

Some observations on a busy publishing year

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

1987 has been a busy publishing year and it would seem remiss if *Excalibur* didn't offer some kind of comment on the vast yearly proliferation of reading material Canadians accumulate in the name of charity, good taste, cultural sovereignty, and . . . I think there was something about the state of the Canadian psyche we're supposed to put in here, but it escapes me just now.

In any event, it sure is a shame that the *Toronto Star* seems to have given up on Judith Fitzgerald's regular "Poetic Licence" column in the Sunday edition. Fitzgerald, aside from being one of this country's most prolific poets (please, somebody, make her stop), was the woman who showed up in chains at this year's Governor General's awards, protesting the fact that there were no women shortlisted for this year's poetry prize. The fact that more than half of the literary awards went to women didn't seem to satisfy her much, perhaps because it underlined how foolish she looked.

Fitzgerald is widely regarded as one of the most irresponsible reviewers in the city (and that's saying something). Her last column, written in a style as confused and prolix as her reviews, had something to do with the style and good taste of the owner of a restaurant she frequents. Somehow, over the course of 2,500 excruciating words, an overpriced yuppie cafe in the annex was transformed into the Mecca of Toronto's literary and visual arts establishment. Perhaps the book review editor figured out that the paper would be better off if the restaurateur paid for his advertising space; in any event Ms. Fitzgerald's column has done a merciful disappearing act ever since.

Fitzgerald's column is symptomatic of a general lack of good judgement on the part of a newspaper which is quickly rivalling the *Sun* in its indifference to poetry and fiction. In the past two years the space devoted to literary reviews has been reduced to the point where a month might pass before a single book of poetry is reviewed, or anything but a biography or non-fiction book is discussed in any detail. **Bev Slop-**

en's "Book World" is a nauseating weekend feature. Someone should spend a few weeks doing a statistical breakdown of the number of authors mentioned who are not clients or friends of clients (Slopen is a literary agent).

Speaking of nauseating, did anyone have the same reaction as I did to this year's *Esquire* summer fiction issue. While it is admirable for a magazine of such stature to take a twelfth of its yearly space and devote it to literary matters, this year's issue is more than a little questionable in certain areas. In a guide to the "literary cosmos," the recent American bias towards fiction, preferably short fiction or disposable novels, is clearly in evidence. No doubt the magazine industry really does consider poetry and literary criticism "lost in space" (I can see any number of reasons why they should think so about the latter), but what they fail to realize is that these days magazines like *Esquire* have a lot to do with what's popularized and what's ignored. Most of the mature poets in the United States right now grew up writing in the '60s, and their work is some of the most accessible and finely crafted in this century. I think it's great that the American publishing industry has discovered a way to sell literary prose, but might they not spend some time trying to do the same thing for poetry before they write the form off completely? It's hard to believe that a magazine like *Esquire* really believes that banal "what's hot'n'what's not" features like this one reflect rather than create buying trends. Some of the people they support are fine writers, but as far as reflecting who really is doing good work is concerned, the whole exercise seems more than a little insincere.

As far as the content was concerned, this year's summer reading only confirmed for me how utterly boring John Updike has become (doesn't anybody think the same way?) and how much I'm looking forward to reading **Ian MacEwen's new novel, A Child in Time**. The excerpt in *Esquire* does more to excite the reader in three

magazine pages than does all of **William Styron's** well-crafted novella (which takes up nearly half of the issue's pages).

But aside from *Esquire* and the *New Yorker*, there's little for us goofy Canucks to get a hold of to really understand what's going on south of the border. I have a theory that isn't too popular up in these parts, but it goes something like this: Canadians have for so long been pumped full of cultural nationalism that they have erected a perpetual smokescreen between the reading public and the happenings south of the border. You can read about Margaret Atwood's latest novel or Alice Munro's new short story collection in the *New York Times Book Review*, but try finding a review of an American novel in this country. It just doesn't happen very often. And then we have the nerve to complain about our writers being ignored in other countries. I think what really hurts Canadian books is burying them in the Canadiana section at Coles rather than letting them stand, as they should, unmarked beside books from the United States and Britain. If Canadian authors are as good as we say they are (and I think many of them are better) what's the big problem?

One press which seems to ignore the author's country of origin once in a while is Oberon, and though the printed results are mixed to say the least, one recent triumph was their publishing of American **Fred Bonnie's** slim volume of stories entitled **Wide Load**. Though the cover price is a little daunting at \$12.95, the stories themselves are quite brilliant. In "In Another Language," two men with the unlikely name of Stanislaw Pittstalk are accidentally brought together when one finds his name listed twice in the directory of the botanical association each belongs to. Each of the Stanislaws has heretofore thought that he was the only such Pittstalk in existence, and the story proceeds from strangeness to strangeness as their uneasy telephone relationship deteriorates into outright animosity. Bonnie tells the story in alternating first-person monologues, and his handling

of dialect and dialogue as the story moves masterfully towards their actual meeting (in a Chinese restaurant, with a firearm present) is alone worth the cover price. In his review of the collection in the *Globe*, William French condemned the book for its plotless stories and unsympathetic characters. My vote, obviously, goes to Bonnie.

