

Quirks of the quest

Savkar Altinel

CHARLES JOHNSON

Oxherding Tale

176pp. Blond and Briggs. £8.95.
0 85634 148 7

A novel with a Zen Buddhist title by an Associate Professor of English who teaches Creative Writing raises uneasy expectations. It could easily be a cult book in the making, or it could be that other kind of "campus novel", the kind which is bought in bulk by American colleges because of its sheer teachability to undergraduates. Happily, though, *Oxherding Tale* is neither of these, but a work of some real depth and humour.

The narrator Andrew Hawkins is, like the author himself, black. Being the product of a drunken wife-swapping session between a plantation owner and his butler, however, he can pass for white; and although the novel is full of insights into blackness and slavery, it is clear that these conditions are meant to be seen, at least to a certain extent, as metaphorical. As the author says in a brilliant aside on the slave narratives of the 1840s and 1850s, the period of the novel itself, the slave's pursuit of freedom has affinities with the Puritan's pursuit of salvation, and both have their roots in the *Confessions* of "the first philosophical black writer: Saint Augustine". To this argument are added frequent allusions to the *Odyssey* and, of course, the "Ten Oxherding Pictures" of Kuo-an Shih-yuan depicting a young herdsman in search of the wayward ox that is his own self; the reader is left in no doubt that what is at issue is a universally relevant quest.

Andrew's father is a black racist who thinks too much imagination is "unwholesome. And white" (his British equivalent would have no doubt said it was "middle class"), but Andrew himself is given a thorough grounding in both Western and Eastern traditions of thought by a tutor, and although he has some misgivings (Chinese thought, he thinks, is like Chinese food: half an hour after one has consumed it one's head is empty once again), he becomes a seeker after truth and leaves his home.

His first stop is a plantation owned by a widow named Flo Hatfield who is addicted to sweets, drugs and young male slaves. In this empire of the senses, which is called "Leviathan" and resembles Circe's island,

Andrew also meets the Vet, a pedlar of bad faith, who is a sort of parody of Camus's Doctor Rieux with his interest in man's health rather than his salvation. The Vet has for sale a number of "life assurances":

They included: (1) The faith that someday you would be honored by your community for your contributions, \$100. (2) That, if not honored, your children would one day regard you as a source of inspiration, \$75.00. (3) If neither of the above, you would enjoy the benefits of a good marriage, a little property, and pride in your work, \$50.00. (4) If none of these, then you would enjoy *all* the above, plus life everlasting, in the afterworld, \$25.00. (5) If *none* of the above, you would, at least, die mercifully in your sleep, \$5.00.

"The last policy is, lately, our most popular," said [the Vet]. "You have only to select a hour. Through the techniques of Friedrich Mesmer, it will seem apodictic."

Andrew, however, angrily rejects such a solution, leaves Leviathan, and heads north, pursued by the dreaded Soulcatcher whose job is to bring back escaped slaves.

Andrew's wanderings eventually lead him to the town of Spartanburg where he marries a white girl, takes out a mortgage on a log cabin,

and gets a job as a schoolteacher. This section of the novel is difficult to interpret, for it looks as if Andrew has settled, with the author's full blessing, for some version of the third policy offered by the Vet. This state of affairs does not last for long, of course, and there is a final encounter with the Soulcatcher, but the so-called "Liberation" that results from this is a passive acceptance of life and death which seems only an extension of the kind of stoicism represented by Spartanburg. In a book which could be said to follow a Hegelian pattern (Hegel is mentioned several times and even lectured on by Marx who is made to pay a brief visit to America unrecorded by history) how could there be room for such an un-Hegelian move? Did not Hegel say that stoicism was not freedom but only an ideology embraced by slavery-based Roman society?

The weakness of the ending, however, is not altogether important. An editor Andrew meets in the course of his travels tells him that she hates her job because "no one seems intellectually equipped to write with the truth as their motive". That is one charge which could not be brought against Charles Johnson.

