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Books, etc.

A Jest of God, by Margaret Laurence, McClelland and Stuart, \$2.50

A few weeks ago a good Canadian novel was reviewed on these pages. Someday a truly bad Canadian novel (and there are plenty of them) may find its way into this column; for the present, it is my duty to bring to your attention an indifferent one: *A Jest of God*, by Margaret Laurence.

The novel, to begin with, lacks originality. The setting is—guess where—a small prairie town in Manitoba. It's the type of town we all grew up in—the kind with two restaurants and three funeral parlors. It smacks of phoniness because, in trying to be the universal Canadian town, it ends up being not a genuine, appreciable town at all.

The heroine and narrator is Rachel (note the Biblical significance) Cameron, a school teacher (what else?) who gives us the impression that she is six foot six and ninety pounds big. She is for obvious reasons a virgin no more at the end. Not only that, but she suffers from schizophrenia and an Electra complex.

The plot can be summarized simply: unattractive and neurotic school teacher lives sexless life until age of thirty-four, then discovers sex, finds God and self-fulfillment, and lives, if not happily, at least healthily ever after.

I might interpose here a word about the narrative style. We are put at all times within the mind of Rachel Cameron. The first person and the present tense are used throughout. This is a rather interesting and effective technique for the first few pages, but when you have to suffer through it for some two hundred pages, it becomes tiring and downright annoying. It forces you to identify completely with the school teacher, who really is not a very pleasant person to identify with.

In fact, the novel as a whole suffers because of the characterization of Rachel. True, she is carefully and consistently portrayed, but so vastly overdone that you end

up despising her rather than sympathizing with her.

I'm not implying that it is necessary to be able to like any given protagonist, but in this type of novel, where the whole point revolves around what is going on in the heroine's mind, there has to be some rapport between reader and character. When the character's personality problems are forced upon us *ad nauseam*, this is almost impossible.

The worst thing about the novel is its self-consciousness. Mrs. Laurence herself was born in a small Manitoba town, and seems determined to take it out on the rest of us by making everything in the novel distinctively Canadian. The universality of the story suffers as a result, and a last ditch effort to salvage it through the use of some subtle Biblical allegory results in an awkward incongruity.

The portrayal of Rachel's sexual relationship is similarly stilted. It is never really adequately explained how it came about after so much emphasis has been placed on her unattractiveness. Mrs. Laurence gives us the definite impression that she was a little embarrassed about writing about such things, but felt she had to. She didn't really have to, and she does it rather poorly.

All this doesn't sound too promising. The book isn't all bad—the other characters are well portrayed, and the psychology of the thing is brought off rather well. *A Jest of God* is, in the last analysis, neither good nor bad, but simply irrelevant.

Good news from the staid, traditional University Book Store. After years of stocking nothing but dull textbooks and very old paperbacks, the store is at last branching into the field of current fiction, and will be stocking an entire shelf with the best of new books—and at a tremendous 5% discount. This trend will be accelerated when the store moves into its new and larger quarters next spring.

—Terry Donnelly

English art annihilate by Massey's mediocre masterpieces

Now showing at the Edmonton Art Gallery are 32 paintings from the Massey Collection. This paralytic assemblage concocted from Mr. Massey's sojourns in England is now travelling slowly (because it limps) through Canadian art galleries, being submitted to the appreciation of Canadian art connoisseurs.

The catalogue—a good piece of propaganda—printed in the two sempiternal languages of the "nation" (comme il se doit) emphatically suggests that this stock of canvases permits a "clear and comprehensive evaluation of English art from 1900 to roughly 1946".

In general the exhibition is bad; in particular, worse. First, it does not do the job it purports to do. The organizers, through ignorance or carelessness and sloth, have definitely falsified the perspective of English art from 1900 to 1946.

The truly important figures—Richards, Bacon, Lewis, Sutherland, Nicholson—have been left out.

VISUAL SCLEROSIS
The works exhibited exemplify the grim atmosphere and malaise of early-Twentieth-Century English painting. In the latter part of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, England suffered from visual sclerosis, and it remained fairly isolated from major contemporary art movements.

While in other countries the not-so-"Tranquil Revolution" was go-

ing on full blast, when the canvas, with its three-dimensional illusion, had been exploded into the *objet tableau*, and *la peinture a sujet* had received its fatal blow at the hands of Cezanne, English artists preferred technical indulgence and precision.

The bold innovations of the Fauves, the Nabis and the Surrealists were shunned for conservative "subdue-ism"; we get fragments, sporadic efforts, miscarriages. The liberation was to come later, in the 1930's.

A BIT SHY

Matthew Smith, acclaimed as one of the great representatives of the Fauves in England, is substantially represented at the Gallery. Of course, the only thing wrong with this Fauve is that he does not "roar".

He displays an interesting *Still Life*, architecturally solid, sumptuously sensual, a bit shy; but his manner is not equally *vide*, this horrible crust, the ghostly *Tulips* of our former art classrooms. His style is timorously reminiscent of Matisse, but he is afraid of color—which is a predicament for a Fauve.

We can have a look at two soft intimate Tibbles. They won't hurt, they won't harm. They are *there*, simply, like beautiful kids know how to be there. Of course, the *Café* is suggestive of Lautrec's café scenes, but we should not let ourselves be intimidated by super-

ficial resemblances.

William Scott's shy Picasso-ish *Girl in Chemise* is sympathetic, although both the girl and the work look rather anemic. (Scott is short-changed in this exhibition—his more recent work is strong and vital.)

THE WHOLE BLOODY ARMY

The great Individualist Augustus John comes out with the lion's share, seven or eight pieces; he is well represented and augustly self-represented.

This painter of the turn of the century, self-elected genius of the age (by default), is the extraordinary ambassador of this cozy, flatulent, academic, bourgeoisified and spiritually dry sort of art-for-everybody: to wit, his numerous portraits of soldiers, colonels—in short, the whole bloody army, British and Canadian.

John has great moments—his portrait of Dylan Thomas—but they have been lost or befogged somewhere crossing the Channel.

Maybe this is all illusion; but one thing remains indubitable: it seems that we have been victimized by Mr. Massey's institutionalized taste. Was it not the Massey Report which claimed that if we listed nations in order of prominence accorded to "culture", Canada would certainly fall at the very bottom of the list—what? in the Abyss—*et pour cause*.

—J. C. Saint-Onge