Another American book, this time by Missouri poet **James Tate** also deserves special mention. In recent years Tate seems to be a well-kept secret, known only among his peers; but you could probably say the same thing about any number of fine US poets. Though published in 1986, **Reckoner** has only recently been available here (I got my copy from This Ain't the Rosedale Library). Tate is a relentless experimenter and a master of the poetic one-liner, and since his first book, **The Lost Pilot** (which won the Yale Younger Poets prize in 1971), he has consistently produced some of the most unique, aggressive poetry in North America. Copyright laws allow us at least one excerpt, and this one's from "Save the Mosquitoes":

Bewildered wall clocks continue
in their grinding poverty.
The birdcages are festooned:
for whom? An ancient kimono
is a kind of dead weight,
avoidupois, typical of this
morning's saffron harvest.

The mosquitoes glitter over
the windswept platform
and swoop in loose formation
along some dotted lines.
The town is still puffed
from the night before,
TV's rippling in the dark.

A crane is paying a courtesy call
on a shrine. A small-craft warning
is flashed across the sky.
This plausible life, at the appointed hour,
is escorted across the midway, dazzled
by the vacuum of dawn
and its abiding bashful grace.

Beats the hell out of most of the stuff I read here.

Hey, as of next Monday it'll be almost six months since **Hugh Hood** (winner of the Franklin W. Dixon award for prose tonnage) put out a book. That's got to be some kind of record.

Am I an idiot or am I the only one who was surprised to find out that **Daphne Marlatt** had read at York this fall? It seems the posters were put up the same day as the reading took place; not a lot of time for the rest of us (those who aren't faculty or Canadian lit students) to find out about it.

Speaking of readings, I feel compelled to: 1) complain about the ridiculous prices at this year's **Harbourfront International Festival of Authors**, and 2) the sorry state of Harbourfront readings in general. Most people probably don't know that Harbourfront literary mogul **Greg Gatenby** regularly barbers with publishers for reading space. The deal seems to be that he will allow the Harbourfront space to be used to launch books, as long as the author and publisher agree to forego any public readings for some weeks prior to and following the blessed event. Pretty scuzzy way to operate, I think.

My last evening at Harbourfront was spent sitting with 30 people in a room designed for 200, and watching Toronto poet **Kate Van Dusen** embarrass herself reading from her Coach House book **Not Noir**. Van Dusen is getting some good reviews for what I feel is a dreadful book, and only a lively reading by Gail Harris (one of a small circle of readers who feel that they have to more than simply show up at a poetry reading) prevented the evening from being a complete washout. The publication of **Not Noir**, only one of a recent glut of stinkers (Hope Anderson's **Slips from Grace**, Ali-Janna Whyte's **Economic Sex**, Donald Martin's **One Out of Four**, to name three), raises some serious questions about the normally reliable Coach House Press. The trend there seems to be towards expensive glossy covers, and away from the kind of solid poetry and prose that the Press is known for. Now, if they could only get the marketing and the editing together, they might be in business.

Getting back to book launches (I think they should be outlawed) I went to one recently at, of all places, The Spadina Hotel. The occasion was the launching of Toronto author **Brian Dedora's** three-part poem, **White Light** published by *Aya Press*. This one was, in fact, better than most. There was a good turnout, and Dedora's reading was short (as is appropriate, and so often ignored by authors at these functions); but the embarrassing **Richard Truhlar** introduction was all-too-familiar. Truhlar, speaking about a work that was long in the making and took even longer to publish, made it sound as if he, personally, was responsible for the whole thing. Yecch.

In other small press news, recent events include **Crad Kilodney's** two-volume set of **Worst Canadian Stories**, some of which have been written by other small pressers under pseudonyms. I've only got volume two, but as far as I can tell, the stories live up to their billing. The worst, by far, is a piece entitled "Roller-Derby Vampires," by Dr. Orval Armando Haltiwanger (who writes more than a little like **Mark Laba**).

Nick Power's **Gesture Press** has just published a chapbook of poems by Toronto poet **Greg Evason** which seems to include some of his best work to date. The poems are all short, and there's a limit to what one can accomplish in five lines (unless you're Ezra Pound), but the three dozen poems in a **journey toward the end in the shape of air** are a nice alternative to the ubiquitous haiku, and the book itself is beautifully produced. Evason's book is available in the consignment section of the York University bookstore, or at Letters and This ain't the Rosedale Library downtown. Kilodney's homages to prose ugliness are available from his portable street shop down on Yonge Street, south of Bloor (you can't miss him, he's the man with the pipe, the touque, and the misanthropic scowl).

