is a "thriller of the first rank," written "in a brisk, clean narrative style that is impossible to resist." And a reviewer in the *New York Times* is quoted by the publishers as saying that "*Samaritan* presages history"; I don't know what that means, but it does sound like an impressive sort of thing to do.

It must, then, be my own incompetence that makes me find the style plodding; the plot over-elaborate, arbitrary, and unconvincing; and the characters lifeless puppets who might have been created — if that's the word — by Richard Rohmer.

A Polish cardinal who becomes Pope (it seems that van Rjndt thought of this some months before the College of Cardinals did, which is certainly to his credit) and a dying Soviet chairman provide timely themes — a little too timely for the author's comfort. He visibly wriggles about in his effort to accommodate his fiction to existing



facts. He has to set his story in the future, but how far in the future? Experiences of some of the characters in Auschwitz are explicitly said to have occurred 40 years ago, which places the story in 1935 at the latest. Yet John Paul II's successor (an Italian, by the way) is coming to the end of what seems to have

been a reign of reasonable length.

The mystery that starts the action off and is supposed to keep us in suspense through most of the book is so uninteresting that the author himself seems to forget about it for long stretches; an old, old woman (she's all of 63) reveals with her dying breath to the priest who is Cardinal Stanislawski's closest friend that when Stanislawski was a 10-year-old boy in Auschwitz she changed his serial number, and hence his identity, to save his life; who is he really, then? What makes the mystery quite absurd is that Stanislawski is said to know nothing about this. When W.S. Gilbert devised a plot idea rather like this for *H.M.S. Pinafore* he meant it to be absurd; but at least he made the change of identity happen to infants, not to 10-year-olds who might be expected to remember their real names.

This is sheer ineptitude; but so is the rest of the story. We have that stock plot-device, the only surgeon in the world who can perform a particular operation, being sent to Moscow by the president of the United States to save the Soviet chairman's life — as any president of the United States naturally would. While there he also saves the life of Stanislawski — who, having escaped Soviet assassins in Warsaw, is naturally in hiding in Moscow — where else? And who organized his rescue? Well, of course: the beautiful Anna Letelier, an Israeli undercover agent who runs a prosperous international chain of art galleries in her spare time.

Any reader who swallows this nonsense will probably take it quite calmly when the American neurosurgeon becomes the Polish Pope's personal physician. Such a reader won't turn a hair, either, when the neurosurgeon-turned-physician goes to stay at Castel Gandolfo, the papal summer residence, and Anna Letelier turns up there in order to share his bed. (That wouldn't have happened when John Paul II was alive.)

There are many other absurdities, not least the grand climax, which might have been a little less preposterous if the story had moved swiftly; but it's padded out with long, laborious, unnecessary descriptions of surgical procedures, the papal electoral process, how to get from one place to another in Vatican City — this last I advise prospective tourists to treat with caution; when van Rjndt gives a similarly laboured description of London geography he has Sloane Street running off Berkeley Square. I haven't seen London for over 10 years, but I doubt if Chelsea can have shifted into Mayfair.

Van Rjndt's *The Tetramachus Collection* and *Blueprint* also suffer from

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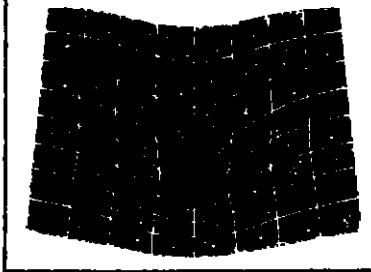
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stilted prose and wooden characters, but they are based on genuinely interesting ideas and can be recommended for that reason. I find no reason to recommend *Samaritan*. Don't, anyway, read it before reading *Blueprint*. A minor character in *Samaritan* is Aleksandr Roy, who is the main character of *Blueprint*. In introducing him, van Rjndt overexplains his history — as he overexplains nearly everything in this book — and with incredible ineptitude gives away the surprise ending of *Blueprint*.

Still. If *Publishers Weekly* says *Samaritan* is a thriller of the first rank, I must be missing something important. Will somebody please tell me what? □

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## REVIEW

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# Real people

By ANTHONY BUKOSKI

*Displaced Persons*, by Fred Bonnie, Oberon Press, 133 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 465 5) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 466 3),

*People Like Us in a Place Like This*, by Philip Kreiner, Oberon Press, 133 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88750 467 1) and \$9.95 paper (ISBN 0 88750 469 8).

I LIKE Fred Bonnie's stories — all but one, anyway. Because he has drawn so carefully and faithfully from real life (or what to many of us passes for real life), his human comedy *Displaced Persons* is at once humorous and pathetic in the true sense of *that* word. The stories evoke tenderness, pity, and more than a few laughs in the way that the American writer Raymond Carver's do. In fact, I was reminded of Carver more than once. In the hands of a less-skilled writer than Bonnie such stories would remain clichés, for he, like Carver, draws from the ordinary life of suburbs and small towns — mostly in Maine and New Hampshire. Where his characters live, however, is not so important as how they live. Sure to get "a good eat," they reserve Thursdays for All-You-Can-Eat Night at Bright's. Other evenings they bowl or drink beer, attend "church beans," or torment Cramps, Old Man Crandall, the owner of The Winning Wheel drive-in.

Sorrow attends their folly as it attends all human folly. The effect on Bonnie's carhops, factory workers, and truck drivers — the shock of recognition that they have somehow foolishly misread their situation after all and now must pay for it — is powerful, even shattering to some of them. Therein lies the appeal of these stories: they deal with fallible human beings, with *us*, who in our own private ways are sometimes as vain, sometimes as petty and mean-spirited.

Having driven up from Dover, New Hampshire, one friend strands another late at night in a Montreal bar in the story "Sign Language": "I felt like I could tear Gene apart with one hand tied behind my back. I knew the Plymouth was on empty and that I was holding all the cash we had between us." All the time believing that his plans were taking shape, he leaves when he finds he can't win back his old girlfriend, who will indeed marry Gene as planned. In "Gone With Wind. Be Back Soon" the wheelchair-bound Link, because of his pride and the opprobrium of others, too late realizes his affection for Jonas, whom no one else "in the building liked." And the young Jeffrey, who has "nothing better to do but play basketball," learns something from his friend Moses about commitments — if only to the families on a milk delivery route — in "Fifty Minutes." In "Selling Delphinium," "The Winning Wheel," and other stories, characters are changed by an incident which shows up their pride or foolishness. These are fine stories all.

One that doesn't work so well, "Nick the Russian," fails to rise above the level of cliché that Bonnie so successfully transcends elsewhere.

Because his characters are so terribly human, they misjudge their circumstances. They trust immediate, empirical evidence at the expense of what occurs outside range of sight or hearing, and eventually suffer for it. "I guess the main reason I was laughing was because of myself," one of his displaced characters admits, "because I had read the whole situation completely wrong" — something that happens often here. Falling into knowledge, Bonnie's characters become sadder, if wiser. As observers of their very human condition, so do we.

No less impressive are the four stories in Philip Kreiner's *People Like Us in a Place Like This*. Whereas Bonnie's occur in the settled areas of existence (and the psyche), where one's mistakes are less likely to be fatal (or psychologically crippling), Kreiner's happen on frightening, inhospitable ground "half-way up the James Bay coast" or along Hudson Bay. Not only are the landscapes forbidding, but also the people —

those indigenous to the North as much as the teachers, anthropologists, fur-traders, and missionaries, who in some cases seek these places as they would Tikal or Timbuktoo, Kreiner says, simply out of the need for extremes.

"I'm lured by the thought that somewhere there is an end of the line," declares the protagonist of the title story, an unnerving trip back into a "heart of darkness" made even darker by the educated mind's inability to grasp or fathom landscape or culture. Few, if any, answers are straightforward in Kreiner's universe. What knowledge his characters acquire comes only after a frustrating, often dangerous, series of attempts at knowing, for "this is a story of extremes." Even white inhabitants of Little Whale River are guarded, cunning. "Arthur Shelton intrigues me," says the anthropologist. "He makes me think he is interested in my being interested in him by his seeming not to be interested at all. He's smart. He knows me very well."

Shelton is the Kurtz in this *Heart of Darkness*, a teacher who eschews the amenities of life in the south in order to confront his *self* more squarely here. In the end, both he and the anthropologist perhaps learn more than they had bargained for about life in the North.

So do others in these stories — Indian and white. It is safe to say that Kreiner knows something about the darker reaches of the soul. □

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## REVIEW

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# Tribal injustice

By JOHN GODDARD

*Eagle Song*, by James Houston, McClelland & Stewart, 362 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 7710 4258 2).

THERE ARE 685 exclamation marks in *Eagle Song*, James Houston's latest novel. That's a lot of excitement in one book. Or, rather, that's a lot of exclamation marks.

The story begins in 1803 when the New England ship *Boston* sails into Nootka Sound, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, to trade manufac-



tured goods for sea-otter pelts. Captain John Salter inadvertently insults Chief Maquina of the Eagle tribe and provokes a massacre during which the Indians cut off their victims' heads and line them in a row on deck. The only two survivors are John Jewitt, a blacksmith, and John Thompson, a sail maker — both valuable assets to the chief, who makes them his slaves until Jewitt engineers their rescue more than two years later.

It is a true story. Ships' logs of the day tell of the wily and impetuous Chief Maquina, and Jewitt kept a diary, publishing it in both a short and a long version after he finally got back to New England. Pierre Berton made good use of the historical material in his non-fiction narrative, "The Slavery of John Jewitt," which appears in his 1978 book, *The Wild Frontier*. But Houston fritters the material away, changing some facts to no advantage and leaving out some of the best parts.

In Houston's version, a group of insolent young Indians take it upon themselves to massacre the sailors against Maquina's wishes. They have the tacit support of the patriarch Matla, but after pages of intrigue and ominous foreshadowing, the challenge to Maquina's authority dissipates. The book's first-person narrator, an old Indian named Siam, shifts his attention to another potential problem: he wonders whether his son is being too much attracted to the other ways of the white man. But this theme too eventually peters out.

