

1980

## Book Reviews

Anna Rutherford  
*University of Aarhus, Denmark*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Rutherford, Anna, Book Reviews, *Kunapipi*, 2(2), 1980.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol2/iss2/19>

---

## Book Reviews

### Abstract

Book .Reviews

# Book Reviews

---

Michael Thelwell, *The Harder They Come*. Pluto Press, 1980. 399 pages. Cased £6.95, paper £2.95.

The readers of the Pluto Press, specialists in critical and analytical works gathered around the loose theme of the Black Struggle, were so impressed by Michael Thelwell's first novel that they were moved to break their strict 'No novels' rule in order to make *The Harder They Come* available outside the United States, where it is published by Grove Press. This immaculately wrought evocation of life in the insular ghettos of Kingston, Jamaica more than justifies their enthusiasm.

Michael Thelwell, a student activist in Mississippi in the 60s, is the author of numerous short stories and political essays. He currently teaches third world literature in the Department of Afro-American studies, University of Massachusetts. *The Harder They Come* is based on Trevor Rhone and Perry Henzell's script for the film of the same name, released in 1971. The film, Jamaica's first full-length motion picture, was a powerful imaginative reworking of the legend of Rhygin (Rhygin = Raging), renowned gunman and songwriter in Kingston in the 1950s. But it should be emphasized that Thelwell's work is not an exploitative 'novelization' in the currently popular Hollywood style, where necessary descriptive passages are added to film dialogue: 'While strictly adhering to the film's general vision of the meaning of the event, I have added much historical and political detail which, because of the inherent limitations of the medium, was beyond the scope of the film.' (Author's Preface.)

The novel follows Ivanhoe Martin from his childhood in the closeknit mountain village community of Blue Bay through his initiation into the hardships of urban ghetto life where he is confronted with the choice between starvation, humiliation and crime to his early demise as a ghetto legend and outlaw on the run.

The early chapters form a loving, lavishly detailed rendering of life in rural Jamaica, more effective and convincing than the African section in Alex Haley's *Roots*, and in its own quiet way this section of the novel is a scathing critique of the dehumanizing effects of urbanization and industrialization. When Ivanhoe visits Blue Bay after six years in Kingston only to find it a tourist haven, he suddenly understands why 'you no come from nowhe' is the foulest insult one Jamaican can say to another.

This realization along with a nascent social consciousness and political awareness become Ivanhoe Martin's undoing. Frustrated by his lack of options and unable to comprehend the deeper source of that frustration, he turns to a life of crime in the most lurid Hollywood gangster/cowboy style, toting a matched pair of 38 calibre revolvers with mother-of-pearl handles and sneaking into a photographer's studio to pose for pictures to be sent to the press.

One of the novel's greatest strengths is its seamless integration of social commentary

and dramatic narrative. Thelwell has an unfailing gift for the telling detail which enables him to summarize and analyse without halting the flow of the narrative. One small example must suffice. On the increasing black consciousness of the urban ghetto youth and the pervasive influence of the Rastafari religion Thelwell observes:

Most of the youths coming up were growing the locks and taking African names, Ras Dis and Bongo Dat, talking about I-man dis 'an, I-man the other, everything was 'dread' and it was bare 'Jah dis an' Jah de next'. The movies were still a great part of their scene, but now they shouted for the Indians and never took the white man's side, much less his name. (p. 205)

Since H. Orlando Patterson's flawed *Children of Sisyphus* in 1964, little of real literary merit on the lowest strata of Jamaican society has appeared. *The Harder They Come* steps boldly into that vacuum, an immensely readable, intense, passionate story full of ironic and low comedy, full of truth and moral outrage, filled with the richness and unselfconscious 'exoticness' that is Jamaica. Read it and weep. Read it and laugh. Read it and think.

ALBERT L. JONES

## APROPOS OF JEAN RHYS

Louis James, *Jean Rhys*. London: Longman (Critical Studies of Caribbean Writers), 1978. 74 pages. £3.50.

Thomas F. Staley, *Jean Rhys: A Critical Study*. London: Macmillan, 1979, 154 pages, £10; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979, 140 pages, \$11.95.

Jean Rhys, *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1979, 173 pages, £4.95; New York: Harper & Row, 151 pages, \$10.95.

