books

York professor assembles a delectable collection of fantasy stories

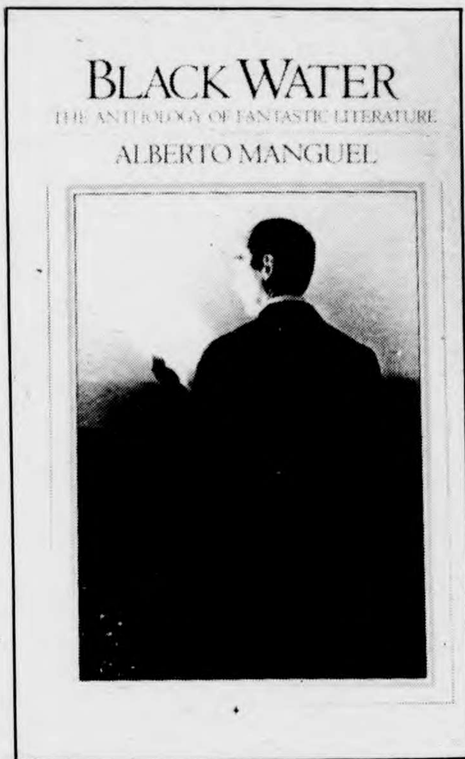
Black Water is a treasure trove for lovers of fantastic literature

Black Water: The Anthology of Fantastic Literature
Edited by Alberto Manguel
Lester and Orpen Dennys, 967 pp., $12.95

By JASON SHERMAN

York teacher Alberto Manguel had two intentions in putting together his anthology of fantastic literature, *Black Water*. The first was to collect in one volume some of his own best-liked stories; the second was to surprise the reader with some authors not usually found in such collections. A quick glance through the table of contents reveals such names as Max Beerbohm, Graham Greene, Vladimir Nabokov and Tennessee Williams, authors not widely-known for their forays into the fantastic.

But Manguel believes the genre brings out the best of writers. "It provides," he says, "a chance to push characters to the brim of situations so they will have to react." And although Manguel shuns definitions, he will at least say that fantastic literature is "the impossible breaking into the possible." A number of the 72 stories in the anthology reflect this view, which we might stretch to mean "an invasion": that is, Manguel's definition shouldn't be taken as strictly metaphoric.



In the first story, Cortazar's "House Taken Over," the narrator calmly describes his peaceful existence while relating the advance through his home of some force or beings never seen:

> I told Irene that I was going to the kitchen for a glass of water. From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. We stood listening to the noises, growing more and more sure that they were on our side of the oak door, if not the kitchen than the bath, or in the hall itself at the turn, almost next to us.

The story is the perfect way to begin this anthology, because the narrator's cool tone duplicates fairly well many of the other characters' as they relate their stories. Rosa's "The Third Bank of the River," Kafka's "The Penal Colony," and Schulz's "Father's Last Escape" all feature narrators aware that their very pacing of the story—as if the details weren't enough—are means of maintaining, if not creating, suspense. "The thing that isn't told," says Manguel, "is the most exciting." In Jorge Luis Borges' terms it is "the intuition of a revelation that does not take place."

Not all the pieces are solemnly told. There is, for example, Saki's very funny "Laura," wherein a woman foretells her own reincarnations. Indeed, Manguel has tried for as much variation as possible, even in an area as seemingly superfluous as story length. The fantastic need only be one single thought, as this story idea from Hawthorne's *American Notebooks* demonstrates:

> In an old house, a mysterious knocking might be heard on the wall, where had formerly been a doorway, now blocked up.

There is also variation in cultures. Although Manguel believes that this is a world-wide phenomenon, he also thinks that in Europe and America "Fantastic literature must find new ways of excusing itself." It's a rare event in Western literature, he notes in his introduction to "An Injustice Revealed," to find as beneficient a ghost as those found in Chinese tales. He thinks this has to do with an "educational system based on the restraint of imagination." When students go beyond certain limits, they are brought straight back. The fantastic Marguel believes, allows access to realities often denied.

