

Subversive Elements, by Donna E. Smyth, published by the Women's Press, Toronto, 1986 (263 pages)

Subversive writing

By LOIS CORBETT

In Nova Scotia, government officials call environmentalists "subversives", writes Donna Smyth. They use that word to describe people politically to the left, if not "Communists". And she agrees with the government officials' choice of the word, not in that more traditional sense, but because, to her, subversive means rocking the boat.

Subversive Elements rocks a lot of boats. Smyth takes a generally accepted form of communication, the novel, and turns it upside down, using its pages to soak up a variety of topics and styles. *Subversive Elements* is a love story, intertwined with a first-person account of the uranium debate in this province, intertwined with Smyth's story of just wanting to cultivate her garden. Add to that funny family stories about local carpenters and goats, and then stick in some newspaper clippings and some

reflections on writing as well, and you have all the elements.

The characters are in their own way subversive. Smyth and her community of environmentalists and feminists have long challenged the government and the nuclear industry in Canada. Lewis and Beatrice, the love story characters, challenge the Church, society and gender roles to lead their lives. Maise, one of the family pets, is introduced as the first goat Smyth saw on the hood of her owner's Volkswagen.

Smyth has accomplished with *Subversive Elements* an incredible task: she has taken parts of her life and her imagination and managed to bring them all together, in a comprehensive yet challenging format. Unlike some authors who would separate a love story from a discussion about uranium mining in Nova Scotia, Smyth bridges the imagined gap for her readers, making them realize that things are not separate, that garden growing is not that

far away from becoming involved in the nuclear debate, that building a barn is not unlike writing a book.

Subversive Elements is important reading for anyone involved in protesting nuclear weapons and uranium mining. It is also important to those who want to learn more about this province and about the people who live here. For those studying literature for pleasure or for credit, this book is also important: Smyth is fast becoming a Nova Scotia literary tradition.

Smyth is the author of *Quill* also, published by the Women's Press in Toronto. She has written many short stories and articles on a variety of topics. Active in the environmental movement in Nova Scotia, Smyth is currently a professor of creative writing at Acadia University.

Donna Smyth will be reading from *Subversive Elements* at Red Herring Bookstore, 1558 Argyle Street this Saturday at 2:00PM

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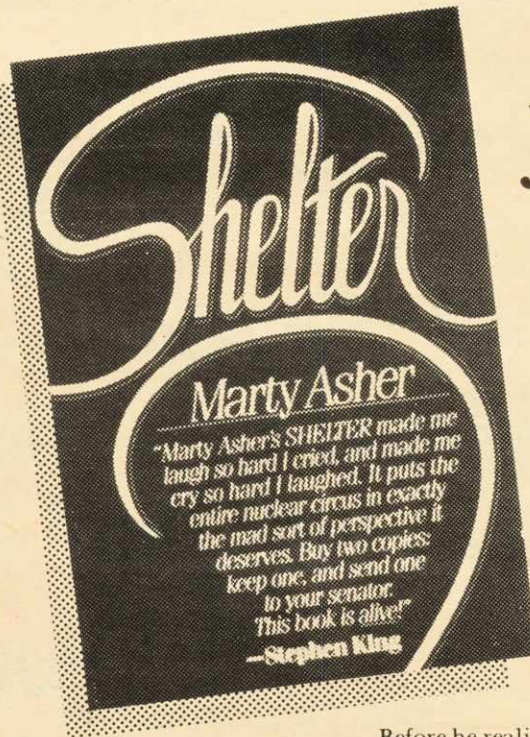
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John Lennon lives

A bizarre concert spells the end of nuclear weapons

Shelter, by Marty Asher, published by Arbor House Publishing Company, New York, 1986 (136 pages)

Before he realizes everything he loves will end in nuclear catastrophe, that is. Then he locks himself in the attic with his typewriter, his emergency shelf of drugs (if you've got to go, you might as well go high), and the Beatles' golden trilogy, *Revolver*, *Sgt. Pepper*, and *Abbey Road*.

And his life work changes. Before his depressing realization, Billy wrote happy bumper stickers, like "Honk for honk's sake," and "I brake for vegetables." Now he writes "You're only going to see the missiles in the sky once and they're not going to look real," and "Boom."

But Billy gets a break. Even after he terrifies his youngest son Jason with stories of fires that never burn out, and a frustrated Sara has packed up the family and moved out, Billy continues with his obsession with the end of the world, "It's coming sooner than you think." In a fit of hopelessness, Billy turns to his drugs, his psychic fallout shelter usually reserved for the end. After a few sticks of sensimilla to get things going, a couple of hits of Christmas coke, a few ludes, a bottle of Kenwood Cabernet Sauvignon and a handful of vitamins, John Lennon appears on the edge of Billy's window sill.

And then the book gets weird.

Tossed in with those familiar lines from the Beatles tunes is Billy's answer to the world crisis: he organizes a comeback concert like no one has ever seen, starring the four Beatles, and held in New York, with over four million nuclear disarmament fans. After the concert comes the announcement: "We have just received word that in light of the overwhelming turnout here today and at a similar concert in the Soviet Union, American and Russian leaders have agreed to start complete bilateral disarmament talks immediately," says Billy.

And so Billy writes another bumper sticker. "Sometimes the only solution is to find a new problem." He makes love with Sara, tells Jason a happy story, and writes still more slogans for cars, pleased to be part of the generation that obliterates the threat of nuclear war.

Stephen King got to say it first. "Shelter made me laugh so hard I cried, and made me cry so hard I laughed. It puts the entire nuclear circus in exactly the mad sort of perspective it deserves." Asher's *Shelter* is just what the doctor should prescribe for those nuclear fallout blues.

Take one with a glass of water, before it's too late.

By LOIS CORBETT

This is a story about a man named Billy and what happened to him in the days before the end of the world.

Billy, who has played the clarinet since he was eight, decided to major in classical music at university. But like many of his college peers, Billy came to second guess the first decision, and soon switched to comparative literature, and switched again, to creative writing, throwing in courses in Chinese, philosophy and economics for good measure. Those courses helped him in his career work.

Now Billy writes bumper stickers for a living.

But that's not all he does. He looks after his two children, helps out at his wife, Sara's restaurant, listens to Beatles' music and makes love with his wife almost every night.