The most annoying aspect of the book is Siam himself — perhaps the most insipid character ever to enter Canadian literature. Siam is Maquina's brother-in-law and an elder of the tribe. But he has no personal following, makes no key decisions, and carries almost no influence. He is a prosaic, unanalytical story-teller with a limited vocabulary and immature turn of phrase. His emotions routinely soar:

Her teeth gleamed white when she smiled at Maquina. Yes, I could tell he wanted her! But did he show that? No, not he!

Occasionally he gets truly worked up:

She smiled at me and made a secret gesture with her body that made my heart go tum-tum-titty-tum-tum.

Once, in the middle of a massacre, he nearly loses control altogether:

My heart went tum-titty-tum-titty-tum as I drove my knee up hard into his groin. He fell down screaming, rolling on the deck. If I had not known his mother well and liked her, if my friend Matla had not been his uncle, I believe I might have taken up that bloody ax and killed him. That young idiot deserved it.

The book might have been worth reading for what it says about the festivals, attitudes, houses, eating habits, and religious beliefs of the West-Coast Indians at the beginning of the last century. But Houston lacks the talent to convey the sights, sounds, and smells of the period, and after seeing how he has manipulated the story line, one tends not to trust the anthropological material either.

*Eagle Song* is Houston's 19th book and fourth novel after *The White Dawn*, *Ghost Fox*, and *Spirit Wrestler*. He is famous for adapting Inuit art to the art markets of the world. With *Eagle Song*, he is in no danger of having his career as an art entrepreneur upstaged by his career as a novelist. □

#### REVIEW.

## Heading for the precipice

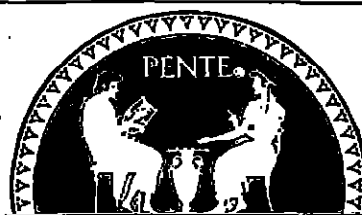
By BRIAN L. FLACK

*My Career with the Leafs and Other Stories*, by Brian Fawcett, Talonbooks, 190 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 88922 199 5).

*Same Truck, Different Driver*, by Mel Dagg, Westlands, 129 pages, \$6.95 paper (ISBN 0 919671 04 7).

IN THE FIRST paragraph of the first story in Brian Fawcett's *My Career with the Leafs & Other Stories*, the four-year-old narrator makes an observation that could stand as the linchpin for both of these collections. "The first thing I noticed about life," he says, "was that it's a battle and that I was at a serious disadvantage."

The alternately sad and funny, but always perceptive, anecdotes that follow are Fawcett's attempt to detail the childhood and adolescence of a boy born in the 1940s and disillusioned in the '50s. He concludes that the world is a playground too large to be contemplated in its entirety, yet small enough to be conquered . . . if the conquerer is both clever and thoughtful. This is not a new message, but Fawcett manages to inject something of a new flavour into the process of growing up. He wants us, as readers, to say, "Yes! I know about



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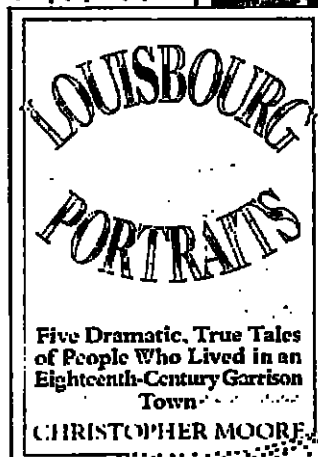
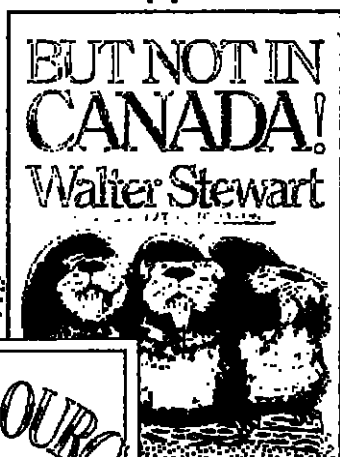
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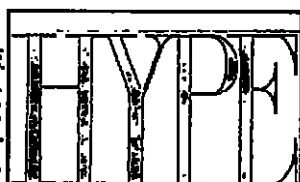
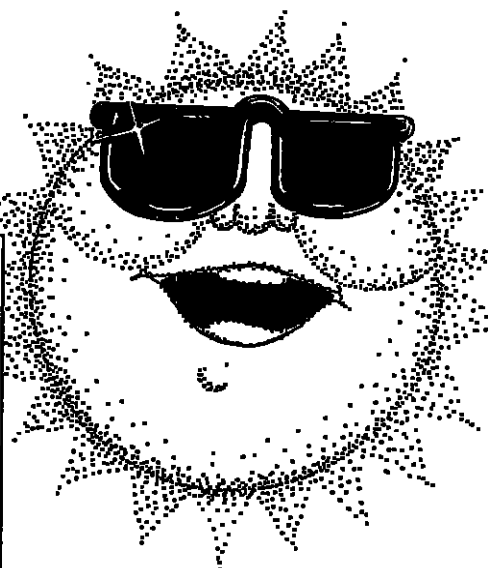
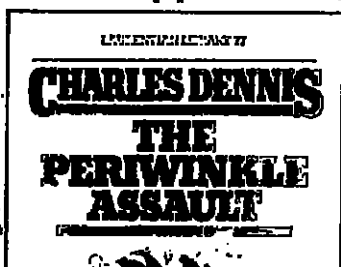


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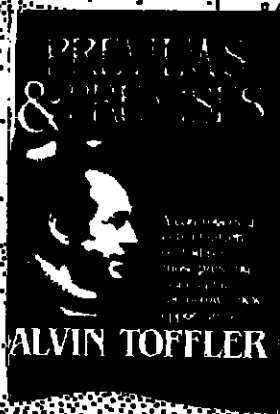
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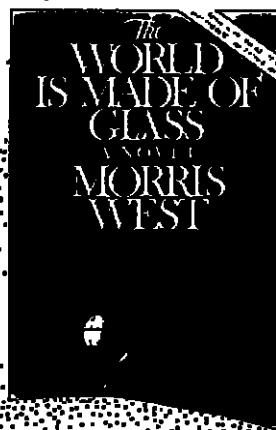


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that, it happened to me. I felt this, saw that, went there. . . ."

This book is no ordinary cataloguing of maturational crises. Friendship, enemies, girls, fantasies, sports drinking, fights, young love (wondrous in its stiffness and hesitancy), learning to drive, even the reality of death are examined; nothing is omitted. Although there is an urgency expressed in the need to experience and grow, there is also a concomitant peacefulness, a calculated seriousness to the best of the stories. An uneasy confusion informs all of them, but behind it lurks the belief that there is a purpose to everything no matter how remote it may appear to be, no matter how many questions are asked and left unanswered, or how many disturbing inconsistencies are discovered.

Two-line homilies dot the narrative and serve as the life rungs upon which the narrator climbs from the ignorance of childhood to the precipice of manhood. Of twins he observes, "they could surround me in a variety of malevolent ways." Of history and his place in determining the future: "They wanted to change things, to be more ugly and stupid, and we wanted to stop them." And finally, contemplating reality, he concludes, "Everybody was making up their reality as they went along, and all reality could be was the collection of those fictions."

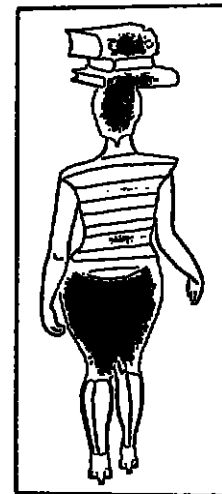
There is much to commend in this, Fawcett's first prose collection, and little to condemn, although one cannot help but believe he occasionally writes what Canadians long to hear — what is tidy and "nice." But those moments are hardly enough to damage the total effect.

Mel Dagg's book of stories, *Same Truck, Different Driver*, is both more and less satisfying than Fawcett's — more, because the author strives to achieve a sense of the philosophic futility of the individual set against an unrelenting, unsympathetic, hostile society; less, because complete success eludes him. Whereas Fawcett very clearly recognizes the dimensions (and hence the limitations) of his subject, Dagg demonstrates a complex and wide-ranging ambitiousness. Such courage is to be admired in a serious writer, but if control is sacrificed to this daring it can become a liability even in a well-conceived, well-written effort.

The nine stories are slow-paced and haunting when they work, fractious when they do not. Most are founded on the author's need to explain, perhaps even to justify, the anxiety and hurt that exist at the end of things: the end of a life, a race's fight for survival, a summer, a love affair, even at the end of hope.

The title story, for instance, relates a young man's grief at the death of his father, a death that compels him to abandon his home and everything familiar. Another, "The Museum of Man," is a brilliant evocation of how one culture is enveloped and exploited by another, of the beauty of the past undulating through the horror of the present. As an anthropologist, Smitty, presses his case for enshrining an old Indian woman's quill-weaving in Ottawa, the passing of the gift of quill-weaving from a grandmother to her granddaughter is chronicled as a distant but powerful memory. When the woman protests, "You have no right to ask for this small thing, this little that remains," she is ignored. The superficial present prevails. Smitty gets what he wants by refusing to listen, almost by theft. In this and other similar encounters, Dagg demands to know what right anyone has to scavenge among the hopes and dreams of another. The answer is no less than by the right of power; the realization of this is a crushing blow to both the author and the characters he evokes.

These loosely connected stories counterpoint reality and myth in prose that comes marvelously close to the poetic both in imagery and style. In the final story, "Ways of Going," the narrator, Danny Stone, and an old Swedish fisherman represent the past and the future. With little in common beyond their desire to be free from constraint, they are emblematic of others who have been ravaged for sharing the same ideal. As they talk, they become one with an eagle that floats above their heads



"riding the wind, resplendent . . . in freedom, playing with it." Which is all, Dagg suggests, we can hope to do.

