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Briefly Noted [Reviews of Paul Theroux, Alice Munro, Beth Harvor, Charles Bukowski]

Joyce Carol Oates

Raymond J. Smith

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Briefly Noted:

THE BLACK HOUSE by Paul Theroux. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974. Pp. 249. \$6.95, hb.

One of the most interesting of younger American writers is Paul Theroux, whose novels *Girls at Play* and *Saint Jack* were well-received by critics in both the United States and England. If he is not so well-known among general readers as he is among critics, and his fellow-writers, it may be partly because his fiction is located outside the territorial boundaries of the United States—in the Far East, in Russia, in Africa, and in England. *The Black House* is a mysterious work: it is ostensibly set in a small English village in the Dorset countryside, and at the same time it is set—psychologically—in Uganda, in an isolated Bwamba village, where the novel's protagonist, an anthropologist named Alfred Munday, lived for a long period of time, researching the Bwamba people. He and his wife are forced to leave Africa, and return to England, where Dr. Munday intends to write an anthropological study of the "witch-ridden semi-pygmy" whom he has come to be fond of. He and his wife begin to suffer a kind of culture shock, having left Africa after so many years, unable to adjust to life in Four Ashes and in the dark, oppressive house they have rented sight unseen, "The Black House." The novel is also a ghost story: Dr. Munday falls in love with, or is bewitched by, a mysterious woman who, like his memories of Africa, haunts him. The novel does not yield its meanings easily; its "plot" is at times rather baffling. But Theroux's ability to contrast cultures and to focus upon the bizarre similarities between them is as powerful in this novel as it was in his earlier, more realistic works. Here is Dr. Munday, speaking to a church hall of elderly retired people, in Four Ashes:

It's a law of nature . . . that once a group of people has been cut off from the world they begin to change. Their direction alters—though they have no sense of having turned. They have nothing, no one, to measure themselves by, except a feeble distant memory of the way things were once done. . . . They withdraw to a shadowy interior world. This inspires certain fears—irrational fear, you might say, is a penalty of that isolation. Who can verify it or tell you it doesn't matter? Who can witness this decline?

Dr. Munday is speaking to all of us and, ironically, to himself: for his own withdrawal to a shadowy interior world will destroy both his wife and himself.

J.C.O.

SOMETHING I'VE BEEN MEANING TO TELL YOU by Alice Munro.
Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited, 1974. Pp. 246. \$7.95, hb.

Alice Munro's new collection contains thirteen stories, all highly readable, very skillful indeed. But one is most impressed by the feeling behind the stories—the evocation of emotions, ranging from bitter hatred to love, from bewilderment and resentment to awe. In all her work—*Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1972), and this new volume—there is an effortless, almost conversational tone, and we know we are in the presence of an art that works to conceal itself, in order to celebrate its subject.

Miss Munro's fiction is always naturalistic, at bottom, but her characters and their reactions to life may be quite varied. She presents a wonderful variety of people: the charming, un-self-conscious narrator of "How I Met My Husband" (who dropped out of high school with a 37 average, and "meets" her husband while pining for another man); the bitterly intelligent and highly self-critical betrayed wife of "The Spanish Lady" (who tortures herself with thoughts of her husband's infidelity); the ex-wife of a "famous Canadian writer" who, coming across a story of his that deals with someone they both knew, whom the husband victimized, passes severe judgment on him. *This is not enough, Hugo. You think it is, but it isn't. You are mistaken, Hugo.* ("Material") These characters create their own suspense; we always want to know more about them, where they have come from and what fate is in store. Technique is never an end in itself, but a way of revealing character.

One of the most moving stories in the book is "Walking on Water," which is told from the point of view of an old man who lives in a run-down apartment building in which "hippies" also live, and who befriends a brilliant but emotionally unstable young man named Eugene. There are highly perceptive old people in other stories—"Marrakesh" and the title story; and "young" people whose self-absorbed lives are made to seem wasteful and desperate, by contrast with older values they imagine they have outlived. ("I never feel sad about anybody," says a liberated young woman, when she learns that an acquaintance has committed suicide.) Powerful also is "Memorial," which describes the funeral—the "memorial service"—of a boy accidentally killed on the highway, and the response of his upper-middle-class parents. They make the boy's death an occasion for testing themselves, for displaying their wealth, hospitality, and misguided stoicism, which not even the loss of a son can disrupt.

Miss Munro does her fictional characters the rare honor of believing in them utterly. In one of the most poignant stories, "The Ottawa Valley," the narrator describes her family, her mother especially, who is slowly dying of Parkinson's disease, but then breaks off to say:

The problem, the only problem is my mother. . . . She is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to *get rid*, of her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. . . . Which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same.

J.C.O.

WOMEN & CHILDREN by Beth Harvor. Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1973.
Pp. 164. \$3.50, pb.