Jean Rhys has recently been reclassified as a West Indian novelist and the appearance of her Dominican autobiography in London last November supports the reclassification. As Rhys readers know, her slim novels published during the nineteen twenties and thirties were long neglected, largely due to the lack of a suitable perspective from which to view them. Francis Wyndham explains their difficulty of placement quite simply: 'they were

ahead of their age, both in spirit and in style'.<sup>1</sup> V.S. Naipaul suggests that the curious failure of *Quartet*, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, *Voyage in the Dark*, and *Good Morning, Midnight* to fit into post-modernist critical categories is a function of the writer's West Indian birth and orientation. He says, 'Jean Rhys didn't explain herself. She might have been a riddle to others, but she never sought to make her experience more accessible by making it what it was not'.<sup>2</sup> And Jonathan Raban claims it is 'her West Indian background (that) has helped to exile her from the fatal knowingness that goes with being English'.<sup>3</sup> Now that the sophistication of West Indian literature has been acknowledged beyond an audience of Commonwealth Literature scholars and Jean Rhys has been identified as a West Indian writer, Rhys critics relate her fiction to her West Indian birth, youth and heritage. This approach is currently expressed in two short critical studies — one from England and one from the United States.

Louis James is the author of a Jean Rhys study for the Longmans series entitled 'Critical studies of Caribbean writers'. James established himself as a commentator on West Indian literature when he edited in 1968 a collection of essays by West Indian novelists and critics, *The Island in Between*. That collection did not include an essay on Jean Rhys, but James has now caught up with Rhys' identification as a West Indian writer in his study devoted exclusively to her biography and fiction. He anticipated the book's publication in a July 1977 *Ariel* essay 'Sun Fire — Painted Fire: Jean Rhys as a Caribbean Novelist'. In some ways, the essay is superior to the longer effort. It represents a distillation of the best aspects of the book, concentrating on Rhys' 'favourite' novel, *Voyage in the Dark*. The essay reveals James' effort to secure biographic material not ordinarily available on Rhys. He journeyed to Dominica, Rhys' Windward Island birthplace, and there examined archives in Roseau documenting Rhys' great-grandfather's settlement in Dominica. As the Dominican archives have suffered almost total destruction since James' visit because the Court House was burned out in June 1979 during the events leading to the deposition of Patrick John as Prime Minister,<sup>4</sup> this part of James' work is genuinely valuable.

In addition, James interviewed Rhys herself, but this segment of James' research appears to have been less fruitful because there really isn't much new information resulting from his visit with Rhys revealed in either the essay or the book. Perhaps the most useful insight James contributes is that the historic background of *Wide Sargasso Sea* relates to the burning of Rhys' great-grandparents' plantation house by West Indian blacks in 1844. This is particularly fascinating material because, hitherto, many Rhys critics believed that *Wide Sargasso Sea* represented a radical departure from the usual autobiographic approach Rhys used for her four earlier novels. A recognition that the imaginative reconstruction of the burning of Coulibri is not simply a background device for a rewriting of *Jane Eyre* places Rhys squarely into the central tradition of West Indian fiction which is engaged in a new writing of West Indian history. While not autobiographic, *Wide Sargasso Sea* incorporates personal family history not unlike V.S. Naipaul's use of his father's biography for *A House for Mr Biswas*.

In view of the considerable effort that James expended to collect background information for *Jean Rhys*, it is more-than-disappointing to locate careless and serious errors in the book. Most embarrassing to James must be his extended discussion of Rhys' first husband's identity and role. Commonplace biographic sourcebooks — such as *Contemporary Authors*, for example — could have supplied James with the accurate information that Rhys' first husband was Jean Lauglet (later corrected to Jean Lenglet) and not Max Hamer, who was her third husband. James' confusion of Hamer with Lenglet could cause

irreparable error in firming the biographic facts for such an elusive figure as Rhys, especially since James is accepted as an authority on both Rhys and West Indian literature. This sort of factual error first appears in the 'Acknowledgements and Dedication' wherein James justly dedicates his book to Dominican novelist Phyllis Allfrey 'who has given so much to West Indian life and literature'. In listing his appreciations, James names Allfrey's husband as 'Charles' whereas, in fact, he is 'Robert'. This careless error jars confidence in James' reporting accuracy, but his critical accuracy is also placed in jeopardy by such a blatant misreading of *Good Morning, Midnight* as he displays on page twenty-nine. Here he cites the conclusion of the novel in terms of Sasha Jensen's wish that the gigolo return to her instead of in terms of the novel's actual ending — Sasha opens her eyes to find the sinister white-robed tenant of the room next door standing over her.

The biographic urge that sent James to Dominica reveals itself throughout his short book to the detriment of its critical function. The opening chapter, 'The girl from the island', is most smoothly written and it resonates with James' impressions of and responses to the island's singular beauty. The second chapter, 'The European', continues the biographic treatment, but the material is extracted from the early Rhys novels and the research method drifts into the manner of an historic novel: 'When the boat docked at Southampton, it was a grey, lowering English summer. The trees were drab, and the fields from the boat train seemed small and colourless.' This sort of conjectural entry into Rhys' mind has little scholarly support beyond a persistent reliance upon the novels themselves, and although James would protect himself by asserting 'it is particularly important not to confuse fiction and real life', he gingerly treads an unclear route between fiction and biography. He never actually says that Rhys' heroines represent Rhys, but he invokes the chronology of their lives to suggest the continuation of Rhys' own biography. All this leads up to the central chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea* where one assumes the biographic impulse will be transformed into the critical study promised by the series' title.