I look forward to the next book by this man. *Same Truck, Different Driver*, although uneven, represents a considerable accomplishment, and I would think the future promises more of the same. □

# So far no good

A new study documents the spectacular growth of Canada's culture business, but also reveals how little has been achieved

By SUSAN CREAM

Canada's Cultural Industries, by Paul Audley, James Lorimer, 346 pages, \$19.95 cloth (ISBN 0 88862 458 1) and \$12.95 paper (ISBN 0 88862 459 X).

HARD ON THE HEELS of the Applebaum-Hébert Committee's report comes Paul Audley's book, *Canada's Cultural Industries*, the definitive, descriptive analysis of the economics of publishing, film-making, sound recording, and broadcasting in this country. The news isn't good — which, of course, is no news at all. A decade of extraordinary effort, even with the encouragement of governments, has managed to secure little more than a toehold for Canadian culture in the mass marketplace. The percentages vary, but the story doesn't: it's easier, cheaper, and therefore more profitable to import creative material from outside the country than it is to produce original Canadian-authored books or television programs or records. That remains the basic, unaltered fact of life for Canadian artists and producers.

Audley's study, done for the Canadian Institute for Economic Policy, is the first comprehensive survey of the cultural industries as a group. Although highly technical and loaded with tables, it is to the publisher's and the author's credit that the book is directed to the general reader. Divided into sections on print, sound, and moving images, there are chapters on book and magazine publishing, film, television, and radio in addition to newspaper publishing and sound recording — two areas that have routinely been ignored in policy discussions.

The second great favour Audley does for us is to pre-digest a mountain of facts and figures from government and industry research reports and Statistics Canada's computers, laying the information out in direct if unembellished English. The size of the mountain is a noteworthy phenomenon in itself when one considers that the cultural industries were barely recognized 10 years ago. It is

said that early in his reign Prime Minister Trudeau casually asked his advisers how much real estate was in the possession of cultural institutions in Canada. Not only could no one at the Dominion Bureau of Statistics hazard a guess, no one could even come up with a list of cultural organizations then active in the country.

*Canada's Cultural Industries* at the very least is a testament to the distance we've travelled since then, and to the spectacular growth of the para-creative professions — all the administrators, policy analysts, statisticians, lawyers, and other experts who have moved into the field and have generated all this data. As a result, what could only be pieced together from a helter-skelter collection of facts six or eight years ago now can be fully documented, which is what *Canada's Cultural Industries* does in drawing its portrait of how those industries are structured and where the monies flow.

The first remarkable discovery is that the culture business, even in these rough economic times, is an extremely lucrative one, if only for a small and, thanks to corporate mergers and takeovers, shrinking band of fat cats operating on an international scale. These multinationals are positively obese when compared to the more numerous and undernourished crew of local (read independent or Canadian) producers who toil in the lower income ranges to produce most of what's come to be called Canadian content. American culture being the staple of the mass media, Canadian culture gets in only by dint of special arrangement. Yet it isn't for a lack of demand for records, books, and movies on the part of the Canadian public that Canadian culture is so marginalized. It is for want of access to the foreign-dominated distribution systems — a situation that apparently remains unaffected by a decade of government consciousness-raising from the cultural community.

The next, even more remarkable discovery concerns the extent to which

public policy and public funds have aided the expansion of private enterprise, even when it's foreign-controlled and deals chiefly in foreign imports. It is interesting, for example, that federal assistance to the Canadian newspaper industry is worth about \$100 million annually in tax exemptions and postal rate subsidies; that *Time* magazine saves itself a cool \$7.7 million by printing and mailing in Canada; and that the duty charged on master tapes crossing the border is assessed on their value as blank tapes rather than on the basis of the \$200-million record sales they generate.

It's a great shame that the Applebaum-Hébert Committee didn't get Audley to write its chapter on the political economy of culture, for clearly there is money in the system going to people who don't need it; in fact, going to those who are the main architects of the problem the government says it is committed to solving. Audley shows us where half to three-quarters of a billion dollars is being misspent and how it could be liberated for the benefit of Canadian culture.

Although *Canada's Cultural Industries* does not deal with the arts, and though it tends to show up the weaknesses in the Applebert report, the two documents are companion pieces. Audley fills in several of the important blanks in the Applebert report; most particularly the blanks relating to the public's large supporting role for private enterprise, and the cultural implications of high levels of concentration and foreign ownership.

Most important, Audley demonstrates what can be done. It is possible, he shows, to take the criticism of policy and practice beyond the lamenting stage and to come up with a strategy for turning the situation around. With his grasp of the mechanics of our cultural industries and the intricacies of government, Audley is able to mastermind a coherent cultural policy that combines a strategy to strengthen those cultural industries — as industries and as forms of cultural

A NOVEL BY LEON ROOKE

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expression — and in this he succeeds where cultural bureaucrats in Ottawa and the Applebaum-Hébert Committees failed. Instead of rehashing Applebert, the current Commons Committee (on culture and communications) and Senator Jack Austin's cabinet subcommittee should be reading this. □

## REVIEW

# Sestinas and Chinooks

By **JOHN McDERMID**

*Benchmark*, by Bruce Hunter, Thistledown Press, 70 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 9220066 47 X).

*The Seventh Day*, by Lewis Horne, Thistledown Press, 71 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 9220066 55 0).

*The Overlanders*, by Florence McNeil, Thistledown Press, 51 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 9220066 3).

*Just Off Main*, by Gary Hyland, Thistledown Press, 116 pages, \$7.95 paper (ISBN 0 9220066 57 7).

FOUR RECENT POETRY titles from Saskatoon's Thistledown Press offer a considerable range of voices and styles, all in beautifully and thoughtfully produced volumes. And while Thistledown may be a Prairie press, by virtue or the accident of its location, its products defy narrow categories by virtue of their scope.

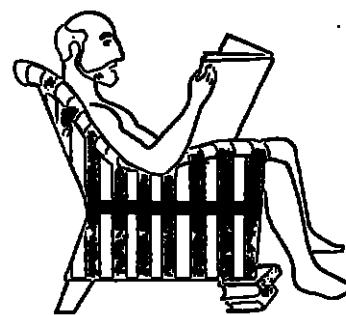
Bruce Hunter's first collection of poems is weakened only by an overdependence on fashion. *Benchmark* trades heavily on recent trends in western Canadian poetry: trends that have been all but abandoned by their initiators (who got it right the first time), and which now border on cliché. Many of the poems seem familiar. There emerges a sense of having read many of them elsewhere in cleaner and more vital incarnations.

The presences of Tom Wayman and Robert Kroetsch loom largely in *Benchmark*. Hunter's numerous "work poems" are competent, but fall short of the celebration, compassion, and genuine sense of community that distinguish Wayman's work in this area. These poems seem tailor-made for *Going for Coffee* (in which several

appeared), and they smack of pastiche. When dealing with work or co-workers, Hunter seems more concerned with his own poethood than with the individuals and events at hand. His debt to Kroetsch, however, is more stylistic and thematic than the particulars of a subject. The elliptical and fragmented treatment of place and family history (as in "The Timekeeping Ghosts," and others) fail to rise to the "benchmarks" that are clearly Kroetsch's.

Only when Hunter abandons imitation does he write the whole and original and workmanlike poems of which he is capable. These are numerous, if a little overshadowed by the others. "But the Wind" captures the sudden delight of the arrival of the Chinook to the foothills, which provocatively "bares the brown shoulders of the hills." The poem evokes the legendary madness associated with the Chinook (so often expressed in a rise in suicide rates) in terms quite as warm and refreshing as the wind itself. The two students in the poem abandon school at noon, carried on the erotic wind which "shook loose our clothes/sent us spinning like twin spells/tremulous through the house." At his best, and left wholly to his own devices, Hunter is a clear, lively and compelling voice. Only when he writes other people's poems do we tend to look away in *déjà vu*.

Another first collection is Lewis Horne's *The Seventh Day*. Horne's attention to craft and detail is evident in virtually every poem. Each possesses its own rhythmic impetus, which contributes to a swift and economical execution. His strength, as well as his weakness, lies in an occasional predilection toward constrictive verse forms. The first of two sestinas in the collection, "Into the North," sees Horne trammelled: stopping and starting and awkward with the demands of the refrain words. The result is a poem that conceals and convolutes more than it



communicates. Happily, "Vision of an Older Faith" succeeds absolutely where the other poem fails. It suggests a flexibility and enchantment in the apparently restrictive structure. Its movement is

fluid and undulant, its subject more perfectly mated to the form, and its execution more sure. A pretty sestina is like a melody.

Common to all the poems, whether in free verse or in more traditional measures, is an unfaltering cleanness. While the tone is calm, reflective, contemplative, most poems exude an impressive intellectual energy. Ordinary scenes are examined with a care and intensity that lends them a crystalline density. "The Windowcleaning" is an operation that leaves the speaker "the center/of these rays, the blinking, grateful center, as though the sparks of angels'/wings ignite the lap of air,/grateful for small things cleanly drawn,/exercising shape and line —/theirs alone." *The Seventh Day* should establish Lewis Horne as a sure and fully mature voice in Canadian poetry.

*The Overlanders* is Florence McNeil's seventh book of poems, and while it is not the first of her narrative works, it is perhaps her most conventional narrative to date. In it, she assumes the persona of a woman who accompanies her husband over the prairies and mountains to the Caribou Gold Rush. Unknown to her husband and other members of the expedition, she is pregnant with her fourth child. *The Overlanders* is the episodic account of the journey and of the woman's mounting fears for the unborn child, as delays and the severity of the trek mount.

The sequence is well executed. It is efficiently related and well paced, but lacks, somehow, the energy and compression, the tautness of McNeil's earlier work. It is arguable that the strong narrative imperative, the necessity to simply have out with the story, is in part responsible for this. McNeil's work to date testifies to her capability in creating and deftly handling complex, elegant rhythms. Thus the "beginning, middle, and end" of *The Overlanders* are not the only controlling structures. Images appear and recur, often in much altered, yet recognizable, forms.

