

Dryden's 'Game' challenges tired trend of sports books

The Game
by Ken Dryden
Macmillan, 272 pp. \$19.95

Laudable sports autobiographies are very rare. Most efforts in this traditionally tenuous field seldom venture beyond the level of beer commercial parlance and amount to nothing more than disjointed strings of anecdotes.

Although inexcusable, this trend is understandable because most sports greats employ the dreaded "professional ghost writer" who is charged with extracting and making sense of the hero's story, often with lamentable results. *The Game*, by Ken Dryden, challenges this tired trend and is one of few credible autobiographies by a professional athlete.

It comes as no surprise that Ken Dryden has written an outstanding first book. His debut in the nets for the Montréal Canadiens in the 1971 Stanley Cup final against the Boston Bruins was equally outstanding. That a rookie goalie could stymie the defending Stanley Cup champions was as unprecedented as the Cornell law student's presence off the ice. When interviewed between periods Dryden would regularly startle commentators and fans expecting the usual inarticulate mumbblings with his concise opinions and plans for the future of the game and his team. So it is with his writing. Dryden's intellectual approach makes

for an entertaining and thought-provoking autobiography.

Rather than a simple chronological description of Dryden's rise to Hall of Fame notoriety, *The Game* is a journal that represents nine typical days in the middle of Dryden's last season, commencing with his decision to retire. Within this framework Dryden uses his keen sense of observation to sketch a colorful picture of the team, the game, and what it's like to be an NHL goalie. The rinks, the crowds, the monotony of practice, the pain of a goal against, the nagging fatigue of the road, and the superstitions to which nearly all professional

"Lafleur as a little boy,
alone on the ice, joyously,
enacting plays.

athletes ascribe. Dryden leaves no stone unturned.

His character sketches of teammates and competitors such as Bobby Orr, Frank Mahovlich, Larry Robinson, and Guy Lafleur, go beyond mere accolades of their talent. In a poetic, poignant fashion, Dryden strips away media hype and allows us to glimpse what makes them special. He describes Lafleur as a little boy, alone on the ice, joyously enacting plays and maneuvers, flowing gracefully

around the rink in a soliloquy of puck and stick. Lanky defenseman Robinson comes to life as the perfect combination of size, speed and skill, the friendly goon who checks men "with simple 'aw shucks' destruction, the kind that leaves behind the shuddering hint of something more to come." Even teams, rinks, and cities are personified. For Dryden each have their own flavor, their own meaning, their own taste, smell, and color.

Dryden adds perspective to his world of hockey by enticing the reader to relive the past through insightful flashbacks. Placed carefully to maintain the flow of the book, these bits of history are more than mere nostalgia and are designed instead to flesh out the characters, places, and events in his story. For instance, tales of the rise of the enigmatic coach Scotty Bowman, the legacy of the Québécois leaders on the Canadiens, and the Boston and Toronto hockey dynasties make wonderful reading. However, Dryden uses such descriptions economically, whetting the reader's appetite and then getting on with his saga.

After describing the thrill of playing for Team Canada against the Soviets, Dryden embarks on a study of the similarities and differences in the countries' two modes of play. Dryden compares the open, free-wheeling style of the Russians (which he greatly admires) to the North American method of winning through intimidation. In doing so he pens a treatise opposing our lax attitudes toward



Goalie turned author Ken Dryden

violence in hockey and also admonishes the Big Business approach to Sports (Inc.) in the West.

Surely not to be found in the after Christmas bargain bins, *The Game* is still well worth reading, whether you like hockey or not. And for suffering Leaf fans it is definitely more entertaining than the average contest at the Gardens.

