

arts

I say the best Canadian poet is Phil Esposito,
and that is not a joke.
—Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Cohen goes to mat for immigrants, rootseekers, drifters

Cafe Le Dog
by Matt Cohen
McClelland & Stewart
182 pp.

By STEPHANIE GROSS

Matt Cohen has spent the last decade writing about small Canadian towns and rural lifestyles, producing the novels *The Disinherited*, *Wooden Hunters*, *Flowers of Darkness* and *The Sweet Second Summer of Kitty Malone*. In his new book, *Cafe Le Dog*, the Toronto-based York teacher writes about characters in urban settings in a series of stories which Cohen says, "Were part of the real change in my writing."

It is a change, for the most part, in setting. Cohen has always written about drifters, and in *Cafe Le Dog* only the context in which these outcasts are placed change. Instead of part-time farmers, island hunters and small-town reverends, Cohen fills the stories with would-be writers and academics, bar pianists, and aspiring and fallen actresses. The physical isolation from neighbors is re-placed by an emotional isolation from masses of strangers, just as extended families sharing homes are replaced by individuals in seedy bachelor apartments.

Most importantly, in terms of Cohen's writing, there is an attempt to bring together characters of dissimilar ethnic origin. For Cohen, the return of up-rooted Europeans to home generations later provides him an opportunity to reflect on what has become of their adopted country. "We've destroyed a lot of what was attractive here. It's become sort of the garbage can of Europe." He also sees it as an "interesting twist (that) Europe tends to find itself dependent upon the very place that it invented in order to take advantage of it."

In "Sentimental Meetings," Joseph Benares, a fourth-generation Canadian of Spanish descent, leaves Toronto to go to Europe in quest of his historical roots. The trip forces Joseph to confront and question his past. His memory of him in Toronto is like a "dream fast receding." At the end of the story there is the revelation that "Jews are international." In Spain, Joseph is welcomed home. By going to Europe, Joseph feels less secure but more complete. He sees where his family has come from and concretely faces the history of his people.

In "The Sins of Tomas Benares," Cohen writes about Joseph's grand-father. In this story we get a clearer picture of how the Benares were forced from Spain to make a life

in a new country. By creating a character who is 94, Cohen is able to dive into the history of both Tomas' life and the life of his family. The story ravel back in time, covering several generations, yet the story is rooted in the present, on Tomas' birthday. In addition to creating a rich, historical complexity, "The Sins of Tomas Benares" is successful because of Cohen's ability to believable convey the thoughts and emotions of Tomas. Cohen himself says, "I am really someone who writes about other people. For me the bigger the leap the better. I'm better off to write about someone 82 than someone my own age."

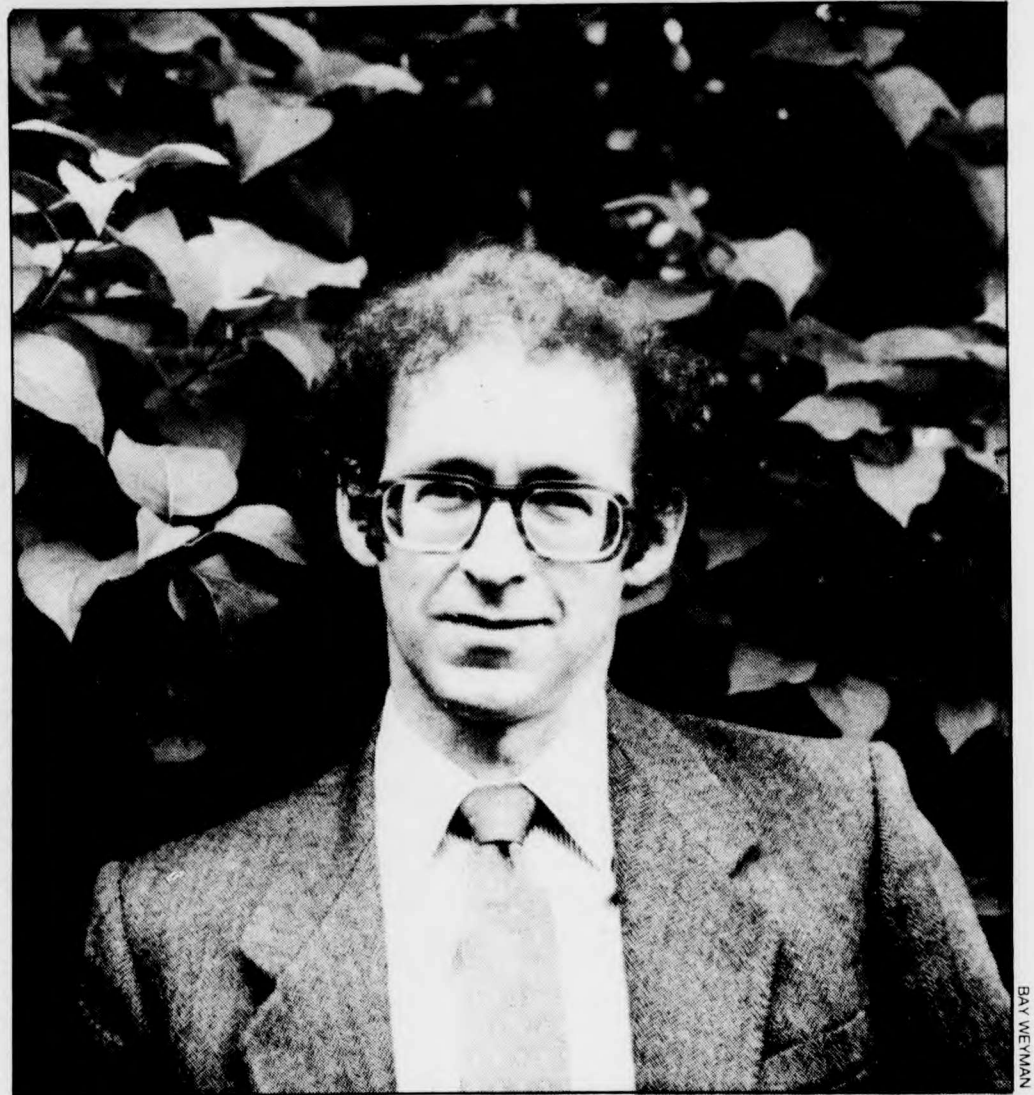
Locale, though the most immediate change, is not the only change in Cohen's writing. His frequent use of first person narrative in *Cafe* is a surprise given his previous work. "The first person," Cohen says, "is much more urban in certain ways because it's more aggressive. It's a real 1980s form." Taken to its extreme, as in the title story of the collection, the narrator becomes the story.

