

## Sandbars.

OONAH McFEE. Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1977. Pp. 357.

This is a novel one would like to have liked. The main character, Hannah Watson, is the protagonist who grows up during the 1930s in Ontario--notably in Ottawa and at a summer cottage in the Gatineaux. The epigraph, taken from T.S. Eliot's "Marina," is particularly apt, for it contains the germ of the novel:

What seas what shores what grey  
rocks and what islands  
What water lapping the bow  
And scent of pine and the wood-  
thrush singing through the fog  
What images return  
O my daughter.

The book is concerned, mainly, with the images that return to this daughter in a manner reminiscent of Eliot's allusive, cryptic writing. However, the control of images one hopes for is never achieved. Consequently, reading the novel is like overhearing a conversation concerning people one knows very slightly; one receives flashes of insight, only to have the narrative move on again. The book's images are abundant, but somehow they do not jell. They are not explored, nor are they put into a context in which their ultimate significance would impress the reader.

In general, the novel's organization is also deficient. The author's plan

was apparently to juxtapose incidents and events so as to weave backward and forward in time. The present, related by the middle-aged, divorced Hannah, gives way to the past and to events that have been of significance to her. Frequently the author creates tension by means of a past happening, rendered at length and in great detail, which presumably has produced for her what James Joyce would have termed an "epiphany." Unfortunately, the inner significance of many of these events never emerges for the reader, who is left to piece together a pattern from among a great heap of trivia. One frequently feels that this novel contains material for the psychologist, but not for the reader of fiction who expects something more structured.

The weight of McFee's subject is daunting. She appears to want to explore her own development, the "fallings from her, vanishings" that are, generally, far too elusive for the treatment she affords them. For example, the break-up of her parents' marriage is the climax of the preceding three-quarters of the novel. The reader is never given a hint of the imminent separation until the adolescent Hannah herself is told of it by her father. The author's previous observations have not crystallized into meaning and the reader is unable to understand what has gone wrong between the adults. It seems, however, that this lack of understanding is more the result of weak charac-

terization than of incomprehension on the part of the reader. Unlike Henry James in What Maisie Knew, McFee is unable to convey the subtleties of naive perception to her reader.

Because the writer seems unable to command the subject matter, one frequently feels uncomfortable with this book. The characterizations, for instance, are far too fleeting for the weight they are required to bear. The reader sees only surfaces, though the author frequently becomes tortuously speculative, or, worse, resorts to reported dialogue to assist her descriptions. These dialogues are often an embarrassing mixture of dated (1930s) teenage idiom and adult (1970s) perspective: the mature speaker recalls her teenage self in a manner that is coy and unconvincing.

The umpire yells, "Out!" Cries, screams all around us, we are the only ones who don't make a sound, or move. Because there's someone, a stranger, who's handsome, and an athlete, and old--he must be eighteen. "Strike one!" I see Marian grinning back at hers, he's the shortstop. "Yours has nice teeth," I whisper. "So has yours," she says except I don't know how she can tell, he's out in centre field. Still, the view from here's peachy, all that's needed. And even though I know that nothing will come of it--I'd die if mine spoke to me--I've got lots inside to think about.

Examples of what can only be termed bathos are all too conspicuous: Hannah's memories of teenage secret-sharing are treated in a way that makes one cringe with embarrassment for her.

"Holy cow!" Marian exclaimed. "This is the best talk we've ever had." And her eyes following a black roadster as it dipped around a bend, the rumble seat with two couples, one sitting on the folded-down top, the other a curve of shoulders leaning back against the velour upholstery. What secrets did they hold? The girls, had they once stood as we were now? Quiet within ourselves once again, feeling beautiful, the movement of our hands slight, almost nil, conscious of a grace within, standing, as if in half-lighted shadows, before an opening of clouds.

A similar clumsiness occurs in writing which strives for literary effect, often with ludicrous results: "She grabbed the brim of her flouncy hat, and I watched it sail through the air and down onto the bed. The dove-grey dress rippled out the door, the swirl of crepe like a destiny, past and present, as it rilled above her legs." This is plain silly. If the swirl of a dress is to be compared to a destiny, surely the reader should be given more information and more warning. Such writing seems self-conscious and affected. In general the humour, when

it does appear, is studied, forced, and awkward.

In summary, then, what can one say of this novel? Clearly the author has recorded experiences that have been deeply felt: the narrator's pain is evident throughout. Also, the author has set down several episodes that might, reorganized, form a novel. As the book stands, however, it is confusing, awkward and much too long.

At the beginning, the author thanks both the Canada Council and the Ontario Arts Council for grants given to her while writing Sandbars. This acknowledgement is puzzling and unsettling, for one must wonder on what basis such work is given assistance. Surely writing such as this would be much better served by being given to an exacting editor who would cut it by approximately one half. It is dismaying to think that this is but the first of a projected (and presumably funded) trilogy and that, once again, public money is subsidizing work that requires revising, pruning and disciplining long before it reaches print.

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## The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788 to 1975

MIRIAM DIXSON. Penguin, Australia: 1976.

This history of women in Australia does not deal with the occasional salient female whose life is considered distinguished enough to be recorded among those men whose efforts are noted and interpreted in the general histories of Australia. Rather, the writer traces the social circumstances of the settlement of Australia, along with the effects of penal settlements and colonial life, on the way Australian women and men have come to regard each other.

Within Australia, past images of the typical Australian have been shown to derive from those writings which have caught the people's fancy, and remained steadfastly representative of what Australians want to believe about themselves and their forebears. These images have generally presented the male as tall, sun-bronzed, rugged, lean, resistant to authority, with a wry kind of humour, rough and ready manners, and not very talkative. He was capable of making do in an inventive way when out of proper materials, tolerant of poor workmanship as a result, and preferred other men to women for companionship. He worked hard for himself but not for his boss, loathed pretension of any kind (especially of displayed and genuine excellence--in-