Nest for the nice

John Melmoth

TOM WAKEFIELD

Mates

144pp. Gay Men's Press, P.O. Box 247,
London, N15 6RW.
£7.95 (paperback, £3.50).
0907040 28 4

Gay fiction, seeking an apt response to post-Wolfenden forbearance (that "lavish fraction of civil rights" derided by Adam Mars-Jones in the introduction to *Mae West is Dead*, his recent anthology of lesbian and gay stories), has tended towards self-repression - variously aping and inverting its straight(er) precursors. If it proceeds on the assumption of a unique "homosexual experience", it restricts itself to the exploration of esoteric themes in a private language for the benefit of the initiated. If, contrariwise, it stresses the continuity of homo- and heterosexual experience, it may be deemed closeted, parodic, insufficiently radic-

al. *Mates* illustrates rather than resolves this dilemma. Tom Wakefield's emphasis on the prosaic nature of extended homosexual monogamy is shot through with a tortuous sexual mysticism: "His breasts, though hairy, were, to all intents and purposes, mammary in relationship to his women friends." Cyril, one of the two principal characters, while generally maintaining a certain discretion with regard to his sexual orientation, can be riled by liberal solicitousness:

Understanding on their terms offered little more than damnation. Informed groups! You enlightened ones! ... Take your stance of pity and feel so much better for it.

There is nothing fay about Len and Cyril. They meet as national service conscripts, swiftly consummate matters behind a wood-pile in a station yard (under the watchful but fortunately sentimental eye of the tea lady) and build a life together which lasts for more than twenty-five years. Opposites attract and adhere: Cyril is dark and burly, gregarious, spontaneous, promiscuous, sexually innovative and thoroughly dependent; Len is lean and mousy, introverted, dour, prudish, passive, a homebody, old-maidish, courageous and self-sufficient.

Once initial passions have been discharged, Wakefield methodically de-glamorizes their relationship. Both lose their hair, Cyril runs to fat, Len forgets to wear his false teeth. Cyril finds Len most attractive when he is ponderous and absurd, Len washes Cyril's socks and underpants. In their mid-thirties they regard themselves as middle-aged. The love that dare not speak its name learns to express itself in mundane domesticity and fried chicken every Thursday evening.

As was the case with David and Brian, the unworried lovers in Wakefield's *Isobel Quirk in Orbit*, sex does not play a large part in Cyril and Len's comradeship. Bed is more frequently a source of comfort than excitement; this is central to the book's sexual politics, which presuppose an antithesis between straight and gay sexual attitudes. Heterosexual sex, frequently linked with eating, is aggressive, voracious and self-serving; homosexual sex is cooler, tenderer, devotional, more a matter of pleasing than taking pleasure. *Mates* proposes a scheme of things in which homosexuals and women who for one reason or another have withdrawn from the sexual fray are conspicuously nicer than overweening heteros.

Wakefield's idiosyncratic sense of fun and tragedy, his sentimentality and laconic inspection of the ordinary make nonsense of the epigraph gleefully pilfered from the Church of England's 1979 Working Party Report on Homosexuality, which refused to accord such ties as bind Cyril and Len the moral or social equivalence of marriage. Wryly and surreptitiously, *Mates* demonstrates that it is precisely the "private" and "experimental" (qualities which the Church apparently cannot approve) nature of such friendships which enables them to flourish.

Dandified

David Coward

MICHEL DÉON

Where are you dying tonight?

Translated from the French by Julian Evans
256pp. Hamish Hamilton. £9.95.
0 241 10908 6

The reader who travels with the likes of *The Aspern Papers* or the Henry Reed radio satires in his literary luggage will immediately know this book for what it is: the Biography of the Non-Existent Great Writer. Readers who are just nosy about other people's private lives or believe that the truth about Great Persons is more visible in their lives than in their deeds or their books, may well wonder why it is classed as fiction. There is no preface to give us a clue, the author's tongue is kept firmly in his cheekiness and we are even left with the suspicion that *Where are you dying tonight?* was actually written by the subject himself.

Stanislas Beren, novelist of international repute, is an invention of Michel Déon who smuggles him into the literary history of modern France much as he might slip an extra egg into an omelette. Footnotes of outrageous exactness enable us to construct a bibliography of The Writings, while interviews with old cronies and ex-mistresses, plus extracts from The Unpublished Correspondence, add the right note of authenticity. We are reminded that Cocteau called Beren "a discreet writer in an age of indiscretions". Sartre perused him publicly in 1946 in the Café de Flore ("the equivalent of taking a full-page advertisement in the national newspapers") and Simone de Beauvoir told journalists that she read him in the lavatory and as a result "no longer suffered from either boredom or constipation". André Breton was furious with him for misquoting Rimbaud and the title of this, his life story, was supplied one Sunday in Hyde Park by Evelyn Waugh, with "battered boater askew and cane under his arm".