Returning to his own vivid impressions of Dominica and to more fascinating details from the island's history, James sets his study of *Wide Sargasso Sea* into a matrix of the novel's derived Dominican background. After a lengthy comparison with *Jane Eyre*, James finally concentrates on *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but the text is so heavily larded with quotations from the novel plus a recounting of story episodes that little space remains for rigorous analysis. James does broach a discussion of Antoinette's divided personality which promises the sort of probing that the novel merits, but he turns quickly to comparing Rochester with Othello. The chapter on *Wide Sargasso Sea* characterizes *Jean Rhys* as a whole. While the book displays flashes of James' critical acumen, it is a disappointing study, lacking the depth of analysis for which James has elsewhere proven himself capable.

The trans-Atlantic race to publish the first work on Rhys also produced Thomas F. Staley's *Jean Rhys*. Staley admits, 'I wrote this book with the idea that it would be the first full-length study of Jean Rhys and her work to be published'. Like James, Staley begins with a biographic study of his subject, but instead of treating biographic material as background for Rhys' fiction, Staley places it in the foreground. And like James, Staley recognizes the formative influence of Rhys' Dominican heritage:

Leaving aside the problematic relationship between life and art, it became clear to me from the first reading of her work that her background and culture not only set Rhys apart from her contemporary novelists, but also shaped a widely different sensibility and radical consciousness.

James says in his book:

Even in her books written wholly about Europe, the sensibility is not wholly European. Her sensitivity to heat and to cold, to bright colour or the absence of colour, her sense of another life behind the mask of society conventions, were formed in the Antilles.

But Staley's biographic research route took him in a different direction. Rather than combing Dominican records for historic documentation, Staley came from the United States to England where he interviewed Rhys' publisher, her second husband's daughter, and Jean Rhys herself. Curiously, neither James nor Staley interviewed Rhys' own daughter, Maryvonne Moerman. Staley's interviews with Rhys were more productive than James' because not only did they furnish specific personal facts about the novelist, they also gained for Staley's university a collection of Rhys correspondence. The correspondence, in turn, gave Staley valuable information about Rhys' life after her expatriation in Paris; consequently, hitherto unrecorded information about her several marriages appears for the first time in Staley's book. Rhys held back her love letters, however, and the identity of her first lover remains concealed while her relationship with Ford Madox Ford is based, as has become custom, upon Stella Bowen's account in *Drawn from Life* (London, 1941) and Arthur Mizener's biography of Ford, *The Saddest Story* (New York and Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1971).

After the initial chapter of biographic material, Staley launches into a chronological book-by-book examination of Rhys' writing. The critical material occupies a larger proportion of Staley's book than James' but Staley claims that it lacks a central thesis: '...nor have I developed a thesis or confined the study to a singularity of critical or thematic approach...' His explanation is that 'such undertakings as these are left to others'. The usefulness of Staley's decision to avoid the strictures of an imposed thesis appears immediately in his treatment of *The Left Bank*. Free to analyze the overall strengths and failings of the collection of short stories, Staley discusses Rhys' style, her lack of 'clear models or visible influences', and her developing craft. Staley indicates which stories he finds effective ('La Gross Fifi') and which unsuccessful ('Hunger') and the reasons for his judgements. He shows how the open-ended stories are peculiarly Rhysian and how they point to the future direction of Rhys' novels. Staley identifies the stories of *The Left Bank* as apprenticeship writing and then moves on to examine the four novels of Rhys' first phase.

Like James, Staley also published in advance a chapter of his book as an essay. Chapter three on *Quartet* first appeared in the summer of 1978 in the Hofstra University Journal, *Twentieth Century Literature*. This appears to be the only other published instance of Staley's interest in Rhys' work, and his approach is not by way of Commonwealth Literature but rather by way of his specialization in Modern Literature. The essay on *Quartet* — 'The Emergence of a Form: Style and Consciousness in Jean Rhys's *Quartet*' — displays a strong feminist tone which is carried over to Staley's book. It is this feminist emphasis that Gabriele Annan notes with sarcasm in the *Times Literary Supplement* (21 December 1979), 'He seems to sense: the feminist school of literary criticism panting behind his sleigh hoping for another Virginia Woolf to drop into the snow' and Hilary Spurling ridicules in *The Observer* as 'claptrap about »the female condition«'. In spite of the resistance in England to feminist literary criticism and despite Rhys' disavowal of herself as a feminist writer, there is much feminist material in the Rhys novels and Staley does a competent job of displaying and analyzing it.

