

two exceptions: Volker Braun's "Die Bretter," 32 pp., and Wolfgang Kohlhaase's "Inge, April und Mai," 33 pp.) are the principal features these stories have in common. The collection includes works by older, well-established writers as well as by younger, relatively unknown authors. It contains stories that adhere to the rigid doctrine of socialist realism, as well as works which experiment with modernistic styles and untraditional themes.

The story "Siebzehn Brote" (Seventeen Loaves of Bread), 1953, by Friedrich Wolf (1888-1953) is a good example of the first type. In seven pages the author narrates an episode which allegedly took place on the Russian front in 1943. The narrator, a German physician who fights with the Russians against "Hitler's army," appeals to his Russian superior to save the lives of forty German prisoners of war who suffer from hunger and cold. Instead of granting him his request, the Russian officer suggests that he approach the Russian soldiers directly hoping that they might agree to donate a part of their very limited daily ration and thus save the lives of the prisoners. Because this day, January 21, coincides with the anniversary of Lenin's death, the German physician reminds the Russian soldiers of Lenin's humanistic ideals and implores them to follow the example of this great leader and help their defeated enemy. After some deliberations, the Russian soldiers donate seventeen loaves of bread to save the lives of their German prisoners. The narrator ends his story by voicing doubts as to whether his countrymen have appreciated this generous deed or not.

This typical example of the tendentious white-and-white projection of communist ideology is what shifts this and similar stories from the realm of belle-lettres into pure propaganda. This naive and one-sided attitude of East-German writers during the late forties and early fifties is what made a number of Western critics and scholars call East-German literature dictated, boring, and philistine. It is a blessing, no doubt, that writers of the younger generation have freed themselves from the rigid literary doctrine of socialist realism, abandoned the unrealistically optimistic Weltanschauung of the forties and fifties, and approached individualistic themes and unconventional forms. It is very gratifying to find a considerable number of these modernistic

experiments among the collection. The best example may be Gunter Kunert's "Ich und ich" (I and I), which was written in 1973.

Although he deals with a traditional motif, namely the Doppelgänger, the author has succeeded in giving his story contemporaneity and human relevance. In five pages the author depicts the situation of a man faced not only by one, but by many Doppelgängers. Because his ghostly counterparts multiply at an alarming rate, the protagonist finds himself unable to start a meaningful conversation with anyone of them since not only do they resemble him, but they also think and act exactly as he does. Later on he discovers that this frightening uniformity is the cause of the disinterest and apathy that surrounds him.

There is no doubt that this collection includes some very challenging and rewarding stories. Perhaps one day someone will drop the tendentious and ingenuous stories of the forties and fifties, replacing them with unorthodox and experimental ones. A collection of this kind would be of great literary value.

S. Elkhadem

KENT THOMPSON

Across From the Floral Park

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974.
Pp. 151. \$7.95.

It is tempting to call this pleasant, charming, seemingly inconsequential, and certainly unsettling novel a parable, for it is that much removed from conventional fiction without exceeding any bounds of continuity and character. Yet it is undefinably disturbing; some indeterminate suggestions and ideas dwell in its conservatory and linger in its Park. As with his first novel, *The Tenants Were Corrie and Tennie*, Thompson's framework is a house, like the story itself somewhat of a maze. Its new purchaser, Simon, finds that it comes not entirely freehold but with Mrs. Fish, wife of the former owner, Fred (now, possibly, a ghost), and Joan, formerly in ambiguous "service" to Fred. Simon marries Joan, and the couple experiences

ordinary and bizarre suburban life: the dark threat of Joan's lover, Harry; his successor, Julien, a Captain of police; Joan's high-brow salons; a dog, Mischief; a child, Harald; extortion, quashed by the director of the "Fathers Club"; Simon's performance with an amateur theatrical group, the Orsino Players, and later political campaigning on a Christian platform (Simon Peter).

In an article on his stories and the short story in general (in *The Narrative Voice*, ed. John Metcalf [Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972]), Thompson has argued that "by making us 'see the point' the author has turned his story into an intellectual exercise. And worse, the moment we 'see the point' the characters themselves are erased from our consciousness" (p. 235). *Across From the Floral Park* itself seems pointless; it is like a review of Simon's appropriate role as a Dictator in the drama, *Revenge*: he "injected a terrible humanity into what might have been a hollow allegorical figure" (p. 127). This is one of Thompson's further points: we tend to read stories as parables rather than seeing their business of invoking humanity. He does not want "the intellectual progress toward epiphany"; he wants to affect the reader's emotional awareness, to emphasize "the immediate *experiencing* of the character" (Metcalf, p. 236). This is perhaps why his novel tends to the mode of open form, consistent with the flux of experience, a stream of happening and perception that isn't ended (see Alan Friedman, *The Turn of the Novel*, Oxford University Press, 1966). Such is the force of the epigraph from Jonathan Seeg: "There is no bottom to Truth. No bottom at all. To any of them." Or, as Simon says, "There are no standards anymore, no guidelines to indicate how one ought to behave in a given situation. . . . Therefore the responsibility inevitably falls upon the individual" (p. 21). Perhaps, also, this is why *Across From the Floral Park* is "inevitably" a comic novel, with many throwaway characters and encounters.

Simon's subject is his emotional life and its rationalization. As narrator he is curiously attractive: he has something of Nabokov's self-indulgent personae, and something of the cuteness and deliberate naiveté of Vonnegut's protagonists. He is predominantly infantile, "protected by a layer of innocence thick as fat" (p. 105); obsessed by Joan's elegance, he believes that "to be civilized is the most important

thing" (p. 50). He is suspicious to a paranoid degree, has a strong vein of romantic and Victorian cliché, and is Orsino, the lovesick self-dramatizer: Simon preciously defines himself as a character actor, and is a caged bear like those in the Park's zoo. He wants to own everything in his self-centered, house-centered world; he is "a present-tense man" (p. 47); he delights in inverting metaphorical expressions to the literal, "They are of a lower class; therefore they are shorter" (p. 40). He frequently addresses the reader familiarly, inviting approval of actions taken and aesthetic judgement of what Simon *knows* is a "story." He is ingenuous (Simple Simon) and dead to certain ranges of human emotional response; he excludes the outside world, preferring the womb-like conservatory where newspapers give him all of life (Simon pure). He is frightened by living, as shown in things observed which the reader is virtually led to identify as symbolic images.

The novel's climax is a reversal. After Harald's birth, Simon forces the house bound, increasingly introverted Joan out into the Park, with its animals; he subsequently is locked out by her. No longer caged, an outcast at life's feast, Simon is totally dispossessed, and can only wistfully note a honeymoon couple dancing in the Park's gathering darkness. *Across From the Floral Park* ends in firm emotional awareness—of the reader, of Simon, who is presumably released from preoccupation with the past into a world of the heart, the real present tense. The book is quirky, individualistic, amusing, pathetic, and involving; it does not encourage objective distancing but rather "immediate experiencing," and remains, above all, quite remarkably novel.

Louis K. MacKendrick

PHILIP ROTH

My Life as a Man

New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1974.

Pp. 330. No price given.

If there is any truth at all to the widely voiced suspicion that *My Life as a Man* is autobiographical, then we should all breathe a collective sigh of relief over not having been born Philip Roth. In Maureen