

# Before and after the life of man

Book review by Lasha Seniuk

*Life Before Man*, Margaret Atwood's latest literary venture, is not really a book in the true sense of the word, but rather a philosophical analysis of humanity. Dripping with a unique creative style that few authors can achieve, it leads the readers in and out of deep philosophical caverns concerning men, women, marital relationships, death, dominance, hatred, insanity, politics, and the eventual extermination of the human race.

Elizabeth is the main character because her forcefulness and flare for the insane makes her always shine through as the victor. She is constantly fighting the domination of her by her Auntie Muriel who raised Elizabeth and her sister Caroline after their mother deserted them. Auntie Muriel raised them with an iron hand, to say the least.

So totally domineering was her temperament that Caroline commits suicide when she is very young. This is the first death that Elizabeth must deal with. The second is that of her mother, who Elizabeth thinks was burned to death by Auntie Muriel. The third, and most traumatic, is the death of Elizabeth's lover Chris. He commits suicide also, in a most gruesome, symbolic way. Possibly she loves him more because he committed suicide.

Elizabeth's husband Nate cannot compete with the image of Chris that is so deeply rooted in her mind. Actually, he cannot compete with anything. He can't make decisions. He can't please his wife or children.

And he can't be happy. Nate is rather a weak character who seems only two dimensional. He first has an affair with Martha and then with Lesja.

Martha is rather flighty and sometimes sees things that aren't really there. Lesja is a small inexperienced woman who has buried herself in the study of dinosaurs and other prehistoric animals: she has buried herself in life before man. She prefers dinosaurs to most people and admits that she has no use for the human race and they have no use for her.

This is the whole book, a marvelous intertwining swirl of characters and philosophy. It strikes notes that have never been heard before by the human ear. Atwood deals with total reality and creates vivid, striking characters that are alive in every one of us. They are indeed unforgettable.

But by far the most interesting aspect of *Life Before Man* is its combination of philosophy and simplicity. Judging from the description of the story it would seem that *Life Before Man* is a very heavy, draining book to read. It's not. It's a very light read and this is where Atwood's true genius comes through. Any fool can be a philosopher, but the true mark of achievement is placing philosophy into a framework that is light, funny and polished. *Life Before Man* does not fall short of any of these qualities.

Margaret Atwood's style is a joy. *Life Before Man* cannot be considered less than sheer poetry. Her words flow from her pen like smoke from an explosion.

Her symbolism is always vivid, constant, and

not overly obvious. Many authors feel that they must bring their story to a dead halt, add their little bit of symbolism, and then start the machine again. They want their symbolism to stick out and catch the eye. This is not the case with Margaret Atwood. She somehow makes the reader realize how symbolic and ironic life is.

There is also an aspect of *Life Before Man* that is rather puzzling. The characters are intertwined together, but somehow they are strangely isolated from one another. They seem detached, not connecting, almost as if a character could be plucked out and any other person could be fitted in. This is probably because the chapters are arranged like short letters describing each character's feelings, experiences, and actions. At any rate, this air of entwined isolation is again reflective of reality and the abstractions of human relationships.

All in all, it is a book about which one could offer very limited criticism. The only aspect of the book that was somewhat questionable was the fact that Nate's character was vague. He seemed too transparent, too noncommittal, and far from solid. However, this is often found in Atwood's writing: men are depicted as weak, spineless people. She has a tendency in her writing to hold a grudge against men. But, apart from this, her book is well worth reading. However, don't read it for the story value, for reading *Life Before Man* for the story is like drinking a bottle of fine, aged Cognac for the purpose of getting drunk!

## The fine art of the Boomtown Rats

Record review by Harvey King

In their latest album, *The Fine Art of Surfacing*, The Boomtown Rats show us the art of surviving in a stark and lonely world... Or do they? From the emotionless 16 year old murderer to the paranoid living in a spy-filled world, from the twisted office-worker trying to escape into the night-life to the beautiful and empty debutante who commits suicide, we see unhappy, lonely and sick people trying to survive.

## Horsing around

Movie review by Marni Stanley

*The Electric Horseman* is the sort of film an average movie goer might fantasize about seeing. It has wit, charm, romance, and winning good guys. The only thing it does not have is a reasonable plot.

It is a modern version of *Roman Holiday* with Fonda playing Gregory Peck, Redford playing Audrey Hepburn and Utah standing in for Rome. Sonny Steele (Robert Redford) is a former champion cowboy now reduced to hustling breakfast cereal in a hideous purple light-up suit. Somehow, through his alcoholic haze, he comes to realize that Ampco, the evil conglomerate, has provided him with a thoroughbred that has been doped and he decides to give it a better life. This upsets Ampco's president (John Saxon) who does not want bad publicity while the company is negotiating a tricky merger, and intrigues Hallie Martin, girl reporter, (Jane Fonda) who sets off in hot pursuit of the two fleeing corporate symbols.