As Staley's *Jean Rhys* progresses, it becomes evident that it is not, after all, so lacking in an organizing principle because Staley applies his feminist view beyond the four novels of the twenties and thirties to *Wide Sargasso Sea* and to what he calls 'The Later Writing'. His conclusion transcends his particular critical approach, however, in a recognition that the critical attention consequent to *Wide Sargasso Sea* has produced a collective opinion that Rhys is someone whose 'talent and intelligence encompass dimensions not found elsewhere in the modern English novel'.

*Smile Please* is Jean Rhys' own statement about her influence of her Dominican childhood upon her life and art. Subtitled 'An Unfinished Autobiography', the volume is divided in half by copies of photographs that Diana Athill found among Rhys' papers. The first half is the finished Dominican material and the second half includes somewhat less coherently connected post-Dominican material. In addition, a piece written during Rhys' later life is included at the end. The childhood recollections are written in the crystalline prose that characterizes all Rhys' writing, and nowhere is there any touch of sentimentality. Searching her memory for the earliest possible accurate vignette, Jean Rhys opens the autobiography with a portrait of herself at the age of six. It is regrettable that the photograph described (the title inspiration) did not survive to illustrate the text.

The Rhys reader meets in the flesh, as it were, characters encountered earlier in the fiction: Francine of *Voyage in the Dark* reappears; Aunt Clarice is surely the model for Anna Morgan's stepmother Hester; Christophine's original might well be the obeah woman Ann Tewitt. The main character is, of course, the island itself, and Rhys renders it with the same subtlety that she used to evoke Paris in her stories of *The Left Bank* and in *Quartet*. Without long descriptive passages, she creates the island's special ambiance. Then, in an uncommon burst of affirmation, she explains the growth of her love for the island:

It's strange growing up in a very beautiful place and seeing that it is beautiful. It was alive, I was sure of it.... I wanted to identify myself with it, to lose myself in it.

The earth was like a magnet which pulled me and sometimes I came near it, this identification or annihilation that I longed for. Once, regardless of ants, I lay down and kissed the earth and thought, 'Mine, mine'.

But Rhys' appraisal of her West Indian island home becomes bitter when she recounts her return visit. Trying, in 1938, to locate her mother's family home in the mountains — Geneva (Was her assumed name a reflection of the Lockhart plantation name?) — Rhys was informed that she was now required to hire a guide. After hiring the requisite guide, she discovered Geneva had once again been burnt to the ground. Leaving the site of remembered childhood idylls, she stooped to drink from Geneva River, superstitiously trying to ensure a return visit. But the guide informed her that she mustn't drink from the river because it was now polluted. 'Very dirty, not like you remember it.'

Rhys' memories of turn-of-the-century Dominica are not all of an island paradise where it is summer every day of the year. Even as a child, Rhys recognized the undercurrent of strained race relations. Trying to befriend a beautiful coloured student at her convent school in Roseau, Gwen Williams was rebuffed and she credited the rebuff to racial jealousy. The pain of the rebuff was remembered all Jean Rhys' life, and it emerges fictionally in *Wide Sargasso Sea* as the rock Tia throws at Antoinette's face. Nevertheless, it is of Tia that Antoinette last dreams before setting fire to Thornfield Hall, and it is Tia's summons that Antoinette follows to her death. Jean Rhys was never able to resolve her



ambivalence about racial identity; even in one of her late conversations with David Plante, she claimed the possibility of African blood by way of her maternal great-grandmother from Cuba: 'Where else would I get my love for pretty clothes?'<sup>5</sup> Young Gwen Williams passionately wished to be black; Jean Rhys' Anna Morgan wishes to be black; Jean Rhys, writing an autobiography in her eighties, still marvelled that the whites of Dominica were hated: 'They hate us. We are hated. Not possible. Yes it is possible and it is so.'

