

TAKE YOUR ORDER . . . ?

FORTUNATELY, even when one has to accept them, it is still not necessary to agree with all the decisions a committee makes. With this bro-mide, I swallowed the announcement of the Governor-General's English-language fiction finalists for 1980; and I put the information away in that corner one keeps for forgettable facts. I miscalculated. The information stewed. And I kept returning to that stubborn simple question: *why them?* One never, of course, knows exactly why any committee makes the judgments it does. But inevitably, in a literary contest, the judgments are comparative; and given the options the committee had for 1980, the decision seems a curious skew of critical attitude and (perhaps) public taste.

The three finalists were Susan Musgrave's *The Charcoal Burners*, George Bowering's *Burning Water* (which went on to win the award), and Leon Rooke's *Fat Woman*. The first of these is a disjointed fantasy about social inequality and sadism towards women. The second is another fantasy — of the sort that has lately been called “narcissistic fiction” — which reinvents one George Bowering, who in turn (as character and author) reinvents the history of Captain George Vancouver and his surgeon Menzies: all of which constitutes a clever idea in technique, all of which ends in ahistorical violence, all of which is marred by the crude anachronisms and deliberate contrivance, and none of which is therefore transformed beyond cleverness into literature. The third novel is a moderately successful and intelligent rendering of an unusual domestic life. All three writers have written better works. Musgrave is, by comparison, a better poet. Bowering's *A Short Sad Book*, a 1977 account of growing up with Canadian archetypes, is a witty satire that he has not surpassed, though it received all too little recognition when Talonbooks published it. And Rooke is an able and innovative short story writer. But the central point is that Rooke published some of these stories *also in 1980* — yet it is *Fat Woman*, rather than *Cry Evil*, his best collection so far, that is singled out for celebration. In the collection are to be found a range of styles, from the pseudo-autobiographical to the mock-analytic, and a range of voices and tonal attitudes, which show a wide command of language and cul-

minate in a fine satire of literary and social pretension called "Adolpho's Disappeared and We Haven't a Clue Where to Find Him." Perhaps the 1980 committee held a bias against the short story form — for accomplished volumes like Veronica Ross's *Goodbye Summer* or W. P. Kinsella's *Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa* also went unacknowledged. But perhaps there was a more disturbing reason why the selection went the way it did, which has little to do with conscious bias and a good deal to do with the tenor of the age. Perhaps the public taste for titillation, the critical taste for formal experiment — and a general intolerance in society for satire, which is read as an intellectual's put-down of ordinary people — have grown towards each other, to the point where they begin to represent an arrogance of the average. Perhaps the taste for crude violence and the rejection of the intellectual subtleties of wit and argument alike reject the principle of difference and celebrate the mediocre and the extremes of human weakness as though they constituted heights of value. To follow these directions is to follow restriction by another name, to elevate reductive, private systems into "normal" public "order." From this to the next step — elevating "order" into mandatory pattern, the loss of options, the restriction of choices — takes very little time, and does not necessarily require the machinations of an evil genius. Bureaucracy can make it happen all by itself; all that is needed is passivity, which by inertia surrenders to the purveyors of order the validity and general authority they invariably claim.

By chance, three substantial 1980 novels which did not reach the 1980 Finalists List comment directly on problems of such dimension, and they make an instructive trio to place beside the other. I refer to Hugh MacLennan's *Voices in Time*, Mordecai Richler's *Joshua Then and Now*, and Jane Rule's *Contract with the World*. They are not without their weaknesses. MacLennan's novel begins slowly and ends flaccidly; Richler's chases too many one-liners for their own sake and builds too ineffectively on the parallels and contrasts it invites us to see between present and past; Rule's, the most sustained of the three and her finest accomplishment to date, explores the ordinariness of several urban lives, but runs the risk that any ironist of the ordinary runs, shaping sympathy so that it looks like disengagement. What concern me here are not these problems in structure or perspective, but the palpable strengths that each of these works nonetheless possesses, strengths of vision and of imagined character, which transform what could have been mere literary exercise into literary enterprise of an unusual order. It is this quality of literary vision, so elusive to critical methodologies yet so necessary to art, which gives a novel its sustaining vitality, and for this we always forgive much awkwardness. Why does a work of Margaret Laurence's or Ethel Wilson's, for example, for all its lapses of style or the frequent strains it places on verisimilitude, appeal more — *and matter more* — than scores of purely private narratives and empty trial forms? The answer has

to do with the core of public values in which it declares its faith, its passion for moral conscience and the possibility of individual choice — even when tired systems impose constraints. Style matters, too, naturally, for it is the process that shapes the vision into meaning and gives it concrete form. All of which takes us back to the novels of Richler, MacLennan, and Rule.

Many who try to distinguish values in literature distort values in the process, for they do so simplistically, separating works purely by vocabulary and external subject, locating morality absolutely in specific words and topics and arbitrarily declaring it to be absent from others. Sexuality, violence, and religious and political partisanship are usually the prime subjects for disagreement. And it is therefore too easy either to dismiss 1980's fiction as the aberrant product of a violent year or to claim violence, as Joyce Carol Oates does in a recent issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, as the current social denominator, the only authentic fictional metaphor for current social reality. Unquestionably we live in a violent age. But probably everyone's "contemporary world" (if they are not protected by class-rimmed glasses or Pollyanna shades) has seemed violent. A work like Sheila Watson's black retellings of the Greek myths in modern guise, *Four Stories*, reminds us forcibly of the degree to which the present repeats the past. Rather than make the idea of a Golden Age simply spurious, however, this conundrum renders a notion of the Ideal all the more relevant to any people that seeks to understand both its belief in shared values and its common failure to express or enact them. Violence may constitute an immorality, a negation of human values, but the fact of violence in a work of literature does not of itself render that work of literature immoral. The challenge is to connect the values with the perceived and violent realities, and achieve some kind of adequate balance.

