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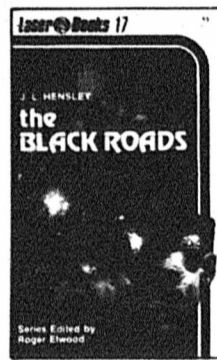
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Kroetsch's Badland characters ..

Recovering the past

Kevin Gillese

Kroetsch, Robert *Badlands*
General Publishing Group, 270
pp. \$2.50 (Paperback).

The cover of *Badlands* lists it as "a novel of strange adventure in the Alberta... *Badlands*." That's quite true - it is a novel of "strange adventure" - but calling it that is like calling *Catch-22* "a departure from the war-novel norm."

Badlands is a loud, raucous novel, in the manner of most others Kroetsch has written. It is a bizarre novel; a frantic, humorous novel, an enigmatic novel filled with wild scenes of incongruous sexual activity; a well-written, well-constructed myth - all that and much, much more. But to call it "strange adventure" is to venture into gross understatement.

For example, at one point in the story a tornado hits one of the characters (Web) while he is out with a young Indian squaw (Anna Yellowbird) on an exposed badland butte covering some dinosaur bones. Web describes his strange lusts during the tornado:

"And the I got the surprise of my life," Web said. "Anna told me. Don't know how it happened."

"Up there in the air," Tune said.

"Of course," Web said. "I had blue balls and lover's nuts and skinned knees; we were locked together up there like two howling dogs and the wind howling and cactus flying and us flying and the lightening like tentacles we were in this huge cave all hung with tentacles of lightning... and just god-damned then the lightning struck us - and sweet mother of Christ the blue flames shot out of our ears, off our fingertips, our glowing hair stood on end, my prick was like an exploding torpedo, we glowed and blossomed and bloomed like a flare, like a burning house..."

Web goes on with the description of his passionate encounter for a full seven pages of nearly-incoherent ramblings

- but that is only the beginning. It's followed by a dynamite blast at the site of the archeological dig which buries the blaster, Tune. Tune is the youngest member of the expedition and was selected for the job because of his piano skills, as witnessed in a Drumheller "hoor-house." And so on.

"Strange novel?" Obviously. Perhaps not quite so obvious is the fact that this is a well-done, fascinating work and yet another feather in the cap of Albertan-born Kroetsch, winner of the Governor General's Award for his best-selling novel *The Studhorse Man*.

Badlands is about William Dawe, an Ottawa archeologist in the early 1900's who launches an expedition down the Red Deer River in order to search for dinosaur bones. Obviously from the previous quotations used, the general content of the book is the (mis)adventures of the people involved in the expedition, but the book is related from a first-person point of view, fifty-some years after the event.

The narrator is Anna - Dawe's only daughter - and she tells the story as she discovered (and uncovers) it in 1972. In similar manner to *The Studhorse Man*, the narrator is omniscient and again intimately involved with the events of the story.

In *The Studhorse Man*, the narrator Demeter was aided by his close relationship with Hazard Lepage and the fact that he himself was closely involved with the characters and the action. In order to make Anna Dawe an omniscient narrator, Kroetsch has her take her father's field notes and go back to the Alberta badlands, only to discover the mistress of the Dawe expedition, Anna Yellowbird, and become fast friends with her.

Together the two Annas drive across Alberta, from the badlands to the source of the Red Deer River, drinking gin

with beer-chasers - chasing the past with laughter and tears.

And that is what this novel is all about - the past. William Dawe pursues his image of the past - fossilized dinosaur bones - and places his image of the present onto paper - his field notes. Anna Dawe pursues her image of the past - William's field notes - and places her image of the present and the past onto paper - the novel *Badlands*. Kroetsch's point seems to be that neither are right in what they believe are the facts.

At one point, William meets a photographer by the name of Sinnott. Sinnott says to him, "We are two of a kind, Mr. Dawe, you and I. You with your bones that are sometimes only mineral replacements of what the living bones were. Me, rescuing positive prints out of the smell of the darkroom." And Dawe replies by saying, "I recover the past. You reduce it."

Here, I believe, is the thrust of Kroetsch's novel: Each person believes himself best fit to "recover the past." William Dawe, Anna Dawe, Sinnott and Anna Yellowbird - each believes their image of the past is the correct one. And all are wrong.

Kroetsch is a man who makes myths of the past and argues that to attempt objectivity in relating the past is to lie. He constantly intertwines his "omniscient" narrators with the stories they relate, shows the opposite version of the story (from another's point of view) and shows the reader how subjective someone becomes about events that personally involve them.

All that is very good from an academic point of view. But it does not make the characters come alive as does a reflection of human emotion and a human's psyche. This, to me, is where Kroetsch falters.

Certainly, Kroetsch writes with excellent style and conjures images very effectively. But I don't think he has come to grips with human emotional entanglements from the inside of his characters. I always have the feeling that the novel's characters are not flesh-and-blood humans, that they do not share the same emotions we all do.

At first, I believed it was because of the "spontaneous" writing style Kroetsch uses. However, after reading Malcolm Lowry's *Under The Volcano* or Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, I have come to believe this lack of character development is merely Kroetsch denying his nearly-formed characters the motivations and emotional complexities I expect from a believable character.

Kroetsch is a good writer - he uses language well - but he doesn't really dig into human nature and doesn't really give me glaring insights into life. Nor does he bind me closely with the characters he uses in his works. Were he to do so in an upcoming novel, it would surely be a Canadian classic.

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