With Rhys' death and the posthumous appearance of her autobiography, the new critical trend of recognizing her as a West Indian novelist and of lauding her exceptional style takes its first turn. As Rhys herself might have predicted, the turn toward devaluation has been initiated by a woman: Diana Trilling in her *New York Times* review of *Smile Please*. Essayist Trilling calls the book 'markedly disappointing' and 'deficient', and complains that she really learns nothing more about Rhys' life from her autobiography than she had already learned from her novels. Trilling supports her judgement by an extraordinary comparison of Rhys' writing with that of Ernest Hemingway and of Rhys' acting with that of Marilyn Monroe. Trilling's disappointed curiosity is, however, satisfied by David Plante's intimate revelations about his personal role in aiding Rhys with the writing of *Smile Please*. Plante, who never surfaced during Rhys' lifetime, is now providing with 'urgency and honesty' (according to Trilling) to the readers of the *Manchester Guardian* and *Paris Review* such details of Rhys' later life that do not appear in the autobiography: how he fished her out of the toilet where she had become stuck, how she spent winters drinking in a hotel in London while he typed her manuscript. Plante, identified by Trilling as 'a young American novelist who lives in London', will do well to write a novel which approaches the quality of one of Rhys', and Trilling might do better than repeat the patronizing stance she found successful in her earlier Marilyn Monroe essay.<sup>6</sup> *Smile Please* will doubtlessly outlive the essays of Diana Trilling and the novels of David Plante. More importantly, the novels by its author will prevail over all the critical studies, personal essays and book reviews exploiting them.

ELAINE CAMPBELL

## NOTES

1. Francis Wyndham, 'Introduction', *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: Popular Library, 1966), p. 10.
2. V.S. Naipaul, 'Without a Dog's Chance', *The New York Review of Books*, 18 May 1972, p. 29.
3. Jonathan Raban, 'Exiles', *Encounter*, June 1975, p. 81.
4. See *The Star* (Roseau, Dominica), 22 June 1979, p. 2.
5. David Plante, 'Big Tree, Falling', *Guardian Weekend*, 10 November 1979, p. 11.
6. I wish to thank Edith Larson, my colleague at Brandeis University, for pointing out the similarity between Trilling's review of *Smile Please* and her essay on Marilyn Monroe: 'The Odd Career of Jean Rhys', *New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1980, and 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe', *Redbook*, February 1963.

Dick Harrison, ed., *Crossing Frontiers. Papers in American and Canadian Western Literature*. The University of Alberta Press, 1979. 174 pages. \$10.00.

This volume contains papers given at a conference in Banff, Alberta in 1978. The conference was organized by Dick Harrison, the theme was 'Crossing Frontiers', and the aim was to bring together American and Canadian historians, literary scholars and writers who were concerned with the culture of the two Wests. Dick Harrison states that the volume is also designed as an autonomous book that might be useful as a starting point for a comparative study of Canadian and American Western literature. There can be no doubt that it will fulfil this function. Lack of space prevents a detailed review of all the papers, but a brief survey of the papers and the names of the scholars will offer an idea of the breadth and depth of the volume.

The conference was arranged so that particular persons were chosen to respond to each of the papers. The responses are also included in the book. Appropriately enough the introductory essay is by Dick Harrison. The first three papers focus on historical aspects. They are: Don D. Walker, 'On the Supposed Frontier Between History and Fiction' - responder: Delbert Wylder; Howard R. Lamar, 'The Unsettling of the American West: The Mobility of Defeat' - responder: Earl Pomeroy; Lewis G. Thomas, 'Prairie Settlement: Western Responses in History and Fiction; Social Structures in a Canadian Hinterland'. Harrison had intended Carl Berger to respond to Thomas's controversial paper, but unfortunately Berger was ill.

The next three papers are of a literary nature: Robert Kroetsch, 'The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space' - responder: Sandra Djwa; Leslie Fiedler, 'Canada and the Invention of the Western: A Meditation on the other Side of the Border' - responder: Jack Brenner; Eli Mandel, 'The Border League: American »West« and Canadian »Region«' - responder: W.H. New.

The final section, 'The Summing Up' includes reviews of the conference and excerpts from the talks and discussions that are not included in the previous sections. The contributors to the summing up are Richard Etulain, Henry Kreisel, Rosemary Sullivan, and Max Westbrook.

Apart from being a historical and literary exploration of the two Wests, their similarities and dissimilarities, the volume is of interest to all historians and literary scholars. The present tendency to include fiction when traditional historical sources have been emptied or are non-existent has led to a re-definition of historical evidence. This tendency is world wide but must be of particular interest to Western Canada where writers like Rudy Wiebe, Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch have been re-writing Canadian history from an imaginative and creative point of view.

Looking at the volume as a whole it is revealing to see that American scholars seem to be most concerned with the similarities of the two Wests whereas Canadian scholars emphasize the differences. Apart from offering new insights into the historical development of the Canadian West, Lewis G. Thomas, in his description of the relationship between Eastern Canada and the Prairie Provinces, tends to establish new boundaries in Canada itself by using a terminology that includes words like 'colony', 'colonize' and 'Eastern élite'. This indirect comment upon one of the most urgent domestic problems in present-day Canada means that the book is valuable not only as a basis for a comparative study of the two Wests but also as an up-to-date statement on Western Canada.

JØRN CARLSEN

David Ireland, *A Woman of the Future*. Allen Lane. A\$9.95.