One such image is that of "the deafening symphony of the Red River carts/that shriek high-pitched and agonizing/so the daytime prairies echo like/a slaughter house." Later in the journey, the party's hunger summons images of the Ireland they left behind. The Red River carts resound darkly as the woman recalls how once "the death carts shrieked/without ending/along the pebbly roads." Later still, horses and oxen must be slaughtered as the party prepares to board rafts, and "the sky was coloured with shrieking/all afternoon." Such correspondences are numerous and compellingly functional,

and while McNeil may be slightly off form in *The Overlanders*, the narrative gains an impressive cohesion from her expert manipulation of echo and imagery.

Gary Hyland's third collection of poetry is no less unified than McNeil's. *Just Off Main* examines adolescence and early adulthood, through the personae of six boys in Moose Jaw in the late 1940s and early '50s. Among Hyland's accomplishments is the avoidance of numerous pitfalls that immediately pre-



sent themselves to such an undertaking. He avoids any romantic sentiment toward youth, avoids the easy nostalgia for the period, and succeeds in differentiating his characters first subtly, and then more dramatically.

The language Hyland uses is varied and lively. It is not strictly a function of the characters whom it describes or to whom it is attributed. Hyland wisely refuses to limit himself to the dialect of the group, but allows more studied and eloquent diction in order to more strikingly modulate the whole. What emerges

is a compassionate and many-faceted portrait of the group and its milieu.

As a counterpoint to the requisite toughness of the youths are glimpses of their underlying vulnerability. "He's incompetent," says Magoo glibly of God: "Like if He's so good/why'd those planes collide/and rain down bodies/all over the fair grounds." The veneer of youth cracks revealingly for each figure at a number of points, and in these moments are the book's richness and scope realized.

The entire work drives inexorably toward the last of its four sections, where the six men are separated from youth and from each other, and where we see them trapped and betrayed by their own dreams of the future. Age and the deaths of friends leave the survivors bitter and apart, looking to their youth with mixed wonder and regret: "The voices you hoped to hear/in phrases from old scripts/have crawled inside your throat/and all the wonderful places /are flooded with death." In the closing section, there is a pervasive sense of entrapment, of time's having nearly closed upon men whose "golden days" were too few, too well loved, and now, too pale and distant to provide solace or even fond memories. □

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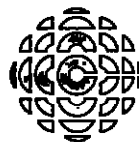
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'If reviews become the reason for writing,' says novelist-playwright George Szanto, 'then there's good reason for stopping'

By DONALD MARTIN

GEORGE SZANTO was born in Northern Ireland in 1940, and since 1974 has lived in Montreal, where he is director of McGill University's comparative literature program. A graduate of Harvard University, he was national chairman of Playwrights Canada in 1980-81, and is a former executive director of San Diego's New Heritage Theatre, a company committed to the development of new works. While there, he wrote two plays, *The New Black Crook* and (with Milton Savage) *Chinchilla!* He is also the author of two critical studies, *Narrative Consciousness* (1971) and *Theatre and Propaganda* (1978), both published by the University of Texas Press, and a number of short stories. Before moving to Montreal, Szanto spent a year in Wyoming, which became the setting for his first novel, *Not Working* (Macmillan). On a recent visit to Toronto he was interviewed by Donald Martin:

**Books in Canada:** *You've written a lot for the stage and radio, you've written texts, and this is your first novel. With which medium do you feel most comfortable?*

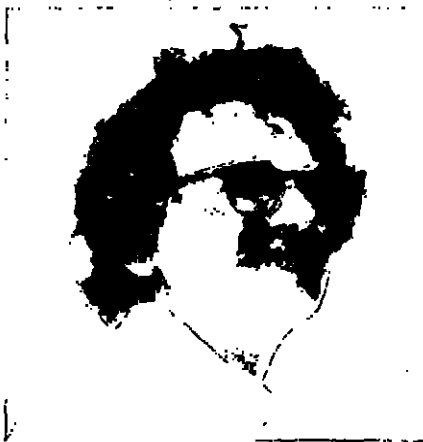
**George Szanto:** It goes back and forth. If I'm working on a fiction I become fascinated by the dialogue. If I'm working on a dramatic project I wish I had more control over the way in which the dialogue is going to be said.

**BiC:** *Your book has a very cinematic flow to it — it seems to fade in and out like a movie. Is that intentional? As a writer, are you affected by film techniques?*

**Szanto:** You always tell a story for the time and place you're telling it. Since most stories people are exposed to these days are visual stories, it's virtually impossible not to be affected by television and film. That doesn't mean you ape it, but it does mean you have to understand your audiences. If you ignore that, if you try to do a George Eliot-type narrative, chances aren't good that you'll get a very broad audience in 1983. Yes, I was aware of *having* to be visual. It's different from making *visuality* dominant. I was trying to make the book — at least on that level — accessible.

**BiC:** *You don't use descriptions much, and a lot of your words are just "punched." As a teacher, how do you feel about writers straying further and further away from the literary form and correct grammar?*

**Szanto:** For one thing, it's part of contemporary natural speech — bits and pieces. You have to be able to *hear* the language of the material in front of you. The narrative, in a sense, becomes verbal instead of written. The other thing, of course, is that in the 19th century people's horizons were very narrow. People lived in a certain sphere — they didn't have pictures of what other parts of the world looked like. Now we've got this phenomenon called television, and you can see what it looks like in South Africa, on a street in Prague, in the hills outside Moscow, what it looks like for two armies to be fighting in Nicaragua. You can see it. You don't need it spelled out anymore. Just two or three words



**George Szanto** create an image. You can play with the image you know already exists in the minds of your readers. You can manipulate a bit more than you could 100 years ago.

**BiC:** *Why Dobie, Wyoming?*

**Szanto:** I lived in Wyoming for a year. I wanted to write a Wyoming story. I was a house-husband — to that extent the novel is sort of biographical. I did not shoot a kid in a liquor store hold-up.

**BiC:** *Not Working is being called a "Canadian" novel. Do you consider yourself to be a Canadian writer?*

**Szanto:** I live in Canada. I work with Canadian writers. I believe in developing materials from experience, and I've lived here for eight years. Five of those eight years I've chaired Montreal's Playwrights Workshop. I believe in play development. When I lived in San Diego I believed in developing local writers there. I chaired Playwrights Canada, and that's devoted to the development of an indigenous Canadian theatre. I believe in it very strongly.

**BiC:** *Do you see any differences between American and Canadian plays and playwrights?*

**Szanto:** A good play turns out to be a good play — it's as simple as that. This does not mean that when Canadian plays fail in the U.S. they aren't good plays. Usually Canadian plays fail in the U.S. because of their subject matter. Americans simply aren't interested in Canada terribly much, culturally.

**BiC:** *How would you compare Canadian theatre criticism to that of the Americans?*

**Szanto:** We've got a different situation here. American culture is an established, institutionalized phenomenon — it's been going for 200 years. Canadian culture, as differentiated from North-American culture, is relatively young. Like any kind of young form, I think it demands a kind of respect and protection that would be inappropriate for a New York critic. The U.S. is an entrepreneurial nation; a U.S. playwright is an entrepreneur. The play either makes it or it doesn't. In Canada we're a much more mercantile nation. We're merchandising stuff, and I think some kind of protectionism has to come into existence. There has to be a pride, on the part of the Canadian critics, that there is material growing out of Canadian circumstances. I find that necessary. And I find it is rare. I'm delighted by good criticism, although I don't take it very seriously, and I'm depressed by bad criticism, although I still don't take it very seriously. If reviews become the reason for writing, then there's good reason for stopping.

**BiC:** *You have worked with Quebec playwrights a great deal. What are your observations on the state of theatre in Quebec?*

**Szanto:** The major thing that's happening in Quebec theatre is the dying off of outlets for production in English. It's a desperate situation. It's one of the reasons why I shifted to writing fiction. The Centaur Theatre is about it, now that the Saidye Bronfman Centre is dead. There's no space for playwrights. Maurice Podbrey at the Centaur Theatre does a fine job developing Montreal playwrights, but you can't build a successful season entirely out of Montreal

writers. If that's the only outlet — trouble.

**EC:** *We've spoken of the U.S., Quebec, and English Canada. If you had to define, in a sentence, that which you feel is truly Canadian, what would you say?*  
**Szanto:** I don't have any idea. I can tell you what's Montreal, what's Quebecois, what's Torontonian — but not Canadian. Montreal: precision in a general

sense and in language. From precision comes a kind of elegance. You find that in dress and architecture in Montreal. You find it, certainly, in some of the very good English-language writing that's coming out of Montreal. Toronto: it's — I'm sorry to say — kind of non-conscious centralism, an unawareness of just how central and important Toronto is to Canada. □

## PAPERBACKS

### A summer burning: from solar energy run amok to two very different examinations of the legal system at work

By ANNE COLLINS

I HAD DECIDED that this column was going to be devoted to the delightfully air-headed pursuit of so-called summer reading. So I scraped and dredged through the publishers' lists, hoping for thrillers and the like, but came up light on light reading. Even J. Robert Janes — whose last monster-chiller-horror show, *The Watcher*, had a definite edge on Stephen King — had got himself tangled up in a strangulating plot in his newest original, *The Third Story* (Paper-Jacks, \$3.95). It's about a novelist of murder and mayhem (already I'm not scared) who watches his plots come true before his very eyes. Janes's usual sure grip of sleazy motivations comes loose in a pool of self-pitying tears over the pain of the writer's God-like condition. Likable characters are not Janes's forte, but this writer's overpowering desire to be misunderstood casts him a stone or two beyond credibility.

Mind you, this second-best effort by Janes was more of a heat-wave than the thriller I then tried: *Air Glow Red* (Seal, \$3.50). Its author, Ian Slater, was too enthralled by the mechanism of his catastrophe — solar power run amok — to pay too much attention to those scheduled to burn.