As the title of this impressive collection of short stories indicates, "women and children" seem to be inhabiting a universe from which men have vanished. To be sure, they are sometimes present—physically. More often they are not even that; several husbands in Ms. Harvor's stories have jobs that take them far from home, filming documentaries in the Arctic or taking photographs of harbors, poignant vistas, capturing the "poverty and fog" of other parts of the country. These eleven stories concentrate upon the predicament of intelligent women who wake up to discover themselves caught in the oldest of traps, for all their intelligence: married to men they no longer love, forced to endure the obvious, and sometimes contemptuous, indifference of these husbands, yet bound to conventional, patterned lives by the fact of being mothers.

The collection would be depressing except for Ms. Harvor's extraordinary gift of making the ironic humor as well as the pathos of her heroines' lives clear to us. Her women are marvelously self-critical, and do not attempt to blame others for the various disappointments of their lives. It is wrong to imagine that, because a writer deals with painful subjects, he or she is indulging in self-pity; though the absent or absent-minded husbands of *Women & Children* are egotistical, cruel, and petty, the women, after all, cling to them and to marriage, and admit that, in their own way, they may be exploiting them. "She got her prince . . . then discovered that that was not the real issue. The shoe didn't even fit. If the shoe fits, the prince said, Wear it. And everyone . . . tried to pretend it did—but it didn't fit anyone, not even that tricky little liar, Cinderella." ("A Day at the Front, A Day at the Border").

A number of the stories deal with Anna and Karl, from Anna's point of view. Anna had been a nurse, is now a painter; she has learned, painfully, how to make art out of the discontents of her life. She says that

being a painter has changed her, has sharpened her wits, allowing her to see "that any incident that has the right ingredients can represent the macrocosm." ("Monster Baby") Without art, her life would probably be a disaster, since her husband travels often, is unfaithful to her and not very interested in his children, and she fears the increasing loneliness of growing old—of no longer being physically attractive to men, of not being needed by others. Where names are changed, the basic situation is often present, and in the collection's concluding story, "Our Lady of All the Distances," the lonely wife experiences relief of a sort by weeping:

The day had pyramided. . . . She was on the painful point. She would have to let herself cry. So she did not sniff it back or wipe at it. It was the beginning of something that she could feel how she was caught in the skein of all the distances. It was the beginning of something that she could cry. There were beginnings here that must be honoured.

It would be unfortunate if the book's title turned away male readers, for Ms. Harvor is dealing with extremely important issues. And she is an artist—her stories are beautifully put together; even those that are in fact reveries are powerfully dramatic, with images—like that of a "monster baby" without a brain, a creature that refuses to die quietly—that function both within the context of the individual story and beyond it, as allegory, as "macrocosm." *Women & Children* must be one of the most accomplished first books of our time. Special mention should be made of the haunting cover (by Alex Colville) which shows a woman and two children getting into a car—a subdued, rather melancholy composition of browns, beiges, and neutral colors.

J.C.O.

BURNING IN WATER, DROWNING IN FLAME: SELECTED POEMS

1955-1973 by Charles Bukowski. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974. Pp. 232. \$4.00 pb.; \$15.00 signed hb.

Charles Bukowski has published over twenty books of poetry and prose, all of them with small 'alternative' presses like Black Sparrow, his publisher since 1968. His world is a world of rented rooms and plugged toilets, prize fighters and race horses, cigarettes and beer, whores and ex-wives, old men and young girls—and poetry. Typical titles in this collection, are "to the whore who took my poems," "2 p.m. beer," "old poet," "a 340 dollar horse and a hundred dollar whore," "x-pug," "looking for a job," "i can't stay in the room with that woman," and "tougher

than corn beef hash." It's a world where you have to drink yourself to sleep at night ("the rent's high too") and recoil from getting out of bed in the morning ("nerves"). At its worst, "I'm like a bug in the bathroom when you flick on the / lightswitch at 3 a.m." ("straight on through"); at its best, "one night like this [reunited with his woman] beats life, / the overflow takes care of death" ("letters"). For the characteristically erotic Bukowski, sex, love, and life are all part of the same fabric; he can't understand how those who have "given it up" do not "expire," are not murdered by "the flowers and the children" ("dreamlessly"). His heroes are persevering old men, like the 92-year old protagonist of "charles," who, too old for the girls, bakes cookies, and the 71-year-old "dutchman" who takes "3 raw eggs in his beer" and is "still working, strong" ("burn and burn and burn"). He writes elsewhere: "they ought to make kings / out of old men / rolling cigarettes / in rooms small enough / to recognize / a single shadow" ("class"). For Bukowski, poetry is a means of self-understanding: "to get your feelings down . . . it is the little we can do / this small bravery of knowledge" ("beans with garlic"). These poems are almost always vital and authentic, and often compelling. Among the best are "the twins," where the poet realizes that he shares the mortality of his otherwise antithetical dead father, "no. 6," a prelude to a horse race, "beans with garlic," an *ars poetica* of sorts, "don't come around but if you do," a defiant song of independence, and "the fisherman," about the meaninglessness of an heroic old age. What is perhaps more memorable than any single poem is the persona of the poet himself that emerges. The reader is left with the feeling that he has really gotten to know Bukowski, someone with whom he feels a genuine sympathy.

R.J.S.