

New in English

[WITH ONE TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH]

A New Athens, HUGH HOOD, Oberon, 1977.

Some of us are put off when we pick up a novel which announces on its dust jacket that it is part of a planned series of three, five or twelve volumes. *A New Athens* is the second in Mr. Hood's projected dozen. We missed the first, *The Swing in the Garden*. We are sorry. Mr. Hood is a master. He writes with precision, treading perceptively through the past.

A New Athens is the story of the people in and around Stoverville, Ontario, in the fifties. The narrator is Matt Goderich, the guileless son of a mildly radical member of Parliament. He falls in gentle love with most of the rich young girls in Stoverville and then, definitely, with one, Edie Codrington, the daughter of the middling retail hardware store tycoon.

A New Athens is marvelous in much the way E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* is: subtle, true, a picture of place and time and social strata, done with an art that appears artless. Hood has created not only people, houses, lawns, rivers and breezes but also a Canadian society—pressures, appetites, illusions and religions. Here is Matt talking about his girl:

[It] all combined to reinforce her status in my imagination as a princess, a royal, goddess-like nymphical figurine. She had great glamour for me, a girl who had boats and a boathouse, traces of feelings I had wrestled with years before. . . . I mean I was a hell of a snob when I first met her. There it is. I was attracted to her partly by her appearance and behaviour, partly by her boathouse.

Each of us is some kind of a snob. In the closets of our souls we keep measuring sticks we're slightly ashamed of. Matt is no hero but he tries to be an honest man. There is no one in this gentle book who properly can be called heroic and no one who can be remotely considered a villain. (The townspeople whom Edie's mother consigned to Hell in her visionary painting, *The Population of Stoverville, Ontario, Entering into the New Jerusalem*, are gently left unnamed.)

Mr. Hood's writing is glowing:

On ice like this your skates have to have a very keen edge or you'll simply slip and slide and lose your footing. Polished by the wind, diamond-hard, the ice resists the ordinary dullish blade, will not allow purchase. That night the ice was so extremely hard that even our freshly honed blades barely incised it. This was like skating over an enormous champagne bottle. Green. The ice was pure crystalline deep green, just like a tinted lens,

two-and-a-half feet thick even in the reasonably sheltered area where we skated; polished to a perfectly smooth texture by the abrasive action of wind-driven snow, it gleamed dully in the mixed light coming from above. The moon was just coming to full that night, as it happened, a circumstance that lent a peculiar flavour to a New Year's Eve celebration, the light over the green ice powerfully suggestive of festival, even of sacrament. . . .

"Hey, while we're here maybe we'll see the ghost ship," said one of the boys, a native of the place, I believe a son of the Uncle George who owned the beach.

We will now read the first of Mr. Hood's books and look forward to the next ten.

Act of God, CHARLES TEMPLETON, McClelland and Stewart, 1977.

Last August Jack McClelland, Canada's most conspicuous publisher, sent special copies of *Act of God*, to a select group of book reviewers. On the cover was a letter signed by Jack.

"Dear Editor," it said, "I am often asked 'How do you recognize a best seller in advance?' I believe it is a matter of sheer instinct. I invite you to test yours. Please be one of the first to read a novel that I have predicted will sell ten million copies throughout the world over the next five years."

The letter offered a prize—free copies of every book McClelland and Stewart publishes in 1978—to the editor who made the best guess as to the number of *Act of God* copies that would be sold in Canada by December 31, 1977. (McClelland's own guess was 47,300.)

It seems likely that writing a best seller was what Mr. Templeton had in mind, and he has come up with a scandalous plot. Though Mr. Templeton is Canadian, his book is set in Rome, London and in the Archdiocese of New York, most frequently in the residence of the cardinal archbishop. (It is not a *roman à clef*: the cardinal archbishop is clearly not the late Francis Cardinal Spellman nor the current Terence Cardinal Cooke.) Although he is not a medieval Italian cardinal but a modern Irish-American one, the cardinal is a potential murderer. To make him an even more unlikely killer, as well as a somewhat ecumenical one, he is a convert, born a Presbyterian, the son of a celebrated society preacher.

What could drive him to kill?

The answer is divinely simple: the bones of Jesus Christ.

If an archeologist found—or claimed to have