Beren (1908-1977) was born in the Balkans at an inconvenient moment in history, but his life begins as a schoolboy in Paris in 1925. Befriended by the publishing family of André Garrett (*d* 1940), he quickly emerges as a literary star who glitters in the spangled 1930s world of Duesenbergs, Cap-Ferrat, cocktails, *Angst* and the more interesting kinds of sex. A man of accommodations - the sort who would probably have been on the winning side both during and after the Occupation - he is fortunately marooned in the United States in 1940. The last of the dandies, he likes money and art and the nicer kinds of suffering and he exhibits a "bluff cynicism" when not disappearing in order to find himself or emitting thoughts about life's sorcery. His novels are used to uncover his biography and his novels turn out to be surrealist-ish, Scott-Fitzgeraldish and, towards the end, Mills-and-Boonish. Loved by many women and admired by many men (but not by Bela Bukor who writes bilious reviews of his books), Beren jealously guards his privacy while behaving in the most newsworthy way. The tale is told by Garrett's son who never quite explains why he finds Beren so fascinating. Perhaps it is because he is also the Great Man's publisher.

And here lies the weakness of the book, which is also the weakness of the genre to which it belongs: the Great Writer never seems to warrant the fuss made of him and his Great Works are inevitably a disappointment. Beren is suitably self-absorbed and narcissistic, but he remains colourless just as his books, summarized and gutted for insights into the Man, seem dull and pretentious. Yet Michel Déon's novel is a sparkling brew. The literary jokes are good and the spoof is meticulously maintained (though Raimu, *d* 1946 could scarcely have been playing Moliere in 1949). Moreover, Déon's fertile imagination is given free rein - half a dozen serviceable plots are squandered with shocking profligacy. He has been admirably abetted by his translator, who has made an exceptionally good job of turning the narrator's dense prose, Beren's style and Déon's sense of teasing fun into splendidly readable English. Beren's *L for London* was (predictably) reviewed as *F for Failure*. M Déon gets S for Sauce and Julian Evans deserves ten out of ten.

The hand-reared squab

Patricia Craig

JOHN BOWEN

Squeak: A Biography of NPA 1978A 203
127pp. Faber. Paperback, £2.95.
0571 131700

There is a place for anthropomorphism in fiction: the nursery. Take away Rupert, Mrs Tiggywinkle, Tiger Tim, the Little Grey Rabbit and so forth, and the field of children's literature is greatly impoverished. The animal tale for adults is another matter. It is hard to attribute human powers of thought and feeling to dogs or rabbits, say, without making an ass of yourself in the process - "There's a great dog up in the sky - he's made all the stars ..." muses, for example, one of the animal characters in Richard Adams's novel *The Plague Dogs*. There is some point, I suppose, in constructing a spaniel's view of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or in envisaging the events of some especially hazardous or intriguing animal life. And it's impossible not to applaud the intentions of an author like Mary Webb, in whose novel *Gone to Earth* the case against fox-hunting gets a very picturesque embodiment.

The author of *Squeak*, though, has no satirical, didactic or decorative purpose. His story, such as it is, concerns the sensations of a pigeon, starting inside one egg and ending on top of another, as the cycle of laying and hatching proceeds. *Squeak*, in due course, at the beginning of the narrative, emerges from her egg shell, eats and excretes. These and other unenthralling events are set out in full. *Squeak's* mother, a Chinese Owl, meets her end in a Kensington square; the baby bird is subse-

quently reared by hand and as a consequence comes to display an unnatural affection for her owners, a couple coyly referred to as "the tenants" throughout. The tenants keep a colony of pigeons in Warwickshire to which *Squeak*, not a show bird, is added. What do we find in the way of incident? An unidentified illness hits the pigeon loft, giving rise to such observations as the following: "Infectious *coriza* is treated with antibiotics, paratyphoid by lancing the tumours." Is this, then, a handbook for pigeon keepers? Not according to the blurb which, elaborately tongue-in-cheek, bills *Squeak* as "a sensational love story", laying emphasis on the "casual sex and even incest" which flourish in the pigeon community. The author's own brand of whimsy is less extravagant than that which solicits attention for his book. It extends to the naming of the pigeons, which include "a deplorable black bird with a white collar known as the Reverend", and very little further.

From the book, we learn what action to take if a pigeon shows signs of being off colour ("Barbara's droppings were scrutinized"); its limitations as a pet ("doves are not dogs"); and the correct term for a young bird: squab. When *Squeak's* first egg hatches, the resultant creature is briefly labelled "Squeak's squab", before acquiring the unaffectionate sobriquet "Monster". It is Monster's fate to become the supper of a hawk.

The scope for drama in the life story of a pigeon is somewhat restricted, sudden death and incest notwithstanding. *Squeak* is a good deal less funny than the publishers pretend; it can hardly be considered more entertaining, in fact, than the work called *Keep Your Pigeons Flying* which is cited in the narrative.

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Where are you dying tonight?

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