

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 50

YEARBOOK 1987

Volume 50

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Yearbook 1987

The Year in Fiction, Poetry, Drama,
and World Literature and the Year's
New Authors, Prizewinners, Obituaries,
and Works of Literary Biography



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Preface

Every year, an overwhelming number of new publications and significant literary events confront the reader interested in contemporary literature. Who are the year's notable new authors? What dramas have been introduced on the New York stage? Who won the literary world's most prestigious awards? Which authors have been the subjects of significant new literary biographies, and what approach did the biographer take—factual, interpretive, psychological, critical? Finally, who among our best-known contemporary writers died during the year, and what is the reaction of the literary world?

To answer such questions and assist students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers in keeping abreast of current literary activities and trends, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook* is being published as part of the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series.

Standard *CLC* volumes provide readers with a comprehensive view of modern literature by presenting excerpted criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers who are now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Works covered in regular *CLC* volumes are those that have generated significant critical commentary within recent years, with a strong emphasis on works by established authors who frequently appear on the syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *Yearbook* focuses in depth on a given year's literary activity and highlights a larger number of currently noteworthy authors and books than is possible in standard *CLC* volumes. The *Yearbook* provides critical overviews of the past year's works in various genres, supplies up-to-date critical commentary on new authors and prizewinning writers whose publications have made recent news, and notes the deaths of major contemporary literary figures. In addition, the *Yearbook* expands the scope of regular *CLC* volumes by presenting excerpted criticism on the works of literary biographers, whose growing importance in the literary world warrants increased attention. The *Yearbook* is, in short, a valuable supplement to the regular *CLC* volumes in its comprehensive treatment of the year's activity in literature. Since the majority of the authors covered in the *Yearbook* and regular *CLC* volumes are living writers who continue to publish, an author frequently appears more than once in the series. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Scope of the Work

CLC Yearbook 1987 includes excerpted criticism on over 50 authors and provides comprehensive coverage of the year's significant literary events. As with the regular volumes of *CLC*, the authors covered include those who are now living or who died after December 31, 1959. In addition, the *Yearbook* also includes essays commissioned exclusively for this publication. The *Yearbook* is divided into five sections: "The Year in Review," "New Authors," "Prizewinners," "Obituaries," and "Literary Biography."

The Year in Review—This section includes specially commissioned essays by prominent literary figures who survey the year's new works in their respective fields. In *CLC Yearbook 1987* we have the advantage of viewing "The Year in Fiction" from the perspective of Robert Wilson, book critic for *USA Today*. Wilson is a member of the National Book Critics Circle and serves on NBCC's Board of Directors. "The Year in Poetry" is presented by Sidney Burris, who is a poet, critic, and assistant professor of English at the University of Arkansas. Burris's poetry has appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Missouri Review*, and *New Virginia Review*, and both a collection of his poems and a critical study of Irish poet Seamus Heaney are in press. "The Year in Drama" is reviewed by Robert Cohen, author of numerous books on the theater, including *Giraudoux: Three Faces of Destiny* (1969), *Creative Play Direction* (1974), and *Theatre* (1982). Cohen is also chair of the drama department at the University of California, Irvine. Finally, "The Year in World Literature" is discussed by William Riggan, who as associate editor of the quarterly *World Literature Today* is in a unique position to comment on important international literature; Riggan specializes in Third World, Slavic, and Anglo-American literatures. These annual survey essays on fiction, poetry, drama, and world literature are a special feature of the *Yearbook*, and provide a focus that is outside the scope of our regular *CLC* volumes.

New Authors—*CLC Yearbook 1987* introduces fifteen writers whose first book, or first book in English-language translation, was published during 1987. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several sources and garnered significant criticism. Although the regular *CLC* volumes often cover new writers, the *Yearbook* provides more timely and more extensive coverage of authors just coming into prominence. This expanded coverage includes writers of poetry, short stories, and novels. *CLC Yearbook 1987*, for example, presents short story writer David Michael Kaplan and the novelists Valerie Sayers, whose novel *Due East* offers a touching father-daughter portrait, and Bruce Duffy, whose novel *The World as I Found It* explores the lives of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, and G. E. Moore.

