

BOOKS

After a quick browse, readers can squeeze bears with confidence, free from the fear of mistaking a bellow-weighted tilt growler for an oilcloth squeaker

Heien Fielding on a bewildering bestseller, *The Ultimate Teddy Bear Book*, page 2

The incredible bulk

Harlot's Ghost
by Norman Mailer
M Joseph £15.99 pp1,122

Peter Kemp

For Norman Mailer, celebrity almost immediately sagged into notoriety. After he won acclaim at 24 with *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, his career pitched downhill. Becoming less read than read about, he embroiled himself in an ongoing saga of nuptials and fisticuffs, alimony and acrimony, public brawls and bruising publicity that left scant time for literature. Though occasional works — *The Armies of the Night*, *The Executioner's Song* — were hailed as signs of a return to form, potboilers mainly interspersed the bourbon binges.

For the past seven years, suggesting that this might change, rumours had circulated of an awesome work in progress. Mailer reports had it, was writing a colossal history of the CIA — his bid for reinstatement as a literary heavyweight, pugnaciously prepared to take on a massively challenging subject: the American psyche with all its conflicting squallors and splendours.

Now it has materialised in the shape of *Harlot's Ghost* — a book that, at a quarter of a stone in weight and 1,122 pages in bulk, constitutes a very lumpy apparition. Partly, this is because it incorporates two narratives.

The first story — a melodramatic maelstrom called the "Omega manuscript" — opens on a lonely coastal road in Maine. Hounded by terrible forebodings, Harry Hubbard, a wealthy Wasp, frantically drives home through woods where "forest demons yowl" and fog hangs "like a winding-sheet". Meanwhile, at Mount Desert, the ominously named family mansion he is hurtling towards, Harry's psychic wife, Kittredge, senses the spirit of a dead woman



trying to "reach" her. What makes this spectral intrusion particularly unwelcome is that Mount Desert already has a resident ghoul. In the vault, emitting "a mad dank odour", lurks the phantom of a homicidal sailor.

Living visitations are also infesting his ill-fated precincts, Harry finds on arriving back. Sinister figures skulk in the shrubbery. A scared friend appears with dreadful news. Lurid disclosures flare. Mount Desert goes up in flames and Harry takes off for Moscow.

As your head reels from this gothic helter-skelter, another narrative (the "Alpha manuscript") starts to unroll. In it, you are introduced to "spooks" of a different nature: CIA agents. Harry, whose father helped found the organisation, has, it

emerges, dedicated his life to it. Kittredge works for the agency too. Hugh, her first husband and Harry's early patron, has long been one of its most powerful officers (codenamed Harlot).

This information, along with a slurry of minutiae about espionage chicaneries (safe houses, scramblers, surveillance paraphernalia) is disgorged in the course of an extensive memoir Harry has clandestinely penned about his CIA career. In contrast to the breakneck gallop of the opening narrative, this chronicle advances with brain-numbing slowness. Copious gleanings from the 130 books Mailer's preface lists as having aided his "veteran imagination" ponderously load everything down. Chapters meander through reams of tedious technicalities. Among characters a-buzz with

operational gen, conversations drone on interminably. Acronyms proliferate — not just CIA, FBI and KGB but (showing that in one sense at least Mailer can still be considered a remarkable practitioner of American letters) DCI and DGI, OSS and TSS, DEA, BAP, MRO, PCU, DOD, DRE, CRC, NSC, MDC, FLC, etc.

The rationale for the double narrative that helps make *Harlot's Ghost* so adipose is spelled out by Kittredge. In a monograph, *The Dual Self*, she expounds the idea that each individual possesses two personalities (an "Alpha" self and an "Omega" one), so experience always needs to be viewed from two different perspectives. Applauding this notion as a major intellectual breakthrough, Mailer surrounds it with other large dualities: Christianity and communism, heaven and hell, America and Russia.

Gender polarities are prominent too. Plastic women with names such as Modene Murphy get arranged into postures demonstrating their femaleness. Among the men, strident huskiness is the dominant tone. Virility tends to be emphatically accentuated. "There can hardly be another so phallic (he's like the knobs and pistons of the Almighty Engine itself)," Kittredge gasps of Harlot. "You, *amigo*, have death-guts," one man gruffly assures another.

Despite such high-testosterone testifings, intimations of homosexuality, not for the first time, perturb Mailer's males. When a vengeful ex-mistress snarls at Harry, "I bet you are a faggot. Deep down!", he has a "struggle to take the tears out of my eyes". Around him, one CIA agent after another tumbles out of the closet with declarations such as: "Yes. I have had an affair with Dix Butler. Does that amaze you? I, who used to be one of the leading white man studs in Harlem." Once again, for the Mailer male, life consists of regularly having his virility tested. Trials of fortitude, from rock-climbing to out-facing other he-men, unremittingly crop up.

But easily the most gruelling ordeal *Harlot's Ghost* confronts you with is that of beating your way through its punishing prolixity. Dismayingly, as the story abruptly breaks off with a "To be continued", you discover there's more of this to come. After more than 1,000 pages, Hubbard's CIA memoir has only crawled — via the Berlin tunnel, the Bay of Pigs and the Kennedy assassination — from 1955 to 1965. You're still totally in the dark as to the import of the initial skulduggery at Mount Desert. Nightmarishly bloated and entirely insubstantial, *Harlot's Ghost* seems the appalling manifestation of a defunct talent.

Collected lifelines

ALAN BROWNJOHN celebrates the work of three poets, whose verse proves to be impressive, ambitious and ingenious

For most people in the 1950s Henry Reed was the author of hilariously accurate radio satires on the literary life and, incidentally, the name underneath the most famous poem of the second world war, Naming of Parts. For some he was also known as the perpetrator of Chard Whitlow, a wicked, spot-on parody of a T S Eliot Quartet:

"This time last year I was fifty-four. And this time next year I shall be sixty-two. And I cannot say I should care (to speak for myself) To see my time over again - if you can call it time. Fidgeting uneasily under a draughty stair.