The main themes in Cohen's new stories concentrate on family and love relationships. The first story, "Golden Whore of the Heartland," is about a man oscillating between the security of his second marriage and his attraction to another woman. It is a story about self-denial caused either by society's rules or the rules of the games people play with each other and themselves. Benton, the man in the story, seems to know that he will sleep with his woman friend, yet constantly forces away his feelings for her. As with all his characters, Cohen creates a complete and complex Benton, without a false note to his physical reactions, internal dialogue or the self he presents to others.

There is one story, "The Death of a Guppy," in which Cohen does not purposely do this. This satiric look at the middle-class focuses on family relationships as the reader is presented aspects most often not discussed.

Although Cohen focuses on two of all literature's most basic and pervading themes—love and the family—he does so in a way that destroys or parodies the clichés surrounding them. Says Cohen, "I just think that love relationships are one of the great subjects for short stories. There are so many infinite variations: the game of romance between men and women makes a great subject and I do think that that's a large part of most people's lives."

And yet for all of Cohen's writing changes,



York Creative Writing teacher Matt Cohen's new book of stories reflects "part of the real change in my writing."

his stories still have the same texture as his earlier works. He has the same mastery of detail, occasionally leading the reader into some dream-like scene where the physical intricacies make it undoubtedly real. His characters are still painfully aware of their own middle-age, forever struggling with their opposing youthful and aging self-images. His stories forward moving in a conventional style, but still dabbling into new techniques that are always born from the varying content. And Cohen still exercises the same balance of irony

and compassion.

For Cohen the attraction of fiction is that "the reader vicariously lives the life of the characters." In his stories from *Cafe Le Dog*, Cohen enters the lives of his characters. He writes about drifters and people "who are the rubbish of society from society's point of view." Says Cohen, "these are the people are real to me." Cohen's characters are knowable but not stereotypical. They are complex but very capable of being understood—most importantly, they warrant understanding.

Banned, suppressed, censored: Forbidden celluloid round the globe

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

The Forbidden Films festival, held over the past couple of weeks at various downtown Toronto locations, made clear the difficulties faced by socially-conscious filmmakers throughout the world. Organized by the Toronto Arts Groups for Human Rights, the festival screened some 100 films from 25 countries that were banned, suppressed or censored in their countries of origin, or were made by filmmakers who suffered imprisonment, exile or execution. It was the largest festival of its kind ever to be held in one city, and was meant to provoke discussion of the human rights aspects of filmmaking and censorship.

It was, therefore, doubly ironic that the Ontario Censor Board decided to ban four of the scheduled films: Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo*, Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, Dusan Makavejev's *Sweet Movie* and Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour*. It seems that "community standards" pre-empt human rights when the two are in conflict, even for a mature and intelligent audience like the one expected to attend this festival's screenings and public forums.

A head of the British film rating office, in fact, once referred to the "integrity" of *Salo* as the main reason for his office's inability to rate it. And it is this integrity and honesty of approach that was the common theme underlying the whole festival. The International Series held at the Bloor Cinema contained a number of cases in point. Jean-Louis Bertucelli's *Ramparts of Clay*, for example, employs a sweeping visual and aural directness that captures the oppressive stillness of a remote village in the North African desert. The spoken words in the film could be counted on one's fingers; the expansive silence of the desert

and the pointedly direct portrayal of the occasional events—the cutting open of a sheep, the raising of a pail of water from a well, the movements of the villagers themselves (all but two of them non-professional actors) convey the characters' state of mind better than any words could.