Manguel, who teaches a Vanier college tutorial called Fantastic Literature, sees the mid-19th century as being the height of the genre in the West, largely because of one man, Edgar Allen Poe. "Unfortunately, it's Poe," he adds. "Poe flirts between being very good and ridiculous."

The same cannot be said for Manguel's collection. Highly recommended.

New Naipaul novel focuses on South American problems

A Hot Country
by Shiva Naipaul
Collins, 185 pp; $19.95

By KAI MAHABIR

A Hot Country is a novel that successfully combines reality and fiction. It deals with the growing apins of an emerging Third World nation—the fictitious country, Cuyama (unmistakably Guyana), "perched uneasily on the sloping shoulder of South America."

Shiva Naipaul masterfully describes Cuyama, its capital Charlestown, the country, the people's daily lives and problems, and the difficulties of attaining national independence, all within the confines of a short piece of literature.

Naipaul uses experiences from his own native birthplace, the neighboring Caribbean island of Trinidad, and successfully combines real scenarios into his novel. The result is a book that not only tells a story, but gives the reader an accurate flavor of life in Guyana. In situations throughout the novel Naipaul covers everything from the inept independent government to the barren food shelves in local stores.

The author not only captures the essence of the country, but explores the questions asked by many Third World nations. One of the main characters, Aubrey St. Pierre, asks, "How does one discover what the limits are? How does one distinguish the possible from the impossible?"

Outside perceptions are revealed through Alexander Richer, Aubrey's college friend and international journalist. Aubrey's wife Dina asks him, "Is it possible that people in England are interested in what goes on in a place like Cuyama?" "To be honest—no," he replies. "Even my editor wasn't too sure where Cuyama was." Alex leaves Cuyama with little to submit to his editor. This may have in part been the result of the rebuke he received from Dina. She asks him, as journalists have been asked in the past, "Why do you come all this way merely to observe our misery, to feed on it? Why don't you and your kind leave us alone?"

Questions aside, *A Hot Country* reveals the growing pains of an independent Third World nation using a combination of history, lifestyle, and present situations. But one problem that exists is the manner in which Naipaul moves from one time period to another. At points in the novel the time change is very clear, but some sections leave the reader to guess by the change in content that a change in time has taken place. Still, Naipaul has written a timely, realistic novel which explores South American difficulties on a personal level.

Shiva Naipaul

Davey's prose poems are witty, nostalgic and charming

The prolific writing professor adds a new title to his long list of works

Edward and Patricia
by Frank Davey
Coach House Press, 80 pp., $6.95.

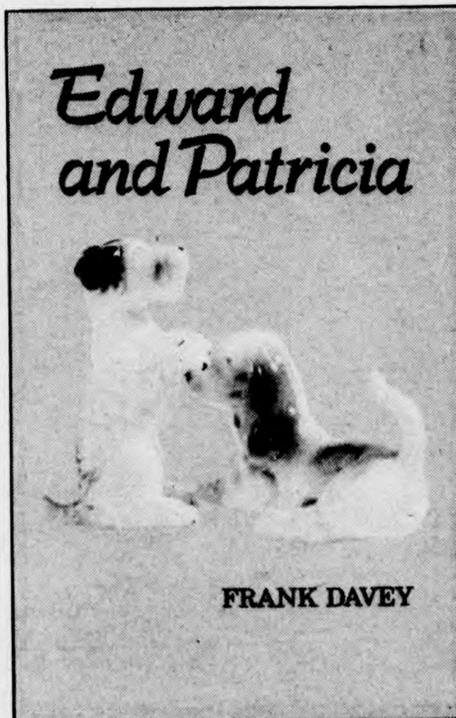
By KEVIN CONNOLLY

York creative writing professor Frank Davey is well known in Canadian literary circles. Not only is he a prolific poet (this month's *Edward and Patricia* is his 15th book) but he is also one of Canada's most respected literary critics, with at least half a dozen titles in that category.