Clearly Musgrave's work is laden with violence, as are other 1980 works, like Richard Wright's *Final Things*, a novel about juvenile prostitution, street drugs, and retribution outside the law. But it is not violence itself which distinguishes Musgrave, Wright, and Bowering from MacLennan and Rule, for violent events occur in their works and in Richler's also; the difference derives from the attitudes towards it. Many Governor-General's Award-winning books — including recent ones by Davies, Kroetsch, Godfrey, Findley, and Hodgins — acknowledge the irrationality of much human behaviour and the violence of much recent human experience. And as with them, there is a kind of fateful inevitability about the violence that occurs in the novels by Richler, MacLennan, and Rule. It is functional rather than "ornamental" in the book. When, for example, public notoriety claims Richler's character Joshua for itself, and reshapes his identity till he is in danger of losing his private life, he lashes out to attempt to solve in anger what he could not distance (or deny) by his defensive wit. Rule's artist-characters, working out their various private compatibilities and their equally various public compromises, run afoul of a middleclass mob which, because it

fears what it perceives as the idiosyncrasy (or “perversion”) of artists, and because it mistakes the persons for the process, goes about destroying works of art as though that could halt change or change truth. For MacLennan’s characters, in a futuristic history, the twentieth century has drifted inexorably towards fascist order, massive war, and bureaucratic reconstruction. But always for the authors the violence is the enemy, the weakness, the threat, never an entertainment or a diversion in which to luxuriate. Holocaust is one of the obvious forms such violence takes. More deceptively, uncontrollable order is another. And the characters in these novels ultimately try to resist both. Rule’s artists survive the attack on their work to realize, somewhat laconically, that their “contract with the world” invites them to express themselves creatively, not in futile anger. Richler’s Joshua survives the threats of ambition and envy to experience that rarest of discoveries in Richler’s world: a gentle reconciliation with another generation. MacLennan’s characters provide a more extended case study still.

The strengths of MacLennan’s *Voices in Time* have to do not only with his faith in the persistence of human aspiration (which overrides his despairing observations of the present and past and even his most pessimistic prognosis for the immediate future), but also with the intelligence of his commentary and the degree to which he has flexibly shaped a literary form to his purpose. The book is cast in the futureworld of A.D. 2030, when the megalopolis “culture” of the years of the Great Fear is beginning to crumble. Young people are beginning to seek anew their history and (distinguishing dimly but accurately between order and stability) to reject the dictatorship that controls them. The conventions that mark this genre then carry the book along. Timothy Wellfleet, the one aged man who can recollect the past, goes on to retell history, recounting the rise of Nazi Germany, the reluctant compromises (for safety, power, love) that marked Germany during the early 1940’s, the parallel rise of the technological dictatorships of North America during the 1970’s and 1980’s, and the parallel and perhaps unconscious compromises that also characterized the later decades. This long section constitutes the substance of the novel; it is a conventional realistic narrative, more inclined to the verbal flourish than the spare sentence, with little in the way of either sprightly direct conversation or experimental reflexivity. But it is the form that MacLennan has always handled best — the reflective narrative essay — which he has here, most successfully in his entire career, adapted to fiction. The novel goes on to dissipate its energies a little in sentimentalities; striving grandly for an eloquent phrase, MacLennan misses at the close the simple eloquence of the quiet end. But up to this point, he has ably avoided the direct didacticism to which the novel secretly aspires. The book is a warning — MacLennan clearly wants his readers to look around them and to worry about what they see — but he knows that to warn in advance of the inevitable con-

sequences of the present is to utter idle doomsdayisms and to act the role of a parental Cassandra. Latching loosely on to the structures of science fiction, he instead casts the inevitable future as the indubitable past. Bowering might have tried to render history as fantasy; MacLennan transforms what might have otherwise been dismissed as fantasy into history. His novel acquires a forceful reality this way, and becomes both a grim and a moving book.

But after recognizing the grim realities, what then? Rushing in circles did not help Joshua; Rule's artists realize that irrational anger will serve no purpose; and the sadism and vengeance of the worlds of Musgrave and Wright — which one is asked to read as event rather than as metaphor — instead of countering violence, appear to embrace it. Censorship is no answer to such pressures, for in the *name* of good things, it takes *choice* away, and one needs to be free to choose. Curiously it is the choice itself which is the pressure feared by many who espouse censorship. Opening options appears to raise for them only the possibility of insecurity, failure, uncertainty. They can trust only what they are told to trust; they dismiss those who question their "certainties" largely by hurling pejorative adjectives ("elitist," "escapist," "redneck," "red") at those who would make distinctions that implicitly challenge *them*. Hence the anti-intellectualism of our times (to which Robertson Davies makes a characteristic reply in "A Defense of Snobbery" — which is just as characteristically easy to dismiss as idiosyncrasy). For snobbery is not the issue; choice is. As MacLennan's young people of the future discover, the challenge of making choices and distinctions, for all the uncertainties it opens into their lives, is more rewarding than living in an ordered contract with fear. They learn to live to reject passivity and at the same time to reject violence. They learn to understand what in another context V. S. Naipaul means when he writes:

All these literary rapes and tortures, this emphasis on the flesh alone: We do, deeply, reject this assessment of man. The time has come to say so, to deny this version of the mini-man's truth, or the truth which accommodates him. . . . We can do so by raising that cry of dissent: "I do not want to be like them."

They learn, I suppose, to understand that a committee has to make its own choices freely, charting its own territory calmly — and that at the same time, the freedom to disagree with the choices a committee makes, *and to say so*, is not a bromide after all, but a right to savour and to prize.

W.N.