

The life & times of short story writers

arts

by Kim St. Clair

Clark Blaise stretched out on his bed and began to tell me his troubles. Small and stocky, he looks as much like a writer as anyone does. He is one of a host of Canadian writers invited here to take part in the universities week long conference on the short story.

Despite the fact that he has written two books of short stories both of which received excellent reviews, Mr. Blaise claims that he is virtually unknown to the Canadian public. This is what he says about the short story writer:

"He knows that he's not going to reach out to thousands and thousands of strangers, he knows that he's not going to see his work in airport bookstores, he knows that he's not going to get any kind of living from it... Anyone who thinks he can earn a living out of it or that he can gain any kind of worldly satisfaction out of it is crazy."

Blaise has been writing for ten years. His first book has been the recipient of three awards. Nevertheless, recognition was not easily found, nor has it been overly generous. This is what was learned about the Canadian literary scene in an interview with him.

GATEWAY: "Would you say that lack of recognition is the fault of the Canadian media?"

BLAISE: I think if anything the Canadian media is trying too hard to publicize it. In publishing two books of short stories I've been on national television and national radio; I've gotten all the exposure I could possibly want. If I was at a similar stage in my career in the United States I would not be invited halfway across the continent to be at a conference."

GATEWAY: "Why is it that most Canadian writers are unknown?"

BLAISE: No public really supports its writers... My *Tribal Justice* sold 4,000 copies, which is considered an excellent sale. I'm making more money this

week giving these readings... than I did on my book. Remember, a writer gets 10% of the royalties on his book... You net a total of maybe \$2000.

GATEWAY: "That applies to hardcover books. Is the situation any better with paperback?"

BLAISE: They're going to sell the book at \$1.75 paperback. My royalties of that is 6%... that's about 10 cents a copy. 94% of the money does not go to the author. Any dairy farmer, any gas pumper gets more than that for his product.

GATEWAY: "What is it then that makes a bestseller?"

BLAISE: A person can type out a bestseller if he knows the formula. The best seller format hasn't changed in over a century... People have always wanted the supernatural as a bestseller, love and sex, or religion."

At this point another author, Ray Smith, walked into the room. Smith has written a book of short stories and a novel, respectively entitled "Cape Breton is the Thought Control Center of Canada" and "Lord Nelson and Tavern". He is tall, young, and a skier. After waiting for him to complain about snow conditions here (like Blaise, he lives in Montreal) we all took up the conversation again.

BLAISE: You can make a lot more going public, is talking about what you've done..."

SMITH: I wrote a McLeans article about skiing. It took me about a week to write. I got \$600 for that. The novel took me about five years to write and I've had about \$900 from it so far. I made the novel into a radio play recently, and I'm going to get about \$1500 for writing the script, and I don't know how much more for the rights... The extras are way far and above."

GATEWAY: "If it is so hard to make a living as a writer then why do people continue to write?"

BLAISE: Writing is often an act of revenge on life, or an attempt to go back to ones childhood. The whole business

of writing is simply to never lose the child's perspective... you have to try to keep the world as seemingly as large and as inexplicable as it is to a child.

GATEWAY: "What do you try to accomplish in your writings?"

BLAISE: I don't have any particular sociological or political line that I'm peddling. I'm offering the richest and fullest expression of my own

experiences... in a language and in a form that I hope that will reach other people."

Before I left them the two writers urged me to attend the readings and to listen to the conversations of the authors. Many guests have been gathered

together for the event, including Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. As a parting remark Blaise and Smith jokingly informed me

that:

"Short story writers are the salt of the earth. They don't have the pretensions of poets... they don't have the -

"The pomposity of novelists."

"They're just cold, angry, embittered, decent folk."

"Perfectionists."

And that is what a short story writer is.



Versatile Van Morrison

"Really the only thing that's important is that I play music for people to hear... All the other stuff - the personal managers, the photographs and the publicity kits and the articles and the pressure merchants and the music magazines - so much of it is bullshit... 'cause in the end it all comes back to the music." - Van Morrison

Versatile and unpredictable, Van Morrison has always refused to compromise. As the quote might suggest, his music is intensely introspective - in many ways an expression of pure, raw emotion, not modified to appeal to an audience. In other words, it is not entertainment to be 'consumed'. You must listen closely to it for a while; then if the music works for you, a tremendous amount of beauty seems to come across in some manner that is impossible to identify. If it doesn't affect you in this way, you may just find it pleasant or weird.

Morrison's style ranges from uptempo blues and light rock tunes to drawn-out ballads.