Two other fascinating films in the International Series were *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* and *The Colour of Pomegranates*, both directed by Armenian-born Sergei Paradjanov. *Shadows* is a wildly expressionistic and exhilarating film that tells the tragic story of Ivan, whose lover-since-childhood drowns in a river, and whose eventual marriage to another woman deteriorates even more tragically. Through its awesome colors, its exuberant, swirling camerawork, haunting and evocative soundtrack and poignant use of symbolism, the

film captures the vibrancy of traditional life in a 19th century Hutsul village, isolated in the Carpathian Mountains of Western Ukraine.

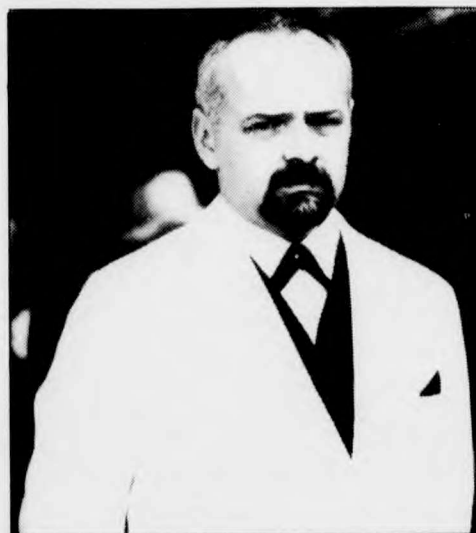
The Colour of Pomegranates, made some five years later in 1969, is more stylized and experimental in structure, and hermetically obscure in its symbolism. Ostensibly the life-story of Armenian poet "Sayat Nova" (Arutiun Sayadian), it is really a sustained hymn to Armenian culture (as *Shadows* had been to Ukrainian culture). Told in symbol-laden tableaux, gestures and motions, the film resounds with an eerie mysticism reminiscent of avant-gardists Keneth Anger, Maya Deren and Alexander Jodorowsky. Paradjanov, unfortunately, has spent the past decade alternating between prison camp and house arrest, officially for homosexuality and illegal trafficking in art objects, but more probably for his political views and their cinematic expression.

A film by another Soviet director, the Russian Andrei Tarkovsky (now in exile, living in Europe) further underlined the difficulties of filmmaking in the USSR. *Andrei Rublev* revolves around the life of a 15th Century icon painter who tries to live a sane life during the most insane of times—medieval Russia, with its vicious, bloody civil wars waged between feudal princes. In its period evocation and in its stark portrayal of an individual's passionate, questioning religiousness pitted against collective profanity and social chaos, the film parallels Bergman's *Seventh Seal*; but it is (if you can imagine it) an even more angst-laden, and a much more expensive, epic production. The film's grimness, its visual complexity and languid tempo, and Tarkovsky's religious sympathies all conspired to effect a ban which was only lifted in 1971, (four years after its making) after the film had won prizes at Cannes.

Also from behind the Iron Curtain were the films from Czechoslovakia's "New Wave" in

the 1960s. Jan Nemeč's *Report on the Party and its Guests* stands out as a brilliant example of this movement's allegorical-symbolist wing. It is a brilliantly disturbing, yet subtly comic, parable about a group of people who disconcertedly discover that they have been invited as "guests" to a "party" (note the double meaning). The Host is a man dressed in white (he who actually looks like Lenin) who makes clear that his only concern is for their happiness. Eventually only one guest remains unwilling to comply and is hunted down by the others so that he could be made happy, too. The film's Bunuellesque end comes just after the dogs have been sent after him, leaving the viewer disturbed and unsettled.

The Latin American films revealed and integrity of a more forthright character. Ruy Guerra's *The Gods and the Dead* and Glauber Rocha's *Antonio Das Mortes* are both typically stylized, expressionistic revolutionary folk epics from the "tropicalist" phase of Brazil's Cinema Novo (1967-70). In strong, violent colors both draw abundantly on Brazil's rich folk heritage, its legends and symbols, its blood-stained and turbulent past. *Antonio das Mortes* tells the story of a former *congaço* (rebel-bandit who redresses social injustice through violence) who becomes a professional killer hired to track down and murder other *congaço*s. The film hypnotically soaks itself in mass dances and music, combined with fragmented images à la Godard. *The Gods and the Dead* is even more blood-drenched. The explosive dialectic between oppressed peasants and wealthy landowners, between church religion, superstitious magic and the revolutionary drive for social justice are fused together in a visually extravagant of jungle violence in which the gods are anthropomorphised and the dead brought back to seek their revenge on the living.



Goateed man, from *Report on the Party...*