

JOHN CRAIG

How Far Back Can You Get?

Toronto: Doubleday, 1974. Pp. 225.

John Craig's fiction offers what the Victorians called "a good read." The principal characters are colorful, always moving about and doing exciting things; there is just enough analysis of motivation to make their actions plausible; the plot consists of event piled on sequential event; and the dialogue is crisp, pointed, topical.

Craig's first novel, *The Pro* (Toronto, 1968), is one of the rare Canadian novels about the national sport, hockey. It is also a love story, tracing the star-crossed romance of a professional hockey player, Les Burton, and a television glamor girl, Lori Adams. *Zach* (Toronto, 1972), is a bildungsroman which records the passage from innocence to experience of Zach Kenebec, the last member of an Indian tribe, the Agawas. After leaving his northern Ontario reserve to travel through the United States and western Canada in a vain attempt to find other members of his tribe, Zach attracts a motley collection of loners to him, including an American black drop-out and a young girl rebelling against her Vancouver family's middle-class life-style. As the novel ends, the trio begins a commune near the reserve where Zach was born, with the vague intention of "struggling for truth" together.

Craig has also produced juvenile fiction, including *Wagons West* and *The Long Return*. In 1971 he published two mystery novels, *If You Want To See Your Wife Again . . .* and *In Council Rooms Apart*. Both have Canadian settings, the former in Toronto and around Sudbury, "nickel capital of the world," the latter mainly in Winnipeg, but briefly in the author's home town of Peterborough, in south-western Ontario.

And it is to Peterborough that Craig returns in *How Far Back Can You Get?*, a nostalgic recreation of Canadian small-town life during the depression years of the 1930's. His fictional memoir finds its focus in the farcical and the ludicrous. One story, for example, concerns a fire chief with a penchant for chopping down the front door of every building he is called to, until one day he takes his axe to the door of a home just before finding out that the owner has rung in an alarm

because her pet cat is caught in a tree. Another narrative recounts the predicament of a newspaper editor who is asked to write campaign speeches for two opposing politicians. Yet another tells of a hated police constable who triumphantly discovers an illegal card game yet is frustrated because the dice he must have to press charges have been cunningly dumped into a chocolate milkshake by one of the players.

In the Foreword Craig tells us that "the relationship between the place I've written about here and my home town is approximately the same as that between Stephen Leacock's Mariposa and the real life Orillia, Ontario in his *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*" (p. xii). But this collection is no *Sunshine Sketches*, partly because the small town stories he relates are too highly localized. In other words, the rose-colored recollections of hard times make pleasant enough reading, the incidents are often entertaining and the quirks of his characters amusing, but they remain idiosyncratic and atypical, marked by their failure to strike a common responsive chord in those who have not experienced the particular situations he describes. Middle-aged readers who share Craig's background may find *How Far Back Can You Get?* worth their time; others are advised to leave it on the shelf.

Stan Atherton

MAX VON DER GRÜN

Stellenweise Glatteis

Cologne: Luchterhand, 1973. Pp. 326.

In a study entitled "The Worker in Postwar Germany as Portrayed in the Novels of Max von der Grün" Lois Campioni Hagen states that "Max von der Grün's profound understanding of human nature and his ability to combine that understanding with astute observation on the world around him have enabled him to write novels that are both interesting and enlightening, and have