"It's Too Late to Stop Now", released in 1974, is a double album recorded at the London-Los Angeles concerts of the summer of 1973. I had the opportunity to attend a few of his concerts on that European tour and found them immensely enjoyable. But Morrison in concert is not able, try as he might, to spark masses of people to hysterical dancing. His music does not work that way. People just seemed to listen, cheer, and leave wearing serene half-smiles. Significantly, crowd response seems to have been better in L.A., and most tracks are from those concerts.

His band on that tour, the Caledonia Soul Orchestra, provides excellent support - the best he has ever had. The album

production is such that the sound is effectively the same as that of a studio album. Some of the old 'Street Choir' members (including John Platania) join him, as does Jack Shroer, his saxophonist for years. A four-member string section was a surprise addition. Van has never kept the same background musicians for any length of time (Jack Shroer excepted). His restless pursuit of the perfect band will never end, but this most talented and polished backup group is the closest he has yet come.

"Veeden Fleece", Morrison's latest album released a few months ago, could not be more inconsistent with the direction his music has been taking for the past few years. The style, strongly reminiscent of "Astral Weeks" (a very early solo album) is much slower, more jazz-based, and more meditative. The backup group is

a pared-down Caledonia Soul Orchestra.

The album is not recommended as a good introduction to the man's music. Even many hard-core Van Morrison fans may find this album tiresome. On the other hand, this style may win him some fans from more low-key jazz enthusiasts (which perhaps suggests the futility of having a rigid opinion of an artist's music). Having listened to Van Morrison for several years, I have grown accustomed to his unique and constantly-changing music, and find this latest album weaker, but still a fine piece of work. For a recommended introductory album to his music, try "Moondance" or "It's Too Late to Stop Now". It is more than worth a chance to impress you, and this music may well become something important to you.

Michael Bow

Bachauer joins Symphony

Twenty year veteran pianist, Gina Bachauer, will appear with the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra at the Jubilee



Auditorium, Saturday, February 1, at 8:30 p.m. and on Sunday, February 2 at 2:30 p.m.

Greek born, but of Austrian heritage, Gina Bachauer studied at the Conservatory of Athens, then at the Ecole Normale in Paris with Alfred Cortot. Since her first New York debut in 1950, Ms. Bachauer has toured the United States almost continually.

This weeks program includes Wolf's *Italian Serenade*, Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3*, and Ginastera's *Variaciones Concertantes*. The symphony will be conducted by Pierre

Hetu.

Tickets are available at the Symphony Box Office (433-2020) and the Box Office at The Bay downtown. Rush tickets will be on sale at the door one hour before concert time: \$1.00 for students and \$2.00 for non-students.

TV Highlight

Michael Scott's "Whistling Smith" will be this week's CBC Pacificanada presentation. It is a film profile of a frontier-type Vancouver cop: Sgt. Bernie Smith.

Michael Scott is a subtle NFB director whose controversial "Station 10", revealing some disturbing aspects of the day to day routine of Montreal police, was shown nationally on CBC two years ago. It was also run to a small audience, with Mr. Smith present, last Thursday night at the NFB theatre in Edmonton.

"Whistling Smith" in its early showings has been equally well received, provoking a number of questions about the duties of modern police. Where, for instance, if anywhere should Bernie Smith fit into a police force?

Pacificanada will run Wednesday night at 10:30 on CBC.
by Kirk Lambrecht

Alberta history retold

Paddle Wheels to Bucket Wheels On the Athabasca, by J.G. MacGregor, McClelland & Stewart, 190 pages, \$10.00, cloth.

Paddle Wheels to Bucket Wheels on the Athabasca is a history of Northern Alberta that begins with the first intrusion of white man in the area and ends with the present day development of the Tar Sands around Ft. McMurray. Along the way the reader is introduced to various people and stories that create the colorful history of the region. Explorers, warring fur companies, missionaries, scowmen, klondikers, Mounties, and more contemporary business pioneers each have their chapter.

J.G. MacGregor is a prolific writer who has recorded much of Alberta's history. His

narrative, although sometimes difficult to follow and punctuated with over exuberant exclamations, is well interspersed with quotes from diaries, journals, or eye witnesses. These indicate a great deal of research on the part of the author and combined with detailed maps and a section of photographs help make the book more readable.

For those interested in Northern Alberta's history *Paddle Wheels to Bucket Wheels on the Athabasca* is highly recommended. Not only does it give a good general picture of the region's development, but it gives fascinating glimpses into specific phases and incidents that arouse interest and encourage further reading.

Maria Nemeth