It obviously isn't the time to try for escape via genre, because just about anything else seems to be on Canadian publishers' minds right now. In fact, James Lorimer has used the market research methods that are usually invoked to throw more schlock at us in order to justify something that may even be good for us: *Goodread Biographies*, as his new line is called. While working on a study called *Book Reading in Canada*

for the Association of Canadian Publishers, Lorimer discovered that 60 per cent of book-store customers read biographies, and that 66 per cent of that 60 per cent "have a very positive attitude toward Canadian books." Twelve paperback releases from Goodread in its first season will certainly test Lorimer's research — and those of us who balk at hardcover prices will finally get a crack at some of the best books published in the country. They include: *Within the Barbed Wire Fence*, Takeo Ujo Nakano's account of what happened to him during the wartime internment of Japanese Canadians; *An Arctic Man*, by Ernie Lyall; Mollie Gillen's biography of Lucy Maud Montgomery, *The Wheel of Things*; *Something Hidden: A Biography of Wilder Penfield*, by Jefferson Lewis; Nathan Cohen: *The Making of a Critic*, by Wayne Edmonstone and so on — none priced at more than \$5.95.

*For Services Rendered* by John Sawatsky (Penguin, \$4.95) certainly outpaces any fictional treatment of espionage, though it competes on different ground. The men of the RCMP Security Service do inhabit the by-now familiar shadowland of paranoia, conspiracy theories, and betrayals, but much of it in real life seems to be iatrogenic — caused by the cold-war doctors themselves. Sawatsky, an exemplary investigative reporter who has burrowed into the RCMP for two books now, attempts to settle the controversy surrounding Leslie James Bennett, who was head of the RCMP Russian desk for almost 20 years until his career was ended by the suspicion that he was a KGB plant — suspicion

fostered even by friends and long-time colleagues. A two-year intensive investigation turned up so empty that interrogation was the force's last hope of catching Bennett in his supposed double-think. The interrogation was also inconclusive.

Sawatsky's research turns up evidence that the RCMP's constant failures at spy-foiling could have been caused by amateur incompetence, bad methodology, smart Soviets, the vagaries of human nature when carrying duplicitous loads: any number of reasons are more compelling than treason by Bennett. The book is an eloquent documentation of scapegoating. If it wasn't so serious it would be funny. Take the Security Service's murderous plot against a tree that blocked the view of comings and goings at the Soviet embassy. When the tree finally died, after great deviousness and expense to the taxpayer, the Soviets simply replaced it with another one.

*Man Descending*, a first collection of short stories by Guy Vanderhaeghe (Laurentian Library, \$8.95) was raved about in *Books in Canada* by W.P. Kinsella, and I second the motion. The two matched sets of stories out of this dozen — "Drummer" and "Cages," about Billie Simpson and his bad-boy brother Eugene; "Man Descending" and "Sam, Soren, and Ed," about unemployable Ed's journey down the social ladder — offer especially acute, funny writing. One throwaway comment by Ed, who has discovered that writing is a good excuse for the unemployed, is a good example:

My first Big Book was to be about my generation, a revealing tale about what it was like being a Canadian university student during the Vietnam war. Let me tell you it wasn't easy having to vicariously share the guilt and agony of their war like some poor cousin.

George Bowering rather feyly slips into the third person to tell of his own journey of discovery in junctures of the narrative of *Burning Water* (New Press Canadian Classics, \$3.95), the historical novel that won him the Governor General's Award in 1980. We find out that *George the writer went east while his historical subject, George Vancouver, went west; George the writer went south while George the explorer went north*. There seems to be an enjoyable George fetish going on here, but we're lucky that *Boy George* hadn't made his mark as a vocalist back then or the Culture Club would be in here singing, "Do you really want to hurt me . . ."

Anyway, George the writer "did not know, to be sure, why all this, but he trusted it, though as the voyage grew

longer and the book got thicker he felt himself resting more and more on his faith in the readers: would they carry him, keep him afloat?" His faith was justified. Bowering's portrayal of the consumptive, ambitious, and dutiful Vancouver floats without special pleas from the writer, as miraculously as the 99-foot *Discovery* floats, with its 100 seamen kept able by frequent dosings of sauerkraut and spruce beer, through its five years' exile in the Pacific.

Vancouver's belief in the merits and justifications of *facts* had him in a bind. He wanted the explorer's glory, but not for him the easy route of telling his monarch and sponsors what they might like to hear — and what no one else could, after all, verify. Trees and cold and fog and Indians; not gold and silver and the Northwest Passage. If Vancouver didn't hate the shipboard scientist so much, he might have agreed with the skeptical Menzies, who was heard to mutter upon facing one more stretch of uncharted world: "Here we go, yet another once-in-a-lifetime experience." George the writer makes both black comedy and rather tender drama out of the emotions of the fated, historical George, who tried so hard to invest his circumstances with glory.

JACK BATTEN sets himself such modest goals in his latest best-seller, *In Court* (Macmillan, \$9.95), that he could be suspected of hedging his bets. Here is a book containing portraits of 10 Canadian criminal lawyers, and here is what Batten wanted to achieve with it:

I wasn't looking for any morals to draw from the stories of the cases, though occasionally they crept into the telling. Nor was I poking after secrets to courtroom success, though, willy-nilly, they, too, surfaced from the stories. Rather, I wanted a whiff of the courtroom, a sense of the drama of the trial, and a taste of the personality of the counsel in action.

Forewarned is forearmed, as they say, and Batten delivers what he promises: a series of friendly chats with criminal lawyers who recall their cases like jocks reliving old play-by-plays, with lots of good anecdote, some details of sensational crimes and one truly horrible tale of injustice (to hockey player Mike Robitaille by his former employees, the Vancouver Canucks) redressed at long last in the courts. So why am I disappointed?

Probably because I just re-read *By Persons Unknown: The Strange Death of Christine Demeter*, by Barbara Amiel and George Jonas, out in quality paperback 10 years after the crime (Macmillan, \$9.95). The first time through — in 1977 when the book was out in hardcover and the controversial trial was still



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fresh in the mind — I read with only one real desire: to find out if Demeter was actually guilty. Not to find out if he received justice, or how policemen build cases, or what the social forces on the judiciary are — or even to have the local Hungarian underworld and immigrant experience that figured so largely in the case explained to me. But Jonas and Amiel were not content to report the gritty details of a sensational crime to satisfy newspaper-fed curiosity (though they did that pretty well, too, down to a description of Christine and Peter making love on the morning of her murder). They take this case and use it to display

the big picture for us; they attempt in the best journalistic fashion to release all the light the Demeter trial can shed on our system of justice.

Whereas Batten, with access to lawyers as eminent as J.J. Robinette, never ventures into the big picture — content in his summing-up chapter to remind his readers that “the nine men and one woman I’ve written about are among my favourite people.” It’s interesting to note which body of work is being used as the basis of a forthcoming TV series on the legal profession in Canada. 1982’s best-seller? You guessed it. □

## CRITICISM

The cause of criticism isn't necessarily helped when its champions are academics and poets

By KEITH GAREBIAN

IN CHOOSING A particular mode of discourse (“a critical wager”), does a critic trap himself within an entire structure of thought? William D. Gairdner examines Marxism, existentialism, New Criticism, psychology, philology, phenomenology, and structuralism, and shows how all these critical philosophies are haunted by the same problem — planted axioms — that create an invidious architecture and a different locus of reality.

William D. Gairdner's *The Critical Wager* (ECW Press, 196 pages, \$12.95 paper) is a lively book — useful for English majors — but is bedeviled by several things. One of these is the paucity of literary explication: “Consider Karenin and his ‘official’ functions, the priest and his homilies in Camus’ *L’Étranger*, all the wealthy characters in Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series, every ‘official’ in Balzac’s world, or the world of Dickens, or Scott.” Indeed! But consideration is precisely what Gairdner fails to offer. His book has a strawman set-up, and his representations of the various ideologies are not unfailingly accurate. He fails to see that New Criticism isn’t interested so much in causes and effects as in contexts and meanings; or that structuralism (at least as practised by Roland Barthes) has not been naively concerned with mastering “the infinity of utterances.” Barthes allowed for non-nominated reality, and

his voluptuous ideas of text and textuality translated criticism into an open-ended, polysemous *literature*.

Despite its defects, this is an entertaining book and certainly does not trivialize its subjects. However, it is pure analytical theory, and readers who want practical criticism should dip into some of the other books.

Canadian regionalists and nationalists will probably enjoy *Taking Stock* (ECW Press, 160 pages, \$8.95 paper), a collection of papers and seminars on the Canadian novel presented at the Calgary Conference of 1978 and edited here by Charles Steele. It opens with remarks by Robert Kroetsch that take up where Gairdner leaves off — with a challenge to the idea of canonicity. Kroetsch writes like a stand-up comedian, but his satirical tone never overwhelms his serious purport. The Calgary Conference was a typical Canadian phenomenon — concerned with committees for classification and evaluation. Unfortunately, the limited range of references to truly first-rate Canadian novels reduces the value of this book as a forum for mature discussion. The usual subjects are given the usual treatment, with the two cultures, thematic criticism, the regional novel, and contemporary standards in the Canadian novel drawing special pleas and attacks. The ballots on the 100 Best Canadian Novels would be worth a laugh or two

were it not for the inescapably sad fact that they were filled in by some of our best-known academics. The truest voices are those of the literary craftsmen (such as Eli Mandel, Robert Kroetsch, Marian Engel, and Rudy Wiebe) who opt for the infinite complexities of humanity rather than for thesis patterns.