—RICHARD UNDERHILL

Canadian crooner's novel disappointing; no comeback for Hill

310 pages of infantile nonsense prove Dan Hill should stick to music; absurd metaphors for absurd situations

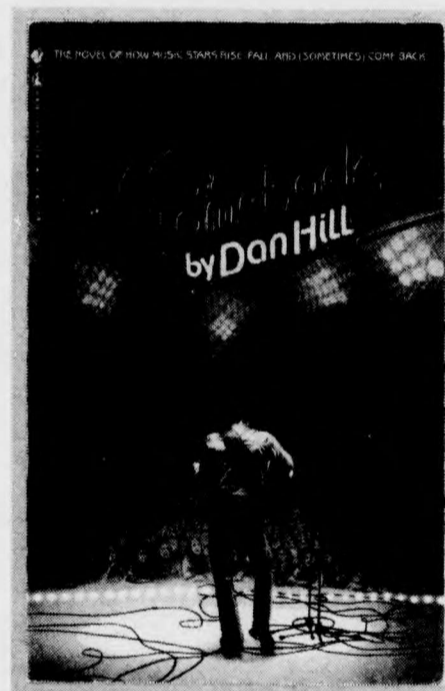
Comeback
by Dan Hill
Seal Books (McClelland and Stewart), 310 pp. \$9.95.

Dan Hill, whose recently released LP *Love in the Shadows* has redefined the frontiers of boredom in Canadian music, has concurrently released his first, and hopefully last, novel *Comeback* in a super-hyped effort to recuscitate his ailing career. Unfortunately for Hill, his writing is as vapid and meaningless as the lyrics to his songs.

Comeback is 310 pages of infantile nonsense, and is yet another in a series of wretched books attempting to exploit the idolatry of teenaged music fans. What Hill and his publisher don't seem to realize is that even pre-pubescent can recognize a rip-off when they see it.

Comeback is the apparently serious story of one pop singer named Cornelius Barnes whose career is on a downhill slide until he is accused of statutory rape. The ensuing publicity brings him back to temporary stardom, until his conviction spells his final downfall.

The final result might not have been so bad,



but it is painfully obvious from page one that Hill has created one of the most unintentionally comical books in recent memory. Hill has a knack for creating absurd metaphors, and although they match the absurd situations,

they serve only to make the book consistently idiotic.

Hill's characters, stillborn cutout nonentities the author aborts into the narrative, are completely unbelievable, as are the ridiculous memories and attitudes of the protagonist. The author uses every cliché imaginable in his endlessly irresponsible railings against everything from the Canadian judicial system, to the government's treatment of native Indians. The courts are depicted as verbal slaughterhouses dispensing frontier justice while the police forces are neo-Nazi arms of a totalitarian regime. Hill's pseudo-liberal themes amount to superficial and worthless ranting, his dialogue is unnatural and witless, and his banalities omnipresent.

In short, the novel is an aesthetic nightmare. The 16-year old girl who Barnes accuses of rape comes across as an imbecile, as does her mother, Barnes, and the author himself. The victim's mother, who is supposed to be prim and proper, inexplicably lapses into dialogue that would make a trucker blush, as does Barnes' half black, half Indian, civil rights leader Daddy.

There is not a single character who is not a ridiculous bundle of stereotypes, and the women in particular are handled in a completely ignorant and offensive manner. It seems that, in Hill's eyes, all women are either nymphomaniacs or sycophants, and two-dimensional nymphomaniacs and sycophants at that. Equally disgusting is Hill's treatment of

the teenage male as a pathological, self-satisfying walking libido who amounts to little more than a rutting pig. In one of the novel's incessantly boring flashbacks, Hill gives perhaps the worst account of a sexual experience in the English language.

Cornelius' sexual partner, Maria, exposes her nether parts to the nervous student while sitting cross-legged and shining a lamp on herself:

The many folds and creases of her vagina glistened up at me leaving me at once fascinated and unnerved. It was swollen and pink, still moist from lubrication and sperm. In one light, it looked like a pile of freshly steamed corned beef waiting to be sandwiched, yet in another it looked like a stream of silver pearls, sublimely majestic and regal.

Sorry to destroy your "sublimely majestic" reveries Dan, but which is it? Pearls or corned beef?