David Ireland has written an awesome allegory for feminism. That's how I found myself reading *A Woman of the Future*, but Alethea Hunt's fragmented account of her development from conception to her final change after High School is part of a large social demonstration and inquiry.

The society is our own. A few clues time Alethea's adolescence about or a bit after 2000 AD, but like other prophets (Blake springs to mind) Ireland testifies to what's here and now, needing only to be envisioned — really seen. Ireland includes some history of civilization in Alethea's education, but invents almost nothing to fill the prospective gap. Then, as now, many people are cool and almost interested witnesses of cruelty. Then, as now, barely concealed sexual permissiveness has people quite fully representing their fears and hypocrisies as well as finer qualities, in their sexual actions. Data-checks and computerization are becoming universal among us, as they are for Alethea.

Already we accept the idea of training large numbers of people simply to fill time without loss of face. Alethea reports 'the consumption of time is the chief object of mock-work done by the free'.

'Freedom' is a temptation systematically offered by the state. An achiever, Alethea makes her own assessments: 'Nothing was-as they told me.' The end of saying yes is the despicable, pampered existence of suburban hordes, their attitudes and technology kept in running order by those who 'serve' society. To serve, a student must evade but not defy the downward-levelling double-talk and double-think about equality of talents; you need luck to stay clear of failure, and, if actively intelligent, a sort of highly-developed negative capability to bear what you see.

Ireland builds his images of 'failure' on a telling correspondence of two kinds of fear. In 'failed' people, unmonitored mental preoccupations come to light as cancerous process, body-growth taking on an undesired autonomy of imitation. Anything that is in you visibly grows, and grows out, like a tumour, like a bullet years after impact. People Alethea knows grow, variously, a coffin, wood, leafy branches, words, coins, cannon, internal organs, and all-over vulva — this last, a figure as obsessive as classical Rumour with her many eyes and tongues. A boy's wish to help emerges as paper napkins, used after sex-parties. Less surprisingly, one child becomes pig-faced, one fragments, another grows into the ground if he stands still, and a girl tends to join on to people she touches. The ambitious are terrified of deformity because it marks those too singularly preoccupied to be Servers.

Neither of Alethea's parents 'grows' anything. But their acceptable appearance is a blind. Alethea's mother had the child, tended it for six years and since then has poured everything that is in her, on to paper — a shedful of pigeon-holed writings, her lifelong record of her life.

It's a caricature of much writing of self-assessment. Towards the end, forced to the same device — desperately piling together the papers of her human memorial — Alethea develops compassion for her mother's cut-off state and mechanical statements of love. 'Why didn't I ask more questions? I wish I knew more about her, why she shut herself in. Was there a change neither she nor father told me of?'

I think here of the common ignorance, among younger women, of what the older, silent and even defected, have suffered and achieved.

And Alethea's father? He dies daily on the public concourse in a play entitled 'Changes' which has official support because it promotes satisfaction among the populace. He is in despair; to him the daily stage-death and return home prove that nothing can change. Every day as he arrives, he kisses his constantly-writing wife who is indifferent or annoyed. He performs all the house-keeping functions, as well as promoting the development of a superior girl-child, quizzing her on social issues, participating in her activities, giving the example of unblinkered tolerance in a hypocritical and totalitarian society.

He is the outwardly bland once-idealistic liberal, making the best of it and often blind to atrocity. He moves derelict people from a house under the wrecker's ball — but they will be dumped the other side of town. He has grown used to book-burning — a connoisseur of *Fahrenheit 451* civic action. He lives passively with the family disaster, the absence of a woman who is physically present.

In his way he is an excellent feminist fellow, but he is a fraud and his prodigy of a daughter is an orphan. He has been called 'a repository of the wisdom of the people'; but it must be partly an indictment. Alethea sees his sophisticated insufficiency, affectionately uses him (as he begs to be used) as yardstick, competitor, and plaything; judges him, and moves on.

It is she, not he, who carried out the intuition of a personal relationship with the land. If he has a life, it is largely through the *tremendismo* of her learning experiences with and upon him. There is a coldness in the stripping-down process of allegory; in his company I can enjoy the contemplation of that other great fraud-as-father, Christina Stead's Sam Pollitt, and his cringing, nightmare benevolence. It's the life, the inconsistencies, the undesigned ironic ways in which he feeds the genius of Louie, a messy prodigy who will make out.

The surprise Alethea brings to her world is an undirected desire for greatness, female and personal. Against the rules, she has a sense of beauty; she is capable of great generosity, great pity; she sighs after the genius of power and the genius of wisdom. The frankness of her self-examination, the large curiosity which leads her in all directions ('from masturbation I turned briefly to history'), her efforts at mapping a course (she decides to learn from men's examples because they have been more successful), are all impressive.