ANOTHER PRODUCT of academe is *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada* (Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 224 pages, \$7.95 paper), a collection of papers edited by Jars Balan from a conference at the University of Alberta in 1979 on "the ethnic dimension in Canadian literature." Most of the papers engage in descriptive paraphrase as they introduce us to Ukrainian, Hungarian, Icelandic, and Yiddish writers in Canada. Often, however, the cases are not made convincingly for these ethnic writers, and there is much stress and strain over minor literary figures. The best parts of this book are in the panel discussions on "Ethnicity and Identity" and "Hyphenated Canadians," from which we can draw the sanest, non-regional, non-chauvinist responses. I, like Maara Haas at the conference, sometimes feel like vomiting when I hear the word "ethnic," and many of the issues raised at this conference are useless, especially Balan's own risible attempt to trace Ukrainian influences on almost any work by George Ryga, from *Rita Joe* to *Paracelsus* — an attempt, incidentally, to which Ryga himself objects. If writers can be known only through conferences of this type, are they worth knowing? And, by the way, where were the black and Indian writers of Canada? Apparently they were not deemed of enough ethnic importance or they were simply invisible to those who held European literary passports.

Academic obsessions, eccentricities, and perversions continue with E.D. Blodgett, Patricia Monk, and Jennifer Waelti-Walters. Of the trio, Blodgett has the highest aspirations and the most fruitful results — even given the problems of his comparative approach to Canadian literature in *Configurations: Essays on the Canadian Literatures* (ECW Press, 224 pages, \$9.95 paper). Blodgett is well aware of the "diplomatic caution" that should be exercised when attempting to compare a moose with a toothpick (in Rudy Wiebe's famous analogy). Critical ingenuity can often make moose and toothpick look like one and the same thing, but so what? Blodgett very wisely eschews the usual methods of thematic critics who (like Ronald Sutherland) are apt to use Grove and Ringuelet, for example, as points of comparison. Blodgett

shows that although themes might meet even when actual texts turn away from each other, the central question is what convergences signify. Blodgett is sensitive to literary form, but his book (although filled with brilliant perceptions of MacLennan, Munro, Hébert, and F.P.G.) is heavy-going, demanding scholarly expertise with critical jargon and German and French language and literature.

Almost equally overpowering, or deadening, in its specialized diction and critical archaeology, Patricia Monk's *The Smaller Infinity* (University of Toronto Press, 214 pages, \$25.00 cloth) — the title refers to man as microcosm — labours over the concept of the Jungian self in the novels of Robertson Davies. Within its evident limits as psychological criticism, this densely detailed execution of a thesis is a triumph of assiduous scholarship. Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, and Northrop Frye are frequently invoked, and readers will have to contend with terms such as "anamnesis," "mythologem," "numinosum," "psychography," and "spagiric." Monk treats Davies's fiction purely according to the norms of psychological realism or allegory, and misses much of his sense of parody and verbal wit. Her generally solemn tone reduces Davies's quicksilver hammy humour.

FIERCE SOLEMNITY, but not scholarship, is certainly a charge that can be laid against Jennifer Waelti-Walters's *Fairy Tales and the Female Imagination* (Eden Press, 161 pages, \$18.95 cloth). According to her, fairy tales have subverted the female imagination, and to establish her case she uses works by Anne Hébert, Simone de Beauvoir, Marie-Claire Blais, Marguerite Duras, Jeanne Hyvrard, Monique Wittig, Louky Bersianik, and Constance Delaunay. Her feminist evisceration of literature shows that she can be trusted in the kitchen, bedroom, or living-room, but not in the library. When she claims that fairy tales are the first steps in "the maintenance of a misogynous, sex-stereotyped patriarchy" because the end-product is a "lifeless woman," who is "inherited, bartered, or collected in a monstrous game of Monopoly," I wonder whatever became of the seven dwarfs, Rumpelstiltskin, the Frog-Prince, and the Beast after the women in their lives were through with them. Actually, I don't seriously wonder about this at all. It's a mug's game that should be reserved for all those sisters of Sappho or sirens from Lesbos who love to chant, "Bridebed, childbed, bed of death."

Everything (from fairy tales to serious works of literature) is reduced to squalid

feminist politics. What Waelti-Walters says of Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Galatea, or Eve would make sense only if, forced to remain on the literal level, we knew the marital situation of each woman. Waelti-Walters is on shaky ground in almost everything from the Bible to modern theatre: when she claims that the Virgin Mary had no access to language for herself she fails to mention the Magnificat; when she deprecates the theatre for putting all its crafts in the hands of men she overlooks Joan Littlewood, Pam Brighton, Denise Coffey, Motley, Theoni Aldredge, Susan Benson, Tanya Moiseiwitsch, or Patricia Zipprodt. She is on even shakier ground as a literary critic. The books she subjects to her merciless, reckless propaganda are deflowered of all sensitivity, subtlety, or genius. Their authors should cry, "Rape!"

Evidently it does not necessarily help the cause of criticism to have academics as its champions. Nor does it necessarily help to have poets beating the drum for poetry, although some of the best critics in Canada have been poets — Eli Mandel, Louis Dudek, and the late A.J.M. Smith. George Bowering is sometimes a fine poet; sometimes a



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perceptive critic. What he says of John Newlove, Margaret Atwood, and D.G. Jones is wonderfully shrewd, and is written from a sensitive understanding of a poet's temperament and craft. However, Bowering fails more often than he succeeds in *A Way with Words* (Oberon Press, 199 pages, \$17.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper). Roy Kiyooka, Lionel Kearns, Fred Wah, Frank Davey, and David McFadden, while certainly significant poets, appear to have been selected for examination more because of their artistic and social fellowship with Bowering than because of high achievement — or so it appears from Bowering's gushing, superficial homage. Despite his windy claims for them, he fails to make a convincing case for any; and his style (awful colloquialisms sometimes clashing against pretentious ideas) often produces bathetic effects.

To his credit, Bowering never pretends to be objective — a state of

mind that is an illusion at the best of times. He dares to let his personal involvements show nakedly, but at the same time he is equally exposed in his critical inadequacies. His piece on Red Lane is a sophomoric reminiscence. For Avison, he is excessively descriptive, repetitive, but short on form. In his first of two essays on James Reaney, he is caught in so many critical brambles that his reader suffers almost as much as his argument. Averse to "that old pattern" of the "literary mind" copying the modes of past culture where "gods and giants are only reported, never met," he declares himself on the side of the unacknowledged shamans of the world, whose emotions make for "better dance" because the dancers are "possessed by nature." But perhaps what Bowering needs to be in what he calls "the post-Layton period" of a "post-lyric, post-thematic age" is a post-shaman critic. □

as a young girl and now lives in Edmonton. Bianca reveals in the prologue, addressed to her older Venetian cousin Marco, that this is her fourth attempt to tell his story. It is an unconventional yet curiously old-fashioned opening: the writer addressing her audience, the new world addressing the old.

The novel then takes up a conventional, third-person narrative of Marco as he is now, a middle-aged Venetian architect trapped in an unhappy marriage, obsessed with his infant son Francesco who was born retarded and with a defective heart. It follows Marco through a sometimes nightmarish series of events that leads to the point of his nervous breakdown. Edwards writes a clear, elegant prose. She gives us Marco's story with economy, emotional acuity, and a sure eye for significant detail. And she evokes Venice as vividly and as concretely as Terrence Heath evokes the Saskatchewan outback.

Marco's story is interrupted at regular intervals by the voice of the prologue, Bianca's voice. She recalls her life as a young immigrant to Alberta and as a summer visitor to Venice, where she learned about life and art from her cousin. She remembers Marco's unattained love-object, the beautiful and rebellious Elena. And she talks about her three previous attempts to write this novel. (I was not always completely comfortable with Bianca's chapters; at times Edwards seemed to be straining for significance.) This structural conceit allows the author to tell two stories simultaneously, the one enriching and feeding on the other.

But what are we to believe? Is this fourth version of Marco's story the true one? Can we trust Bianca's portrayal of her rival, the now revolutionary Elena, who lures Marco into unwilling and unwitting complicity in an assassination plot? Where does the fiction really begin? I will happily settle for the answer Bianca (Caterina?) gives us in the epilogue: "Why have I spent my winter telling your story? I needed to exorcise my dream of Venice. I needed to rid myself of the ache of longing that I have carried for so long. And you — you are the grain of sand that began the pearl that is my dream."

*Flora, Write This Down*, by New Brunswicker Nancy Bauer (Goose Lane Editions, 136 pages, paper), is, like *The Lion's Mouth*, a kind of dialogue between two countries, two cities — in this case Fredericton, N.B., and West Peterborough, Massachusetts. But this is a chronicle of family connectedness rather than irreparable separation.

The moment I turned to the opening page I found myself surrounded by

#### FIRST NOVELS

### Rites of passage: from the nightmares of a Venetian architect to the crumbling dreams of a soap-opera cowboy

By RICK ARCHBOLD

PERHAPS IT'S BECAUSE I'm an effete Torontonionian that *The Last Hiding Place*, by Terrence Heath (Oolichan Books, 216 pages, \$8.95 paper), failed to touch me deeply. Certainly a day in the life of Gabriel McFie, half-breed, former rodeo circuit rider, and Saskatchewan farmer, is far from my own experience. But I think the problem lies in the fact that despite his frequent eloquence and considerable technical ease, Heath attempts too much here. He tries to condense into this novel not only Gabe's past life (the Indian mother he has rejected; the uncle who told him his true calling was as a story-teller, his rodeo days) but also three other members of Gabe's family: Lisa, the beautiful, restless white woman he has married; Louis, his sullen, cunning, and resentful 19-year-old son; Gabrielle, his fragile favourite, mesmerized by her Catholic education and seemingly headed for the nunnery. The other children — I counted at least three — are present mostly as a backdrop.