REVIEW

Brazilian Journal much too detailed

P.K. Page
BRAZILIAN JOURNAL

By MICHAEL REDHILL

It is difficult to judge a journal as one would judge a work of fiction—a journal seems more subject to the mood swings of the author and is allowed the luxury of unevenness. **Brazilian Journal**, P.K. Page's account of three years in Brazil, is, at worst, a wildly inconsistent book. It moves from interesting tales of the Brazilian uppercrust in the '50s, to remarkably dull descriptions of just about everything. At its best, however, Page has sculpted a unique vision of Brazil; a personal rendition of a landscape seen with the eye of a painter, and recorded in the lush language of a poet.

In 1957, Arthur Irwin (Page's husband and the "A" of the book) was dispatched to Rio by Ottawa to serve as ambassador. In her journals, Page wrote that Brazil was a land buried in coffee, where the women "looked like a cross between women and precious stones." **Brazilian Journal**, however, shows the unraveling of Page's personal myth, as well as her growing love affair with the country. Unfortunately for us, this is a Brazil Page disclaims even before the book begins, saying in her foreword, "Brazil has changed, I have changed," and by doing so, suspends the timeliness of her memoir in ether, locking up its magic in the canceling power of the present from which she sees Brazil.

One of the sweet things in reading a journal is that one assumes it was never meant to be read by anyone but the writer. **Brazilian Journal** abounds with the secret discovery of the author unprotected, although it is obvious that sections have been edited away, and perhaps others adjusted. Still, Page's personality drives this book, urges the reader past dull sections (the journal threatens to turn into a Brazilian book of birds, with Page languorously describing bird after bird: "this is the third kind of bird we have seen jump in Brazil," etc.), but she moves onto images of Brazil and Brazilians, written with such compassion that they come to life, despite her opening disclaimer.

Page describes Brazil with an animal sensuality, the front garden invaded by "a vegetable polecat called jackfruit" and the "pau mulato tree . . . shedding its orange bark and standing up slim and salad green on the lawn . . ." She is introduced, slowly, into Brazilian society, taught the mores of a foreign country (how to refuse an invitation: "say of course you'll go. And don't"), and painfully, its language ("Don't buy anymore young girls," I say to the cook. Hours later I realize I meant macas (apples) not mocas.")

This long journal is a series of gems hidden in some terribly slow, almost entirely personal entries—things that appear of interest only to Page. As a rule, any time she and her ambassador husband leave Rio to travel in any one of 50 locales in Brazil, the reader is treated to a litany of hotel rooms; this one with wide floorboards, that one with a bathroom fit for

apes. We receive endless lists of purchases, of menus and guest lists, detail upon detail fit only to recreate a material world of no interest to the reader, rather than the hypnotic Brazil of P.K. Page's mind.

This is not to say that the physical world of Brazil is uninteresting, but rather that the monotonous repetition of paltry detail is. Her growth as a visual artist may somewhat (excuse) this longing to itemize the world, and often our prize for living through it is to be able to accompany Page as she discovers her desire to draw. (The book contains over 20 of her drawings.) **Brazilian Journal** makes some excellent discoveries through the gifted artist comparing her two sensibilities. ("Schaffer . . . can only show me his way (to paint), which is to put up your picture like a building, according to plan, and this I cannot do anymore than I could have written a poem that way. Just as one word draws out another, so does one shape draw out another.") Or, in Page's case, one word may draw out several.

At home in Rio, however, Page's world is rooted in her role as "ambassador's wife," the entertainer, the hirer and dismitter of servants. Here, her style is crisper, her voice purposeful. At first, the reader may balk at Page's descriptions of her opulent life-style (what on earth is a Canadian poet doing with a cook, a chauffeur, a butler and twelve other servants?), but the necessity of such a household (Irwin being the Canadian ambassador) and Page's human rendition of a house full of them, soon wears away resistance. Indeed, by the time one reaches the story of the head servant laying gramophone records out in the midday sun

to rid them of mildew, all sympathies go to the stranger in a strange land. ("How could I have thought of saying, 'Graciano, never spread the gramophone records out on the terrace in the sun?")

Her description of official dinner parties for 60 is mind-boggling. Each seating plan was, potentially, a blueprint for disaster, Page accidentally seating political enemies together, or worse, ex-husbands and wives. By Page's account, the Brazil of 1957-59 was a country built in extremes. In the midst of poverty, renegade architects designed palaces of glass, foreign dignitaries with elegant manners neglected the washing of guest towels, and museums boasting the planet's rarest coins could no longer display them for the dust. Her insights into a time forever gone are brilliant as memory and bittersweet in their loss; as she says near the end of the book, "I am desolate that the dream is ending."

But let the reader be forewarned. Even as **Brazilian Journal** shines with the energy of an excellent mind, it also bogs down under an almost obsessive tendency to record every leaf for posterity. As Page complains about the undammed conversation of a governor's wife: "and (she) talked non-stop—that formless, subjectless kind of conversation about cousins and who married whom . . . and whose house that is and what they paid for it . . ." so does she succumb to the luxury of having the rostrum uninterrupted. Her poetry suffers from the same detailed disease. Still, one wishes Page had had an editor who might have imposed some of prose fiction's rules upon a sprawling journal with a little too much to say.