

# Long ago and very far away

**VERY FAR AWAY FROM ANYWHERE ELSE**, Ursula K. LeGuin, Bantam Books, New York, 1976.

by Judith Pratt

In her failing attempt to lyrically express in prose the importance of individualism, Ursula LeGuin has raised doubts about her suitability as a recipient of the Hugo Award (three times) and the "Boston Globe" Horn Book Award for Excellence. She surely must now be stooping to the position of hack writer to write and have published a book which has nothing significant to say, nor a readability which one would term enjoyable.

LeGuin's newest novel, **Very Far Away From Anywhere Else**, belies her reputation as a novelist of some importance. With only odd bursts of energy and style, the novel seems otherwise lost in the unfathomable mire of poor prose, polluted with catchy phrases. The theme, which has been poignantly expressed especially in the works of the prophet of individualism, Ayn Rand, here takes on the guise of a very juvenile sense of self-importance which never seems to surface and take flight. Initially a story about a young boy's shedding of social and artificial restrictions, Ms. LeGuin attempts to instill her

work with too grand a theme for her talent. She also attempts to make her character Owen Griffiths speak in the language of a high school student of Any Old City, U.S.A. He makes inane statements like, "Maybe when you meet the people you are supposed to meet you know it, without knowing it. I don't know." Later on he again gets lost in the realm of juvenile thought. "It was an unimportant conversation that was extremely important to me. And that's important, that something unimportant can be so important."

In a comparative sense, Alice Munro has covered, much more poignantly and universally, the same theme of a developing youth growing up under the watchful eyes of peers and adults, from within the boundaries of a stringent socially-manipulated world. Alice Munro's **Lives of Girls and Women** achieves a sense within the reader of a struggling youth who is attempting to accommodate herself both as an individual and as a being within an inescapable social sphere. LeGuin's work attempts to portray a young man shedding the chains of the crowd of high school and accepting the garb of one who is aware of himself as primarily an individual. In an almost embarrassing sense, she fails miserably.

Lauded as "a different kind of love story", **Very Far Away From Anywhere Else** involves a youth, who with the help of a young woman who has already achieved a sense of herself and her goal as an individual, tries to instill meaningful order in his life. Recognized by the American Library Association as "a notable book for young adults", this work should really be

pushed aside in favour of a work, like any of Ayn Rand's very readable novels, which present the same theme, conflicts and resolutions in a more artistic, more enjoyable, and more poignant light. If this is the only kind of modern work available to young adults, then it is obvious why television and the movie theatre provide the major avenues of escapism.

## Writers take note

The Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia is sponsoring their fourth annual writing competition with prizes totaling over \$4500.

The competition is open to anyone legally resident in Nova Scotia continuously since July 1, 1977. The typed manuscripts, which must all be submitted under pseudonyms, will be judged by panels of Nova Scotia writers, teachers, and critics.

There are eight separate categories: the novel, either popular or literary; non-fiction booklength manuscripts; the modern romantic novel; adult short fiction, adult poetry, children's fiction and children's poetry, all to be published in an anthology; and adult short stories. The adult short stories are for a joint competition co-sponsored by the Federation and the literary magazine Alpha of Wolfville.

The most valuable individual prizes for the 1978 contest are in the

novel and booklength non-fiction groups, where the first prizes are \$1,000 each; top prizes in the other categories range from \$100 to \$250.

All entries to all categories must be the original, unpublished and unaccepted or unsubmitted work of the writer. Deadlines for all submissions are April 1, 1978, with the exception of the three book-length classes, whose deadlines are April 15.

Winners of the competition will be announced during the W.F.N.S. annual conference and general meeting, to be held this year in association with the Canadian Authors Association's national convention in Halifax in June.

Further information and entry materials may be obtained from the Federation's Executive Director, Ms. Geraldine Gaskin, W.F.N.S., P.O. Box 3608, Halifax South Postal Station, B3J 3K6; or by phoning the office at 423-8116.

## The end is near

by Bruce Grant

**The Eco-Spasm Report** by Alvin Toffler, Bantam Books, 116 pp., \$1.50.

If you've been entertaining yourself these long winter nights with the growing body of literature forecasting the imminent demise of Western society you may be interested to know that Alvin Toffler (a la **Future Shock**) has struck again. **The Eco-Spasm Report** is an imaginative and insightful tome on the state of the world. And the prognosis isn't too healthy; just picture "hordes of desperate city dwellers cut off from food, medical aid, energy, and water, fanning through the countryside like a pillaging army, squatting on farmlands, stealing livestock and crops." And this is all supposed to happen, mind you, in Connecticut! Toffler believes we are in the process of transition from an industrial society to a "super industrial" one with vastly different conditions from the present.

An "eco-spasm" has nothing to do with ecology but refers to the spasmodic self-destruction of the economy and consequent breakdown of society. Toffler's book is interesting because it goes deeper into political reality than, say, the philosophical rumblings of the Club of Rome. Certainly no one can deny that there isn't something happening out there. Bobbing exchange rates, soaring energy costs, shortages of this and that; Toffler is right with his claim that "the old structures and rules of the international economic game . . . have rapidly changed."

There's little here we haven't heard before; the industrial state is sliding inexorably down a slippery slope to a nasty end—you can hear that any afternoon at the corner of South and Queen Street. Toffler, playing the part of a journalist rather than a scholar (he was associate editor of **Fortune** for several years), has done little more

than research and correlate. The charisma of creativity he achieved in **Future Shock** is lacking here. Nor are the strategies he proposes for averting chaos anything new: control, stabilization, democratize; these all demand sacrifices from the industrial state and are therefore slightly utopian.

The main point here is that the shift to a post-industrial civilization involves a fundamental change from a consumer-oriented to a service-oriented society. It seems we in Canada had the right idea all along with the L.I.P. programme—use the unemployed armies in socially useful projects.

Toffler isn't kidding when he says the post-industrial world will be radically different from the one we now inhabit. If this turns you off because you don't like "prophets of doom" maybe you should consider hibernating until it's all over.

Toffler's impeccable journalistic style shows little traces of the great haste he claims he wrote in. He tries—and fails—to give the impression his book is the last ray of light before The Great Darkness. **The Eco-Spasm Report** is not likely to repeat the success of **Future Shock**. It tends to be overly sensationalized and follows the classic pattern of save-the-world-now books: visions of horrible disasters in the first two chapters and prescriptions for avoiding them in the third. This is unfortunate, because if the general public was more aware of the possible consequences of bad government management we might see more public participation in national affairs.

Finally, even Toffler is forced to admit that things are not hopelessly bad; the worst that can be done is to take no action. Society is not irredeemably condemned, but its capacity to survive will depend on its ability to weather the gathering storm.

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