What Heath does give us in the grip-

ping middle section of the book is a compact rural melodrama that crackles with energy. The novel takes place on the day Gabe discovers his wife's adultery, when the whole way of life he has so stoically constructed collapses in rubble. It is as their confrontation reaches its climax, with quickening cinematic cross-cuts from Gabe to Lisa to Louis to Gabrielle (and at one marvellous moment to an episode from *Bonanza* flickering on the family TV screen) that the book is at its most convincing. This part is damn good soap opera: melodrama with the inevitability of Greek tragedy. Gabe's final journey into the bush, into the first snow of winter, into his past where he unlocks the untold stories of his childhood, contains some beautiful writing but leads to a predictable conclusion.

THE NARRATOR OF *The Lion's Mouth* (NeWest Press, 180 pages, \$16.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper) is a woman named Bianca who, like the novel's author, Caterina Edwards, came from Venice to Canada

several generations of a warm and chatty family. Everyone bubbles with enthusiasm for the project of the moment (an excursion to the banks of the old canal to look for the medicinal herb, boneset); everyone brims with stories from family history. So contagious is this mood that I hardly noticed my irritation at trying to keep track of all these names — Gad, Winkie, Doc, Blackie, Sart, Preacher — and to figure out who each person was and how he or she related to the rest. Thankfully, as the opening section progresses the voices do begin to separate and much (though not all) of the confusion disappears.

Flora, the narrator, and her son John are visiting West Peterborough for the summer. John is about to have plastic surgery at a Boston hospital; he's injured his left hand (never fear, no sinister symbolism here). Eventually Jeffrey arrives with his family, then Flora's husband Art and her daughter Priscilla. The reunion is complete.

The remaining two sections of the novel constitute a sort of winnowing, a separating of the wheat of history from the chaff of family legend. Flora recounts episodes from her own childhood ending with her rite of passage (by train) to Canada to visit Art Benjamin, her future husband. Here the book modulates seamlessly into its final section in which Flora, now returned to Fredericton from the summer in Massachusetts, fills us in on pieces of her family's life since she married and moved to Canada. Here too she ponders the impulse to write down what has become a very satisfying family chronicle — an unpretentious, artful celebration of life. □

#### LETTERS

## Answering the party line

IN HER REVIEW of *Dangerous Patriots*, (April) Margaret Laurence appears to misinterpret the reason why the Communist Party of Canada at first opposed the war against Nazi Germany.

It was not because the party saw it "as an attempt on the part of an imperialistic Britain to involve Canada in a European war," but because the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact had forced Communist parties everywhere, on orders from the Comintern, to do an abrupt

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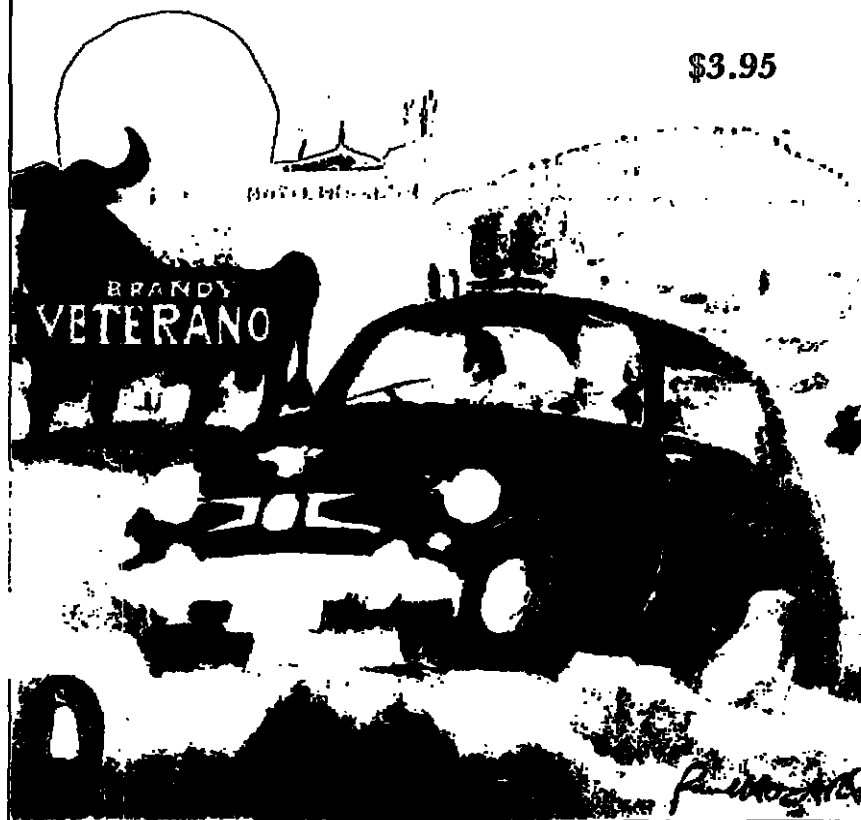
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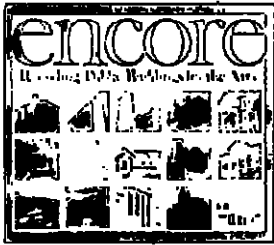
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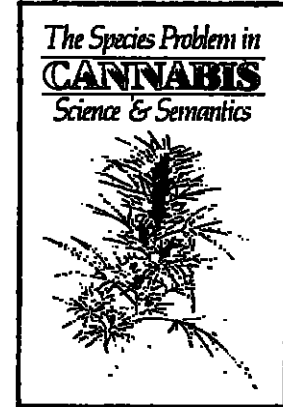
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about-face in their positions on the "anti-Fascist struggle."

Laurence says "this anomaly must have caused a lot of agonized debate." Indeed, it drove many people of integrity out of the party.

Laurence writes that "the Soviet Union came into the war on the Allied side," but this was not, of course, because Stalin's conscience had suddenly been awakened, but because the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union.

It seems to me that Laurence's review seriously blurs these well-known historical facts.

Kennedy Wells  
Alberta, P.E.I.

### Capital theatrics

A COMMUNITY may get the theatre it deserves, but does Ottawa deserve the mercurial bombast of M.B. Thompson? His diarrhoeic droppings on the April pages of *Books in Canada* was a demeaning and disgraceful assault against the Great Canadian Theatre Company and the many people who have encouraged its efforts to bring intelligent, provocative Canadian theatre to Ottawa.

GCTC will survive not because, as Thompson grandiloquently posits, its productions are lying, untruthful tracts funded by institutions fattened on a diet of metaphoric rubles; GCTC will survive because by offering stimulating, relevant theatre it has earned the respect and support of a large number of people.

With this support and active encouragement the potential of this talented, energetic company has continued to flourish and mature; without the community support, GCTC's splendid new space would still be the greasy, oily garage it was only a year or so ago.

*Books in Canada* does a great disservice to itself, to the dedicated members of the Great Canadian Theatre Company and to its many supporters by printing McCarthy-ite bluster instead of considered criticism.

Michael Ostroff  
Ottawa

THERE ARE a number of libellous falsehoods in M.B. Thompson's bitchy and irrational summing up of the Great Canadian Theatre Company's role and achievements on the Ottawa theatre scene. In all fairness, you owe us space for a reply to set the record straight.

Thompson's first Big Lie is that GCTC members are heartless xenophobes who would not permit "a technically 'stateless' Chinese girl to help sew threads for Robin Mathews's *Selkirk* since she lacked the citizenship for it." In fact, the young woman in

question was a first-year student from York University who wandered into rehearsals and announced she would like to help — but only as dramaturge! Nonetheless, she was invited to attend rehearsals and make her contribution. Her name appears in the program as "Script Assistant."

Thompson's second Big Lie is that our proximity to the "money bags of the Canadian Labour Congress" enables us "to plumb whatever pork barrels are administered by grant-granting propaganda such as the GCTC's recent Nicaraguan fantasy, *Sandinista!*" The facts are that we have never received a penny in contributions from the CLC, and after eight years we are still not receiving a sustaining grant from the Canada Council.

The only "mendacity" (why not call a lie a lie?) is Thompson's account of our motives and accomplishments. The biggest "fantasy" is his silly claim that GCTC is surviving and prospering because this liberal country rewards cultural organizations that challenge the status quo by-attacking its ideological underpinnings. Such spiteful drivel is an insult to your readers' intelligence, if not to Thompson's.

Larry McDonald  
Associate Director  
The Great Canadian Theatre Company  
Ottawa

*M.B. Thompson replies:*

(i) You'd never guess from either letter that the bulk of my piece was not about the GCTC.

(ii) I assumed that the union (CUPW) that has a strong connection to the GCTC and whose president, Jean Claude Parrot, is a vice-president of the CLC has something vaguely to do with that body.

(iii) "Mendacity" — "Lie": all the same to me. I'm not the expert.

### Style and substance

I AM SORRY that Ralph Gustafson, whose work in general I respect (as I respect and like also what I know of the man), should choose to term me a "moronic critic" in his letter in the April issue for disagreeing with his own evidently high estimate of one book, *Gradations of Grandeur*, and should moreover misrepresent me as having found the poem "statistically constipated." Anyone actually reading my review in the February issue will see that I did not mention statistics, nor apply statistical methods, and that the constipation refers solely to the excessively clotted quality of some of his more philosophical tercets.

For me literary criticism involves, as

well as a close attention to details, the obligation to demonstrate via extensive quotation, rather than merely to assert, stylistic qualities that one admires or regrets. In this way the reader can at least know what the critic's standards are in practice and take them into account. Rather than crude insult I would have welcomed from Mr. Gustafson, either publicly or privately, a line-by-line refutation of the points that I took pains to substantiate in such detail.

However vast geographically, from the literary perspective Canada is a small pond, so that it is almost impossible *not* to know or have met many of the writers whose work one reviews. A false camaraderie results, I fear, more often in diplomatic silence or friendly but evasive "noticing" than in the balanced and detailed criticism that Canadian literature needs now more than either further volumes of poetry or even — if such is to be the cost — than literary friendships, however pleasant.

Christopher Levenson  
Department of English  
Carleton University  
Ottawa

### Hear, hear

AS A hearing-impaired (or -handicapped) individual, may I point out to the judges and to Andrew G. Gann, who contributed to CanWit No. 80 the item defining "hearing-handicapped" as a new euphemism for "deaf," that these two terms are not synonymous.