Or counting sleepless nights in the crowded Tube." Only for tenacious Third Programme poetry listeners who picked up Philoctetes or The Auction Sale, and then perhaps sought out Reed's sole book, A Map of Verona (1946), was he pre-eminently a poet. His readers had to search hard for his poems, or just wait patiently for them, because he was, sadly, unproductive; but he seemed the equal, at his rare best, of any of his contemporaries except for his masters: Eliot, Auden, Louis MacNeice.

Not many people knew Reed himself very well. Jon Stallworthy's introduction to this absorbing Collected Poems (OUP £20) goes some way towards filling in the personal record. First there was the kindly, reprobate father, the illiterate, storytelling mother, the rebellious days at primary school. Then came the brilliant classics degree, the establishment of his homosexuality, the first poems (slowly), then the teaching and freelancing, the penurious travels, the biography of Thomas Hardy toiled over and never finished. He was always a little mysterious, and retiring (a recuse in his last years). And in poetry he was a perfectionist, deeply reluctant to let perfectly good work out of hiding. But then came the BBC. Those radio extravaganzas (one ruseful running gag concerned the mishaps of a naive biographer) were easier tasks altogether. Did they, in Reed's case as in certain others, represent cunning enemies of genuine promise?

His Collected is impressive enough to leave the question intriguingly open. Reed was drawn, early on, to write the longer poem; a pity, because his excursions into extended allegory (The Desert) or myth (Tintagel) compel attention only in certain isolated passages where he manages a surprisingly grand and stately manner. The shorter lyric pieces of the same period (the early 1940s) are more coherent and approachable, carefully shaped, both tender and sinister in mood.

But his writing comes splendidly to life with the army poems in Lessons of the War: not only Naming of Parts, but the admirable Judging of Distances and Returning of Issue - the last of these completing the

sequence as late as 1970. And among the unpublished poems Stallworthy prints a fine, bawdy extra, Psychological Warfare; which Reed worked on for 20 years.

With some excellent translations (Leopardi, Theocritus), radio play extracts, uncollected poems and early writings, the volume assembles a body of work, substantial enough to suggest considerable talents denied fulfilment by circumstances. But if so, what circumstances? The war, the sexual dilemma, the failure to find anywhere to be happy in, certainly.

But in The Chateau, an unfinished draft from the 1950s, the poet gazes at a huge, deathly mansion and reflects that:

"Surely beyond that great facade my life is being lived? Lived, loved and filled with gaiety and ardour.

As though my life were endowed with a perpetual splendour And radiance fell on it."

Stallworthy interprets this, and he is surely right, as a vision of contentment rather than disappointment. Reed felt blessed and fortunate to have written and achieved as much as he had; and would not have wanted to have done more, or done it differently.

E J Scovell was born in 1907, seven years before Henry Reed, and began writing in the 1920s; but she didn't publish her first, wafer-thin books until 1942 and 1944. She held back a third volume until 1956;

then retired into silence, went out of print, and only resurfaced with a notable Collected in 1988.

Unlike Reed, she has never been diverted from poetry, but like him she has been intensely self-critical. The new Selected Poems (Carcanet £5.95) draws on work from six decades; the recent poems show her writing in her 80s with the old craft and delicacy, and no departure at all from the wholly traditional style of her early years: she is living testimony to the current of quiet romanticism running under 1930s modernism in English poetry.

Her range is ostensibly small. Scovell has travelled widely and felt deeply; but doesn't write about places, and virtually excludes personal emotional reference from her work. Her subjects are marriage, childbearing, nature's impingement on her domestic living; her images are taken from children and childhood, birds, and flowers (strong rather than fragile):

"Walled plot of fruit-trees, flowers. What strength it yields, how hard it bears!"

This would seem, given the brevity and trimness of her poems, a recipe for a modest and minor poetry. Not so. She is constantly making connections between these small-scale concerns and much larger themes. The Kite begins in spring-holiday mood, switches to memories, focuses on one remembered child, and ends with a chilling evocation of mortality.



Reed: tender and sinister

"Oh dead in childhood, soon I shall be coming too under the earth Where you have slept in peace so long alone. Better to come there rosy, out of breath

And warm with sweat - straight from the open air And the race to the hill-top . . .

There is a tendency for the syntax to become imprecise, the imagery a bit tangled and tentative. But there is a genuine power in the intenness of her contemplation, a tough talent at work under the surface calm.

It is good to have back in print the Poems 1963-83 by Michael Longley (Secker £8), originally pub-

lished by the late, much lamented, Salamander Press: it is a collected edition, apart from his recent Gorse Fires, and to re-read it is to find Longley as witty, ingenious and subtly off-putting as one remembered.

On almost any topic - love, family, nature, the troubles - Longley's angle is different and disconcerting. In The Fairground, the voyeuristic spectator is manipulated by the exhibits; his Orchid becomes an ugly flower reminiscent of the shape of a human heart:

"one artery Sprouting upwards to support a flower."

Longley's formal skill half-enables him to be genuinely eloquent, but he eschews easy rhetoric, or indeed any obvious effect. He says:

"I could have Implied in reduced haiku A world of suffering, swaddled In white silence like babies The rows of words."

But he doesn't do that, although he is more laconic, riddling and cryptic than most of his Irish contemporaries. His meticulous view of the phenomena of nature (see Spring Tide or Entomology, is all his own, weird and more than a little frightening. He is not easy reading, but it would be difficult to think of a more entertaining, touching and rewarding book of poems published this autumn.

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