Yet at the end Alethea has directed all her enormous energy only to being TOP, beating the others, especially males, analysing the system so as to triumph...

Society cannot place her. For all her wish not to be duped and ravaged, she participates in a world full of these things. She is too big. Doped and packraped, she finally knows society's way of dealing with such a freedom as she proposes for the whole of Alethea Hunt.

Once she sat by a mountain waterfall and wished for its 'freedom to jump'. Her departure as leopard — a characteristically total and startling change — seems to be a movement away from human society and out to the continent at which Ireland gestures throughout the book, the visionary country of bush and grassland towards which she drives her car with her last human capabilities. Is it also a journey towards a love beyond the rediscovery of a childhood love? At one moment, despoiled, she let herself be touched, pitied, and let off the competitive game of 'dare you' which is the basis of her life-design so far. Certainly it is a positive journey.

'I thought it was youth I was gradually leaving — is it life as others know it that's going? What am I? Will I be able to stay sane?... one's deepest instinct is to go on.'

Society's values almost left behind, she wonders if her human life and impending change will be 'a symbol for future females, an archetype for the future'. Somehow, trying to answer this, it matters that she has attracted and perhaps appreciated (by keeping her letters) the caring, country-bred Lil Lutherburrow, put-upon for sex and maternal services, a fool and wise in senses exactly contrary to Alethea.

Ireland's first prize-winning book *The Chantic Bird* dealt with the unresolved efforts of a dropout to fantasise a family round himself. His *The Unknown Industrial Prisoner* showed men swallowed by their creation, the irresponsible monster organization to whom they turn for a livelihood. Here Ireland sends Alethea into an unsocialized and fabulous existence in unknown country, country of the mind, where her marks (second to a boy in High School finals) cannot follow her, nor her father's offer of a reward. At this crisis and metamorphosis it is no more use talking of madness, as did one reviewer in a wince of distaste, than it is with Theodora Goodman. Ireland's is a dire but bold pronouncement, a curse or a promise — the life that is within us will abandon everything, even the identity of the past, the records and the mentors, for the 'freedom to jump'.

JUDITH RODRIGUEZ

Yvonne du Fresne, *Farvel and other Stories*. Victoria University Press and Price Milburn, 1980. \$7.95.

These linked stories are a record of the life of the Danish-French Huguenot community in the Manawatu, New Zealand. Yvonne du Fresne is herself a member of that community and the stories are strongly autobiographical. They tell of the struggles of an immigrant community not only to adjust to a new land, and to integrate into an Anglo-Saxon community, but also of their attempts to retain the old traditions of which they were so proud. If these stories are to be believed, and there is no reason why they shouldn't be, their attempt at cultural retention has been extremely successful for the legends, history and customs of Denmark seem to play as much a role in the life of this community in the 1930s-40s as they did in the 1860s when they first settled in New Zealand.

It is presented to us through the eyes of a small child, Astrid Westergaard, who sees herself as a spy, intent on discovering New Zealand which for her was 'a country that was coloured rose-pink and an ancient country of the British Empire'. Astrid has a vivid imagination and quite often lives in a fantasy world divided between that of the ancient Vikings and of the British Empire. She can change within minutes from being a Viking queen to one of the Royal Princesses, her playmate Cherry Taylor is the other, playing with the corgis at the Royal Lodge. Much of the humour of these stories, and some are very funny indeed, originates from this gap between the imagined event and the actual reality.

Fader told her the stories of the Old People; The Marsh King Elfin-Mount, the Huldres, Baldur, Thor, Harald Bluetooth. Harald Bluetooth had lived near them in Jutland, at Jellinge, and had carved his own messages on his rune-stone and put it out on the moors, for his message to be seen by all men of the earth and sky.

But no one had set a rune-stone here in a paddock for them to read. There were three messages though. One was a grave message on the petrol pump at the store,

'Do not punp until this glass is full.'

The others were on a stone shed across the road. The front one was an elegant flashing tin sign — 'Whakarewa Feed and Grain Co.' and on the back of the shed — 'Fatty Sykes is a Skite' in large, white-washed letters. Astrid envied Fatty Sykes. His friends had made a rune-stone for him, for evermore.

As a social document the stories have much to teach us about a small immigrant community and as such they must be looked upon as Yvonne du Fresne's loving tribute to that community. But they also fulfil the second requirement Sidney demanded of a literary work — they delight.

ANNA RUTHERFORD

Robert Fraser, *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah: A Study in Polemical Fiction*. Heinemann, London, 1980. 113 pages.

In this work Robert Fraser assesses Armah's contribution to African literature in two areas, as an innovative technician whose experiment with the chronicle form in *Two Thousand Seasons* is an attempt to bring his art to the attention of a wider African public, and as a social critic whose concern with the imaginative sterility of contemporary society in Ghana leads him to seek its causes in the breakdown of social cohesion in the pre-colonial past.

