

she had merely succumbed to the temptation of gratifying an adolescent wanderlust, he decides to intercede on her behalf by going to Kaunas and pleading her cause. In a long dream sequence (revealed as such only at the end of the novel) he and Sigita run away together, fly to the Crimea, and settle in a mountain cottage perched so high that no one can disturb them. Their idyllic existence comes to an abrupt end, however, when the police become suspicious and make the arrest. But when Požera wakes up from his beautiful dream, he finds that he has lost all interest in the girl's plight. Eager to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with the authorities, he gets off the train in Vilnius and returns to his accustomed life of private compromise and public pretense.

The novel is admirably structured. The main narrative line is developed almost exclusively in train stations and on the Vilnius-bound train itself. Both the flashbacks detailing the martyrdom of Lithuania and Požera's dream of escape are occasioned by people he meets on the train. This unity of place (and of time) provides a solid framework for the mélange of reminiscences and associations and a poignant symbolic setting for the poet's interior drama.

The translation generally flows smoothly, though a few Russian expressions have been rendered too literally. "Promised her mountains of gold" (p. 35) should be "Promised her the moon" or "Promised her everything." "Don't try to crawl into my soul" (p. 108) would perhaps sound more natural if translated as "Don't try to get on my good side." There are, moreover, a number of curious mistakes in the spelling of Lithuanian proper nouns. Thus, *Mažoji Litueva* (p. 36) should be *Mažoji Lietuva*. And the port mentioned on p. 87 is not *Kleipede* but *Klaipėda*.

Aesthetically, *Truth is for Strangers* is an auspicious beginning for a new novelist. From a historical point of view, it is bound to be a revelation to the Western reader. As a sociological document it is a very disturbing work, for, although it expresses the justifiable discontent of many Soviet citizens, it also reflects all too vividly their even greater cynicism. Little hope is offered for substantial change in Soviet life. Algirdas gains a degree of self-respect only on the inaccessible mountain top of his dream. At the end of the novel, as he returns to his every-day life in Vilnius, he

carries his luggage down the path leading into town and notices that the slope is becoming "steeper and easier" (p. 209). The ideal may be on the mountain, but reality is down the hill. One is reminded of the Sibil's words in the *Aeneid*: ". . . facilis descensus Averno; noctes atque dies patet atri ianua Diis; sed revocare gradum superasque evadere ad auras, hoc opus, hic labor est . . ."

David Matual

SHARON RIIS

The True Story of Ida Johnson

Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976. Pp. 111.

This thin volume is written in the modish experimental manner or irregularly shaped chapters and much blank space. If the novel is interesting in form, it is contrived and disappointing in content. Three separate narratives are used to tell the life story of the protagonist, Ida Johnson, and the divergent tale of her childhood friend, Lucy George, and to present multiple versions of the significance of their lives. Despite these innovative attempts the novel remains an exercise in form lacking in characterization and compelling drama.

The novel begins with a single line on a blank page which points to the irony of the title: "The Truth of the matter is: there is none" (p. 6). On the opposite page is a dialogue written after the manner of Nathalie Sarraute with no external identification of speakers or orientating narrative. On the third page a conventional narrative begins with normal paragraphing and punctuation. This omniscient narrative frames the novel and provides intermittent reminders of the truckstop scene of Ida's telling of her life story and the presence of her lone listener, Luke,

The situation of Ida's narration itself is artificial. A young male hitchhiker chooses to remain in a truckstop and asks a waitress there, Ida, to tell him her life story. In spite of the interludes of interior monologue of the two characters which indicate a mutual subconscious recognition of

Luke's true identity as Lucy George, Ida and Luke strike their bargain of her story for twenty dollars and breakfast with no other basis than a perfunctory flirtation and Luke's statement, "I need to talk to someone" (p. 23). Motivation is slight and transition is unsubtle.

Ida begins her story: "It's my first memory this. I must've been four. We were all up fishing my Dad and brother mostly and Mom with the lunch and her embroidery" (p. 25). Ida gives a simple chronological account of the events of her life that she deems important. She recounts a childhood group killing of a lamb, times of make-believe with Lucy (Indian girl and friend), Ida's initiation into sex and her subsequent marriage, her murder of her husband and two children, and the following years of meager work and casual prostitution until her return home to Longview, Alberta, and the truckstop. Ida narrates in a loose conversational style, blending her own idiom with the vernacular of the people she is describing. Sentences are joined in run-on structure with omissions of punctuation and capitalization. Her narration of each episode is skeletal. Essentials are sketched in, critical moments dramatized briefly and Ida's few reflections related matter-of-factly or indifferently. When asked by Luke how she felt after killing her family, Ida answered, "Anything could happen that's how I felt. Anything. And hell I wasn't scared or anything I just thought I'm going to Calgary and anything can happen" (p. 61).

Ida bears no guilt or remorse, she forms only temporary relationships, has no interests and anticipates little from past or future. She is a pat and uninteresting anti-heroine. And yet in the novel she is apotheosized and called the unwitting "salvation" of Lucy George. The author has attempted through the multiple narratives to enlarge the significance of Ida Johnson. Ida's first-person narrative, though dominant in the novel, is limited by her incapacity for introspection and her lack of interest in anything more than a superficial understanding of herself. The fragmented third-person narrative of Lucy's life becomes a commentary on Ida's "resilience," her power to "rise and fall and, always, to rise again" (p. 72). But the omniscient narrative which frames and unites the novel is the authoritative voice, and it easily could serve as the author's own notation on the novel. In

brief passages between the narratives of Ida and Lucy the omniscient narrator analyzes the possible meaning of both characters. Some of these passages are abstractions, obliquely related to the characters: "Imagery left to cramp inside the mind self-destructs" (p. 56). Other passages interpret directly: "She [Lucy] thinks immediately of Ida as she often does in moments of despair but is as yet unable to register the fact that she is also thinking of her salvation" (p. 88).

Ultimately, at the end of the novel when Luke clearly is revealed as Lucy and Ida takes Lucy home to her apartment (first visitor ever admitted), the omniscient narrator attempts to transform these major characters and their relationship to each other. Lucy's early rejection of conventional white society and their Christian god and her self-imposed years of exile as a male impersonator are described as a pilgrimage. "Lucy was an old soul. She'd been born out of the grave with her sense of past intact and an immortal's disregard for the particulars of time and place" (p. 108). Ida is defined by her solitary room as seen finally through the eyes of Lucy: "The room is surreal. It gives a startling sense of order and incredible beauty. Everything fits but Ida and yet it has come from her. . . . Its very perfection provides the Final Solution. None but the holy could live in a room like this; none but the whole" (p. 107). This climactic transformation is unprepared for. The three narratives have suggested multiple levels of truth, but the novel itself fails. The extra dimensions of consciousness and truth are not imaginatively integrated as are, for example, the obsessive overlays of time and place, illusion and reality of Sheila Watson's *The Double Hook*. Sharon Riis has attempted an avant-garde novel of complex human relationships. *The True Story of Ida Johnson* is more nearly a beginning performance in experimental fiction.

Mary Lund