If, for some reason you decide to read *Comeback*, the key question that will come into your mind as you drop the book from the sugar tongs into the garbage can will be why such obvious tripe got published in the first place. There are legitimate Canadian writers who would kill for the type of publicity Hill is getting. It's pretty obvious who are the real rape victims here.

—KEVIN CONNOLLY

Big words from a big woman in pseudo-autobiographical novel

Toronto writer Susan Swan captures the life and times of a nineteenth century Nova Scotia giantess. Tom Thumb, the Thin Man, and the Celebrated Mountain of Human Flesh are only a few of the other characters

The Biggest Modern Woman In The World
by Susan Swan
Lester and Orpen Denny, 340 pp., \$14.95.

Toronto author Susan Swan blurs the distinction between the historical and the fictional in her first novel, *The Biggest Modern Woman In The World*. The story of Anna Swan, the nineteenth-century Nova Scotia giantess (228 cm), is written as a pseudo-autobiography—in her preface, Swan notes that both Anna and herself descend from a common, Scandinavian ancestor.

But if you expect an intimate and confessional autobiographical style, you might be surprised. Reading it, you feel like a spectator at a side show in which Anna makes her "final appearance." Anna was an accomplished barker with P.T. Barnum's American Museum, and her tale is told using rhetorical techniques. Letters and journal entries by those involved in Anna's life widen the perspective of the book.

The novel begins with Anna's early life in the backwoods of Nova Scotia. Unable to adapt to the pioneering life of her parents (who, ironically, were both short), Anna goes to New York to perform at the American Museum. Here she meets and works with celebrities with names like "Tom Thumb," "The Thin Man," and "The Celebrated Mountain of Human Flesh," and has a touching relationship with the only human being taller than herself, the renowned Cape Breton giant, Angus McAskil.

After leaving Barnum's museum, Anna tours Europe under the management of Hiram Percival Ingalls. The highlight of this tour is the strange behavior of the tiny Queen Victoria—barely half Anna's height—upon meeting Anna:

Then she (Victoria) dusked her spiked head and walked in a slow and leisurely fashion through my (Anna's) legs. *En passant* she paused to study the archway of my poor pelvis and my long legs trembled at the thought of her solemn little face regarding by enormously baggy drawers which consisted of two separate sections gathered at the waist and open at the crotch.

Walking out the other side, she looked back and winked and I realized her little person was convulsed with merriment.

Anna returns to America to attempt to settle down to small town life in Ohio with her new husband, "The Kentucky Giant."

Susan Swan enriches her novel with nineteenth-century historical detail: the Canadas become a Confederation, Queen Victoria is still in mourning 10 years after her husband's death, and the terms "mudsills" and "bluenoses" are applied to Americans and Canadians respectively.

Anna's autobiography and its rhetorical splicing style both show how those who differ from the norm are alienated, misunderstood,

and exploited. Anna's father uses his baby giantess as a charm to make his vegetable garden grow. Anna's gigantic proportions erotically thrill many men including her manager, H.P. Ingalls: "I (Ingalls) cannot put out of mind those breasts of hers, like loaves of bread hiding under scented silk, ready to be squeezed and sampled." Anna's giant husband married her because of her large proportions; he was obsessed with a desire "to giantize the human species."

Anna's size is not the only reason for her suffering. Anna is frustrated in her attempts to succeed as a career woman. She sacrifices her relationship with Angus to join Barnum's Museum only to meet with further disappointment. Barnum provides his audience with sensational exploits, but Anna yearns for high quality entertainment.

Anna also suffers because she is misunderstood as a woman. As a wife she is bored with her role as a moderator of her husband's behavior. The knowledge that it is impossible for her to give birth to healthy children frustrates Anna. Susan Swan, Canada's tallest woman writer, explicitly shows the various ways in which this remarkable nineteenth-century woman dealt with her alienation.

—SHEILA HIRD