

## Book Reviews

**Nude on the Dartmouth Ferry.** Elizabeth Jones. Windsor: Black Moss Press, 1980. Pp. 48.

*Nude on the Dartmouth Ferry* is Elizabeth Jones' third book of poems. It is a very sparse collection (twenty-four poems in forty-eight pages), and the poems, although interesting, are themselves rather thin and far too gentle.

The interest of the collection is largely in its range of subjects. Jones has chosen to look at the activities, work, images and preoccupations of women. *Ladies*, for example, reviews the women of the Durban churches of her childhood, comparing (to their disadvantage both spiritually and physically) the "prosperous white slugs" of the Protestant congregations with the "old Indian women" and "African matriarchs of tribal proportions" in the Catholic congregations. *Maritime Heras* moves from contemplation of a display of photographs to concentrate on one which shows "women bathing" and then to explore the consciousness of these women "Abstracted/from kitchen stoves rocking chair/in the slow ripples/of a lake", and is one of the most successful poems in the collection because it maintains a firm grip on the subject. The combination of women and water is repeated in *Women Bathing*, with similar success, as they "slip/along cockled seaweed/smooth hair of algae/to the sea" and then lie "invested in ripple and wave" (a particularly effective use, this, of the word *invested*). *Aphrodisiac* and *Muse* take careful looks at contrasting images of women (the media image and the artistic and literary image, respectively), and could have been placed together to their mutual advantage; the tone in both, a tone of the most

delicate possible irony, is scrupulously maintained. *Fall Collage* and *Morning Run* present tranquil domestic sequences; the title poem, *Nude on the Dartmouth Ferry*, offers an abstract and uneasy reflection. Within the range of her chosen subjects, Jones' insights and observations are careful and revealing.

Uneasiness, however, as in *Nude on the Dartmouth Ferry*, is perhaps the nearest Jones gets to the darker elements of life. There is a certain baroque decadence of image in *Conservatrice*, admittedly, but in *Noeud de Vipères* and *Circles*, the darker elements are drawn in by the literary and historical references involved and remain at one remove from the reader. Jones is most at home in the everyday moods of *Fall Collage* and *Virgin and Hose* or the humorous, playful and lively *Confession of a Suburban Housewife*. Essentially, the poems in the collection are the poems of an undemanding daylight imagination.

They tend, also, to be undemanding in form. They are more often than not anecdotal, with a few that are purely impressionistic, for example, *The Empty Space Between*. The anecdotal approach, however, provides her with an imposed form, so that of the two poems, *Initiation* and *Circles*, each dealing with an insight gained from listening to music, *Initiation* with its anecdotal structure presents a more shaped and finished experience than *Circles*, which is purely impressionistic. Indeed, Jones appears to be unable to finish/close *Circles*, for it trails off into ellipsis. (The same stylistic gimmick of ellipsis appears in *Fundy Tide*, where it again indicates a failure to achieve closure, and in *Women Bathing*, where it is simply unnecessary.) An opposite problem is revealed in *Confession of a Suburban Housewife*, where the poem continues beyond the couplet which effectively closes it: "no need to tell me/I have a poor grasp of reality"; the additional lines which follow this couplet, apparently in

an effort to tie the end of it in with the title, merely unbalance the poem as a whole, disturbing both tone and structure.

Like her imagination and forms, her style is essentially undemanding. Her rhythms are steady, veering towards flatness only in the over-conversational *Salt*. Her diction is smoothly colloquial for the most part, without being slangy or archaic (except perhaps for the unnecessarily pedantic Latin plural of *vulva* in "wrinkled vulvae"). At some points, for example "turned for relief/to waxy glow of flowers," she drops the article before a noun which could really do with it, giving the lines a rather clipped effect, in this case rather at odds with the impressionistic romanticism of the poem as a whole. On the other hand, the adjective "yellow" is clearly redundant in the lines "lemon yellow rim/of morning sky". These points are indications not of a lack of control, but of a need for one more final polishing before publication.

On the whole, in fact, I would prefer to see less control and more energy. The potential for the energy is certainly to be found in these poems. It needs, however, to be encouraged and developed so that the poems strike the reader rather than nudging her timidly.

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**Margaret Laurence.** Patricia Morley. *Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981. Pp. 171.*

Margaret Laurence's work to date falls into two clear divisions, the books which reflect her experience in Africa, and the better-known Manawaka novels, where the prairie town of her childhood provides a central focus. She herself implied that *The Diviners* (1974) marked

the end of a stage in her career and this, therefore, is a good time for taking stock of her achievement. There is already a plethora of articles on every conceivable aspect of her work, but until now only one book-length critical study, Clara Thomas's *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence* (1975). I wish I could say that Patricia Morley has added a second of comparable stature, offering fresh insight or even pulling together existing critical viewpoints in a lively and readable way. Alas, her *Margaret Laurence*, one of the Twayne's world authors series, does not fit the bill.

I was surprised to read that "the biographical details of Laurence's life are confusing" (p.16). What we need to know of the events of her life has been told clearly in many places and their pattern is easy to grasp. In Morley's hands, however, the details do become confusing. One of the problems is organization: we are well into an account of Laurence's journey to Somaliland, and her reading of the books of Moses en route, when we suddenly encounter her grandparents in their early days in Canada. A useful description of her birthplace, Neepawa (no date of birth given in the text), and its relationship to the fictional Manawaka, is just as suddenly interrupted by a return to matters of ancestry, with this geographical whirl:

The Scottish side of Laurence's ancestry has loomed larger in her imagination than the Irish, doubtless because of the Scottish culture of Neepawa. Laurence thinks of herself as Scots-Canadian, and identifies sympathetically with the Highlanders despite the fact that Fifeshire is in the Lowlands. (p.18)

Another problem is over-documentation: the obvious facts or deductions can surely be stated without acknowledgement that "Critic Clara Thomas" and "Donald Cameron, a Canadian writer and critic" have already uttered them.