An opening chapter, 'The Context: Liberation and Resistance', is useful in providing a sketch of Armah's background, and an assessment of the contributions which his reading of Fanon and his experiences of black political awareness in the USA in the early 1960s and of the 'post-colonial ennui' in Algeria in 1963 made to Armah's analysis of his society. A discussion of the five novels in chronological order of publication follows.

The first three novels are examined in the light of Fraser's contention that 'despite the tone of individual anguish in his first three books (Armah's) primary concern has been with the cultivation of the collective, rather than the individual sensibility' (page xii). Arguing that critics of *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* have been narrow-minded in concentrating on the surface manifestations in the novel of the rot in post-colonial Africa, Fraser draws attention to Armah's examination of the social causes of this rot: the 'forceful mitigating factors' (page 12) which, in Fraser's view, indicate a 'compassionate sense of human frailty' (page 15) at work in the novel. In a world which denigrates anything of local manufacture or inspiration, Koomson is recognizably the successor of generations of men who exploited their people in order to get the trinkets of the West, but Fraser's assertion that Armah sees historical forces as *mitigating* factors remains not proven. The discussion of *Fragments* and *Why Are We So Blest?* is valuable in pointing to their examination of the sterility of contemporary African society: in *Fragments* this is a sterility of the imagination as well as a broader social impotence; in *Why Are We So Blest?* sexual sterility is a metaphorical extension of the lack of instinctual life which betrays the hopes of the people and renders Solo an 'ideological neuter' (page 49), incapable of using his art as he wishes to, in the service of the people.

Any discussion of Armah's works must come to terms with his fourth novel, *Two Thousand Seasons*. Fraser's comparison of this novel with Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de Violence* is interesting in the light it sheds on Armah's reaction to the call for the African artist to provide his readers with an alternative to the colonial view of their

history by, in Chinua Achebe's words, 'showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost'. *The Healers* applies a different historical method, with its closely researched analysis of a crucial period of Ghanaian history, but tends toward the same end.

Fraser sees in Armah's use of the plural voice in *Two Thousand Seasons* an assertion of the traditional relationship of the African artist and his community, in opposition to the alienated, Romantic artist figures of the first three novels. He holds that *Two Thousand Seasons* marks a crucial development in Armah's writing, not only a change in the primary focus of the subject matter, from the anguish of the present to its sources in the past, but a change in style as a result of Armah's concern with the democratic basis of his art as a novelist.

While the author is obviously an admirer of Armah's work, he is not unaware that there are passages, particularly in the two later novels, in which Armah's writing lacks power. He argues, however, that Armah's technical innovations in *Two Thousand Seasons* should be recognized as nothing short of revolutionary. Fraser's emphasis on Armah's concern in all five novels with the historical basis of contemporary human interactions is convincing, and while his discussion indicates Armah's interest in the causes of the disease, he does not ignore the symptoms which are so compellingly depicted in the earlier novels, although he does not pay them the attention which they have received from some of the critics listed in his selective bibliography of secondary sources.

While this brief work is not a definitive study of Armah — how, indeed, can one expect a definitive study of a living writer? — the author's careful examination of Armah's evaluation of the historical forces acting upon a society and his analysis of Armah's developing style form a major addition to the growing body of criticism on the novels of this fascinating writer.

ROSEMARY COLMER

### ***Critical Perspectives***

**Edited by BERNTH LINDFORS**

A series of key readings on writers from the Third World

#### **Chinua Achebe**

Edited by Bernth Lindfors and C.L. Innes paper **£2.95 net**

#### **Amos Tutuola**

Edited by Bernth Lindfors paper **£4.95 net**

#### **Nigerian Literatures**

Edited by Bernth Lindfors paper **£4.95 net**

#### **V.S. Naipaul**

Edited by Robert Hamner paper **£3.95 net**

#### **Arabic Literatures**

Edited by K. Boullata paper **£4.95 net**

### **The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah**

**ROBERT FRASER**

'Robert Fraser's critical introduction provides a valuable guide to the work of Ayi Kwei Armah, considered by many to be the finest of the younger African writers.' *British Book News*

cased **£4.95 net** paper **£1.95 net**

### **The Novels of Camara Laye**

**ADELE KING**

This straightforward introduction concentrates on *The African Child* and *The Radiance of the King*. paper **£3.95 net**

### **An Introduction to the Writings of Ngugi**

**G.D. KILLAM**

This gives a brisk guide to a range of critical reactions to the novels and plays of Ngugi. paper **£2.95 net**

**Heinemann Educational Books**

22 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3HH