To make a long story short, boy gets horse, girl gets story, and cowboy gets reporter — everybody happy, well I should say! When Redford finally gives up the purple suit he spends the rest of the picture looking like a Marlboro add, and three days in the desert leaves Fonda with eyeliner and hairdo intact. Neither of them ever gets dirty, nor wrinkles those wonderfully tight jeans. In fact, both stars put so much energy into looking good that they don't seem to have much left for acting. Redford is selling the old charm and Fonda is just a little too confident for comfort.

In spite of its hopelessly unrealistic plot, *The Electric Horseman* is a winning film in many ways. Sydney Pollack's direction is tight and he does nice things with juxtapositioning and balance; a sodden Sonny next to a prim general for instance, or the lit up horse and rider trotting down a neon Las Vegas strip, echoed by the image of the two, clad in denim and leather, escaping down a creek bed. There is also a touching performance by Valerie Perrine as Sonny's breathless ex, and Willie Nelson provides a nice authentic touch as Steele's early sidekick.

If you can resist the urge to groan at Steele's too cute revelation that his name is Norman, and if you can get through Redford's mandatory ecology lecture about strange little fishy fossils in the rockbed (not to mention the singing of "American the Beautiful" from mountain tops) you will probably enjoy this film. It has a chase scene to rival *Bullitt* and some very good moments of humor. The writers even revert to a touch of realism in the ending, a feat that the girl behind me found dreadfully upsetting.

If this film captures any Oscars the Academy may as well retire, but for light entertainment it is a winner.

The Rats use their instrumental prowess excellently to power their songs' biting lyrics. Powerful drumming underlines each song, and acoustic and electric guitar-playing of an excellent, yet stark style, provides most of the instrumentation.

However, perhaps the most emphatic music comes from the fine piano-playing. This is especially present during the single off the album, "I Don't Like Mondays." It tells the actual story of a 16-year old girl who one day took a rifle, and shot up a playground. Asked why, she replied, "I don't like Mondays." Banned in the States by the Federal Communications Commission because the trial is still on, this song perhaps most emphatically captures the mood of the album.

*All the playing's stopped in the playground now  
She wants to play with her toys awhile  
And school's out early and soon we'll be learning  
And the lesson today is how to die.  
And then the bullhorn crackles,  
And the captain tackles,  
With the problems and the how's and why's  
And he can see no reasons  
Cos there are no reasons  
What reasons do you need to die?*

*Tell me why  
I don't like Mondays  
I want to shoot  
The whole day down.*

The Boomtown Rats seem to offer no escape from



this twisted and stark world. They only offer the alternative of:

*I'll slip beneath these sheets and shiver here awhile  
(hmmmm)  
I find this happening more frequently these days.  
Still ... I practice nightly, I try to keep ahead.  
This art of surfacing is all but dead.*

## A date with Herstory

Calendar review by Bruce Cookson

History has been re-written as Herstory, but as the Canadian Women's Calendar illustrates, the role women have played in Canada has yet to be adequately documented in the first place.

Herstory 1980, written by the Saskatoon Women's Calendar Collective is a calendar with a difference. Instead of pneumatic pinups or pastoral countrysides, this publication celebrates the achievement of Canadian women. Each week of the year is given a page, opposite which is a profile of a Canadian woman or organization that has contributed to the lives of women.

I can't say that I find all of the profiles of consuming interest, probably because space requirements limit some of the women profiled to little more than a listing of their achievements. While this is may be impressive, it doesn't make for scintillating reading. Also, there are some lapses in writing style which I suppose is to be expected of something compiled and written by eight authors. However, these criticisms are nitpicking at best. For anyone interested in the achievements of Canadian women, this calendar/book is worthwhile.

Of course, Nellie McClung is written about, but the interesting catch to the calendar is that it features women just as interesting, if not as well known. Who, for example, has heard of Shawnadithit, the last surviving member of the Beothuks, an aboriginal tribe

who were exterminated in the early 19th century by Europeans and MicMac Indians? How about Jennie Dill, who in 1921, despite prediction that she could not walk farther than fifty miles, became the first woman to walk across Canada from Halifax to Vancouver? Or Molly Brant, a Mohawk Indian who spied for the British against the Americans in the 18th century? (Interesting women, but could they rightly be called Canadians?)

In addition to individual profiles, there are profiles of organizations and issues that are related specifically to women. Some topic headings are "Women in the Education Work Force," "SORUC (The Service, Office and Retail Workers' Union of Canada)," the "Hanes Hosiery Strike," "Domestics, Yesterday and Today," and "Telephone Operators." The latter reveals that the Bell Telephone Company first employed men because of the "brilliant technical minds" required to operate switchboards. Women, however, were soon substituted because they were found to be more patient and alert.

Herstory 1980 is the seventh calendar/book to be assembled by the Saskatoon Collective. It is an informative and generally interesting glimpse at a side of history not usually talked about in Canadian history books. The profiles are pithy but one of the best things about the calendar is its Bibliography of source material. And, if you were just looking for a calendar, there is enough room to note appointments.