His new book is particularly tight. Its strengths are in its humor and its characterization, focuses one would expect from a novel but not necessarily a book of poetry. Indeed, to classify *Edward and Patricia* would be difficult and probably counter-productive. It is a collection of some 40 prose poems arranged loosely in chronological order, each one a chapter in the growth and disintegration of a marriage born in 1960s Canada.

Edward, a librarian, and Patricia, hydro clerk, are both eminently ordinary people. What Davey manages to do is to take their seemingly mundane middle class lives and breathe life into them, creating two sympathetic and familiar characters in the process. Middle class values and mores are only the objects of light parody—they play a secondary role to the emotional dynamics of the pieces. Davey's jokes don't go much farther than self-inclusive good humor, they are not meant to provide any cynical exposé of the bourgeois psyche.

Davey takes seemingly banal detail and dialogue and charges them with emotion and thematic relevance. 1960s iconography—anything from A&W and *McCall's* magazine to Alan Watts and the Kingston Trio—provide the context for the psychological drama, and its familiarity keys a reflexive nostalgia for the reader. The characters of Edward and Patricia are given depth by the familiarity of the surrounding detail, and their environment and their concerns are very reminiscent of our own.



Like much of Davey's work, the thematic focus in *Edward and Patricia* tends to shift toward the sexual. Sexual problems and sexual politics are used to illustrate the state of the couple's relationship. Sex also becomes the source of much of Davey's humor, indicative of all that is absurd or difficult in life. Davey manages to turn the sexual peculiarities of Edward and Patricia into light farce throughout the book. With their sexual problems and idiosyncrasies exposed the two seem naive and essentially innocent. The author deliberately avoids bawdiness for its own sake, and the explicit language is not employed for mere shock value.

Most of the verses are pared down and deceptively easy to read. Only on the second and third readings does one really appreciate the craft involved, the subtle control of audience sympathy that underlies even the smallest details. Though Davey tries hard not to limit himself, the book is clearly about Edward, with Patricia as a well developed but slightly secondary concern. Many of the poems focus on Edward's sexual hang-ups, his immature and self-satisfying attitude towards the sexual act. He is often childish and easily manipulated, frequently becoming the victim of Patricia's sexual tyranny. It becomes increasingly obvious that Edward's attitude is superficial compared to his wife's andhe suffers from an often unrecognized inability to cope with Patricia's physical needs.

Edward becomes completely alienated by the sexual revolution, and though Patricia takes a lover towards the end of the book, the most Edward can muster is a guilty platonic friendship with a young philosophy groupie. His desire for another sexual partner is more a passing fancy than a definite need. But Patricia has her problems, too. She puts too much stock in Edward's emotional dependence and underestimates her own. It is these conflicting sexual and emotional attitudes that ultimately drive the two apart.

Though enjoyable on their own, the poems are clearly meant to be read in sequence, preferably at one sitting. *Edward and Patricia* is an exercise in narrative poetry. The book adopts many of the conventions of the epic and the mock-epic forms.

Davey has a keen sense of the ridiculous and has a delightful ability to approach social taboos directly, with grace and humor. More importantly, Davey's humor is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. he uses humor to deflate his poetic language, making it all the more moving in contrast.

Though we recognize much in *Edward and Patricia* that we can equate with our own lives, we can also recognize them for what they are—overgrown children. *Edward and Patricia* takes the symbols of a generation, with all its sophistication, affectations, and idiosyncrasies and exposes them as emotional toys, the things which hide our essential childhood. Though the book ends sadly, one is not so sure that Davey is saying that this advanced state of childhood is necessarily a negative thing. What drives the two apart are their personal excesses, rather than their personalities. Their innocence, while endearing in particular situations, is lethal when taken to the extreme. In all their fond game-playing, the two rarely meet at any great depth. Consequently, they are completely helpless when the final crisis hits.

Frank Davey will undoubtedly read selections from the new book when he is featured along with bp Nichol and Judith Fitzgerald at Calumet College, Friday February 24. *Edward and Patricia* is available at the York University Bookstore and through Coach House Press.