"Hearing-handicapped" is a perfectly legitimate term used to differentiate those people who still have some hearing and can generally be assisted by some means, such as a hearing aid, to hear better. "Deaf" refers to those whose impairment is so severe that any sense of hearing is essentially non-existent. One might say that all deaf people are hearing-impaired — but not all hearing-impaired individuals are deaf, as that word is properly defined.

Liz Craig  
Red Deer, Alta.

### CANWIT NO. 84

THERE HAS BEEN so much fuss lately about the immoral content of Canadian books that some censorious organizations have begun to specialize. For instance, we recently learned of the Mordecai Richler Abhorrence League, which operates under the acronym MORAL. Contestants are invited to com-

pose acronyms for other groups whose aim is to launder (or protect) the work of well-known Canadian writers. The prize is \$25 and another \$25 goes to Laura Kropp of Ottawa for the idea. Deadline: September 1. Address: CanWit No. 84, *Books in Canada*, 366 Adelaide Street East, Toronto M5A 3X9.

### Results of CanWit No. 82

OUR REQUEST for "drop poems" produced the usual flood of snide comments directed toward his nibs, the most common of which transformed *Trudeau* into *rude*. (Other duplications included *Brian Mulroney: baloney*; *Harold Ballard: old lard*; and *Allan Fotheringham: another ham*.) The winner is K.C. Angus of Kemptville, Ont., for the following compositions:

LLIAM ON CKE ZIE KING  
WI LY MA N  
  
HN R BI  
JO C OS E  
  
J NT  
AN TENNA  
  
JAC CAR I  
QUES TER

### Honourable mentions:

MAR ARET ATW  
G OOD  
  
EDW' BROADB  
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— L. Brown, Winnipeg

### THE EDITORS RECOMMEND

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

#### FICTION

*Night Travellers*, by Sandra Birdsell, Turnstone Press. Birdsell's evocative style and uncanny eye for detail transform the immediate situation of these stories — the rather ordinary existence of a Metis barber, his Mennonite wife, and their daughters — into a reverberating meditation on racial heritage and Manitoba history.

#### NON-FICTION

*Letter to the Past: An Autobiography, Volume 1*, by George Woodcock, Fitzhenry & Whiteside. A finely crafted account of Woodcock's formative years on the rich and ambivalent margins of cultural, social, and political life, in which he reveals the youthful experiences that led to his lifetime emotional and aesthetic commitments.

#### POETRY

*Generations: Selected Poems*, by Rachel Korn, Mosaic Press/Valley Editions. A welcome introduction (through translations by Seymour Mayne, Miriam Waddington, and others) to the work of the Yiddish poet who, though widely anthologized abroad, was still largely unknown to Canadian readers when she died last September in Montreal.

### 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:

*Air Glow Red*, by Ian Slater, Seal Books.  
*All for Margarita* and other stories, by David Wansley, Dalwas Press.  
*Anhaga*, by Jon Furberg, Pulp Press.  
*Aphorisms*, by Peter Taylor, Adela Press.  
*Approaches to the Work of James Renney*, edited by Stan Dragland, ECW Press.  
*Baby Beluga Book*, by Raffi, M & S.

*Barbara Pentland*, by Sheila Eastman and Timothy J. McGee, U of T Press.  
*Best Man*, by Claire Martin, Translated by David Lobdell, Oberon.  
*Birding, or desire*, by Don McKay, M & S.  
*By Persons Unknown*, by George Jonas & Barbara Amiel, Macmillan.  
*Canada as a Principal Power*, by Dewitt Kirton, Wiley.  
*Canada's Oil and the American Empire*, by Ed Shaffer, Hurig.  
*Cantos North*, by Henry Beissel, Penumbra Press.  
*Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, edited by Eleanor Cook, Chaviva Hosek, Jay Macpherson, Patricia Parker, and Julian Patrick, U of T Press.  
*Champions*, by Marjorie Holland, Gage.  
*Chemical Nightmare*, by John Jackson, Phil Weller, and the Waterloo Public Interest Research Group, Between the Lines.  
*Chilean Literature in Canada*, Edited by Nain Nómez, Ediciones Cordillera.  
*Clapp's Rock*, by William Rowe, M & S.  
*Collected Poems of Raymond Souvaris, Volume 4*, Oberon.  
*The Company on the Coast*, edited by E. Blanche Norcross, Nansimo Historical Society.  
*Complete Vegetarian Cookbook*, by Janet Hunt, Hurig.  
*Counting the Hours: City Poems*, by Tom Wayman, M & S.  
*Dark Secrets*, by Veronica Ross, Oberon.  
*Divorce: Law and the Family in Canada*, Minister of Supply and Services Canada.  
*Un Dozen: Thirteen Canadian Poets*, edited by Judith Fitzgerald, Black Moss Press.  
*Dusty*, by Ellen Schwartz, illustrated by Ann Swanson Gross, Solstice Books.  
*Earth Witch*, by Anne Cameron, Harbour.  
*The Ebb of Affluence*, by David William Carr, Human Progress Press.  
*Erotic Haiku*, edited by Rod Willmot, Black Moss Press.  
*Flash Harry and the Daughters of Divine Light and Other Stories*, by Kevin Roberts, Harbour (1982).  
*Fortune and La Tour: The Civil War in Acadia*, by M.A. MacDonald, Methuen.  
*Greendream*, by Joseph McLeod, Penumbra Press.  
*I Wish There Were Unicorns*, by Karleen Bradford, Gage.  
*Illusion One & Illusion Two*, edited by Geoff Hancock, Aya Press.  
*In Court*, by Jack Batten, Macmillan.  
*Inequality and Social Policy*, by A.W. Djao, Wiley.  
*The Insecurity of Art*, edited by Ken Norris & Peter Van Toorn, Véhicule.  
*Jobs This Summer (1983)*, by Carl L. Bedal, Guidance Centre, Faculty of Education, U. of T.  
*The Language of the Skies: The Bilingual Air Traffic Control Conflict in Canada*, by Sandford F. Borins, McGill-Queen's.  
*The Last Outposts Newfoundland in Crisis*, by Jay Goulding, Sisyphus Press.  
*Love en Route*, by Gregory M. Cook, Fiddlehead Poetry Books.  
*The Madness of a Seduced Woman*, by Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Dutton.  
*Making Time Work For You*, by Harold L. Taylor, General. Man Descending, by Guy Vanderhaeghe, Macmillan.  
*The Mameet Is All*, by Ralph Gustafson, M & S.  
*The Moon of Hunger*, by Ian McCulloch, Penumbra Press.  
*Mostly Coast People*, by Hubert Evans, Harbour Publishing.  
*The Myth of Deliverance*, by Northrop Frye, U. of T. Press.  
*The New Querist*, by Royce MacGillivray, The Querist.  
*Night Letters*, by Bill Furey, Véhicule Press.  
*95 Hikes in the Canadian Rockies: Banff, Kootenay and Asinibolne Parks*, by Vicky Spring and Gordon King, Douglas & McIntyre.  
*Not For Export: Toward a Political Economy of Canada's Arrested Industrialization*, by Glen Williams, M & S.  
*100 Years: The Royal Canadian Regiment 1883-1933*, by Ken Bell and C.P. Sacey, Collier Macmillan.  
*109 Walks in British Columbia's Lower Mainland (Second Edition)*, by Mary and David Macaree, Douglas & McIntyre.  
*103 Hikes in Southwestern British Columbia (Second Edition)*, by Mary and David Macaree, Douglas & McIntyre.  
*Primitive Offensive*, by Dionne Brund, Williams-Wallace, Dionne Brund.  
*The Portable City*, by Don Austin, Pulp Press.  
*Public Money in the Private Sector*, by Allan Tupper, Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, Queen's University.  
*Quebec: A History 1867-1929*, by Linteau, Durocher, Robert, translated by Robert Chodas, Lorimer.  
*Race Against the Dark*, by Elfreida Reed, Gage.  
*Seafood Cookery from Prince Edward Island*, by Julie Watson, Ragweed.  
*Scrubbing for Repose*, by John Terpsira, Split Reed Press.  
*Shale Like the Wind*, by Joan E. Ford, Gage.  
*Shi for Your Mountain*, by Sharon Simon, Gage.  
*A Slow Light*, by Ross Leckie, Véhicule Press.  
*So You Want to be a Helicopter Pilot*, by Greg Bailey, The Informatics Company.  
*The Story's Drama*, by Sean O Higin, Black Moss Press.  
*Tasks of Fusion: Dennis Lee at Mid-Career*, edited by Karen Mulhally, Donna Bennett, and Russel Brown, Porcupine's Quill.  
*The Tenth Crusade*, by Christopher Hyde, M & S.  
*This is the Way the World Will End, This is the Way You Will End, Unless...*, by Harold Freeman, Hurig.  
*Tion, Uqbar, Orbia Tertius*, by Jorge Luis Borges, illustrated by Rikki, The Porcupine's Quill.  
*Tom Penny*, by Tony German, M & S.  
*Tsunami*, by Crawford Kilian, Douglas & McIntyre.  
*Wanted Alive*, by Erin Mouré, Anansi.  
*Whatever Happened to Muggle and Other People I've Known*, by Edna Staebler, M & S.  
*Water Epigrams*, by Dionne Brund, Williams-Wallace.  
*Women and Work: Inequality in the Labour Market*, by Paul and Erin Phillips, Lorimer.  
*A World of Dragons*, by Jenny Beck, Penumbra Press.  
*Zarkeon*, by Pegeen Brennan, Quadrant.

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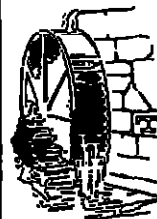
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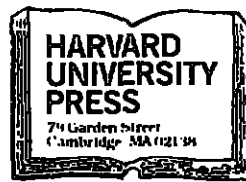


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