

it were not for the two sentences "The chipped lettering on the door reads 'Salvation Army,'" and "I laughed, hugging her close. 'You know,' I replied, 'I was just wondering the same myself!'" (pp. 62, 64)—which make the situation depicted too conspicuous and thus less poetic—this six-page story would have been an excellent one.

Pamela Bush's "Bedtime Story" is a harmless little tale about witches, bad spirits and superstition; it has nothing to offer, neither intrinsically nor extrinsically.

Beth Powning's "Limbo" is the most conventional of the five stories. The style, setting, and central motif of this typical kitsch-story make it ideal for *feuilletons* and Saturday Family Supplements. Should Ms. Powning once decide to write a novel, she would have no problem finding a publisher.

S. Elkhadem

## JACK HODGINS

### *Spit Delaney's Island*

Toronto. Macmillan, 1976. Pp. 199.

The blurb on the dustjacket of this book is unfortunate. Canada's three leading women novelists, Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, and Margaret Atwood dutifully trot out superlatives to convince us that we have something unusual before us. Assurance is given that Hodgins has generated considerable excitement in the literary community. The idea that outside a dozen friends the author might have there is such a community in Canada and that it can get excited by anything is news to me. We are told also that Vancouver Island, the locale of the stories Hodgins writes, has universal relevance. There is an inevitable comparison made with Faulkner's *South*. One grows tired of the patronizing attitude of Toronto publishers toward Canada's regional literature, of their vehement assertions that there are people way out on Vancouver Island and they really do matter. Hodgins needs none of this shrill shouting from the barricades to protect his turf. His presentation of life on the island is vivid, detailed, and convincing. In the life of

Spit Delaney, the main character of the opening and closing stories of the collection, we see what happens when a man breaks the routine of a lifetime. The stories assert again and again how much we are creatures of habit, how comforting our habits are, how easily habits foster illusions, and how many perils we encounter when we abandon our habits.

Hodgins is concerned with how people gradually drift apart or how they can suddenly come together, with the disruption caused by the decisive intervention of one life in another's. He is good at showing how people who live together for years as neighbors, or man and wife can remain essentially strangers because they are so obsessed with their own viewpoint that they cannot appreciate anyone else's. His characters are not glib self-analysts. Once a habitual pattern of life is broken they are often bewildered at being unable to explain exactly what is happening to them. He does not overexplain his stories. He allows his characters to retain some mystery in their stubborn persistence. By manipulating point of view he, like Alice Munro, draws the reader into a puzzle. He does not have her confident control, but he does not tease the reader either by implying that there is more mystery than one has any grounds for believing in, as Munro occasionally does.

"Separating" the leadoff story does not seem wholly successful to me. Spit Delaney has devoted all his love and care to operating a steam engine at a paper mill. When the engine is taken away from him, his life without that keystone collapses. Because Hodgins insists on observing Spit's wife and children from outside they become caricatures. That is his point, of course, that is how they appear to Delaney. But this family which is no longer real to Spit becomes incredible to the reader. Hodgins is good, however, at showing how, when a man becomes untracked, he is overwhelmed by fundamental questions that he has had no training in coping with. In the last story, which gives its title to the collection, we pursue Delaney's confusion after the breakdown of his marriage. He knows that an exotic, female poet who barges into his life and represents everything he hates has something to teach him. For a moment their lives touch and overlap. With great patience Hodgins sets out the defensive, grudging, wryly Self-deprecating quality of Spit's mind. He wants to tear away the coils of resentment

he has wrapped round himself in his reclusive withdrawal so that he can achieve freedom, but he will never do so.

Hodgins is preoccupied a good deal with the way people withdraw from life, the pain they suffer in the path to which they have condemned themselves. In "After the Season" Hallie Crane hibernates in the winter after the tourists have gone, at a remote camp with a man called Morgan. He enjoys the seasonal routine of a mating dance followed by sessions in which they behave like rutting sheep. Only when a schoolteacher unexpectedly intrudes on their seclusion does she have to face what she has settled for. The ending in which the schoolteacher drowns reverberates in the mind. We are led to the edge of a complex awareness of how a chance encounter can shake up lives in ways that the characters themselves dare not fully understand. Again and again Hodgins shows us people crying out for human contact and yet fearful of making it. "The Trench Dwellers" is a marvellous study of the effects an extended family clan has on the individual. In this story Gerry Mack finds the relentless attentions of his kin so overwhelming that he flies off into total isolation. All those alienated urbanites who have sentimental views about those wonderful, warm, rooted rural families which give everyone a sense of belonging should scrutinize this story carefully.

"Three Women," a tale in the Gothic vein, is the best story in the collection. Hodgins has a wicked ability to pinpoint the pompous pretensions of the self-righteous rural snob. In Mrs. Wright we have a devastating picture of one woman's conviction of her superiority in all things and of the contemptible vulgarity and banality of all those among whom she is unfortunate enough to live. The concept of "otherness" is totally beyond her. When confronted with other styles of life she assumes people are not bright enough to live the right way—*her* way. By presenting the story through three narrators Hodgins can show us how much we are locked out of each other's lives, how in guarding secrets we can destroy ourselves and others. Like Spit Delaney we each have our own island. We may have fantasies of going up into the mountains or dreams of plunging down into the seas, but what we are always both yearning for and fearing are the bruises and the caresses of human contact.

The whole book seems to work variations on John Donne's theme of "No man is

an island." We meet people who, even though they live together are essentially alone, there are others who, in their isolation still strive in their minds to live with others. Some characters who cannot live alone resent those who try to do so, yet others fear both the problems of living with others and the questions they will have to face if they live alone. Vancouver Islanders and Mainlanders stare at each other across the gulf. Hodgins incorporates this sense of separation into the texture of everyday life. The stories are not all equally convincing but in each one he strives to give us a poignant sense of the struggles involved when people succeed or fail in bridging the gulfs that divide them.

Anthony Brennan

## NKEM NWANKWO

*My Mercedes is Bigger than Yours*  
London: Heinemann, 1975. Pp. 171.

This is Mr. Nwankwo's second novel to appear in this distinguished series. It relates how a young Nigerian wizz-kid returns to his native village after an absence of fifteen years, the proud possessor of a gold-colored Jaguar car which brings him immediate and easy success with the local girls. Unfortunately after a particularly active night in which at least three women succumb in turn to his charms on the back seat of the car he crashes it down a ravine. He borrows—or more accurately embezzles—money to hire a crane to pull it out, only to find it a heap of wreckage since it has been "cannibalized." Onuma is broken with grief and only emerges from his depression to become an electoral agent. Now deeply compromised and corrupted, he is beaten up by the thugs supporting one of the candidates, a local man of substance whom he has (in so far as there can be any honor among thieves) double-crossed by working for his political rival. At the eleventh hour Onuma repents, sees the error of his ways, and determines to "re-order his priorities" and "find a different kind of idyll to love and care for" (p. 169).

This is no Victorian morality story, however. Mr. Nwankwo who, the biographical note tells us, is studying for his PhD