Prizewinners—This section of *Yearbook* begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 1987, citing the award, its recipient, and the title of the prize-winning work. *CLC Yearbook 1987* then highlights fifteen major prizewinners who will be featured in the *Yearbook*. A “Prize Commentary” follows, discussing each award featured in the *Yearbook* and indicating the year the award was established, the reason it was established, the awarding body, how the winner is chosen, and the nature of the prize (money, trophy, etc.). After the “Prize Commentary,” entries on individual award winners are presented. Recipients of established literary honors, such as the Pulitzer Prize, are included as well as authors who have won less established but increasingly important prizes, such as the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the only award given to writers by writers. In addition to the winners of major American awards, recipients of several outstanding international prizes are also covered. Thus we include England’s distinguished Booker-McConnell Prize, awarded to Penelope Lively, and Canada’s Governor General’s Literary Awards, presented to Alice Munro for fiction, Sharon Pollock for drama, and Al Purdy for poetry. We have, of course, also featured the literary world’s most prestigious award, the Nobel Prize in literature, bestowed on Russian-born American poet Joseph Brodsky.

Obituaries—This section begins with a necrology of *CLC* authors. Following the necrology, individual author entries are included for the more prominent writers whose influence on contemporary literature is reflected in the obituaries, reminiscences, tributes, or retrospective essays included in their entries. *CLC Yearbook 1987*, for example, presents entries on Jean Anouilh, James Baldwin, Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Laurence, and Primo Levi, among others.

Literary Biography—Since literary biographies are outside the scope of works covered in regular *CLC* volumes, the *Yearbook* provides an opportunity to offer comprehensive commentary on these prominent and popular works. This part of the *Yearbook*, then, is devoted to criticism on literary biographies of authors who are within the *CLC* time period. We do not, therefore, include biographies of authors of the early twentieth century or of previous centuries. Besides giving a personal perspective on the authors who are the subjects of the literary biographies, this section also introduces readers to today’s biographers and their methods, styles, and approaches to the genre. *CLC Yearbook 1987* discusses six literary biographies, including the first full-length biography of the colorful Rebecca West, by Victoria Glendinning, and *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, by Linda Wagner-Martin, which was limited by the refusal of the Hughes estate (Plath was married to Ted Hughes) to grant permission to quote the poet’s work.

Format of the Book

With the exception of the essays in “The Year in Review” section, which are written specifically for this publication, the *Yearbook* is comprised of excerpted criticism. There are approximately 400 individual excerpts in *CLC Yearbook 1987* drawn from hundreds of literary reviews, general magazines, distinguished newspapers, and scholarly journals. The excerpts included reflect the attention the authors and their works have received by critics writing in English and by critics from other nations whose work has been translated; critical books and articles not translated into English have been excluded.

Since the *Yearbook* is designed to complement other *CLC* volumes, *Yearbook* entries generally follow the same format with some variations and additional features. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following elements:

- The **author heading**, which is included in entries in the “New Authors,” “Prizewinners,” and “Obituaries” sections, cites the author’s full name. The portion of the name outside the parentheses denotes the form under which the author has most commonly published. If an author has written consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the real name given on the first line of the author entry. Also located at the beginning of the author entry are any important name variations under which an author has written. For new authors and obituaries, the author’s name is followed by the birth date and, in the case of

an obituary, the death date. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by question marks. For prizewinners, the author's name is followed by the title of the prizewinning work and the award received.

- The **book heading**, which is included in entries in the "Literary Biography" section, cites the complete title of the book followed by the biographer's name.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism in entries in the "New Authors" and "Prizewinners" sections.
- **Cross-references** have been included in all sections, except "The Year in Review," to direct the reader to other useful sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches on more than 90,000 authors; *Children's Literature Review*, which presents excerpted criticism on the works of authors of children's books; *Something about the Author*, which contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches on writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Contemporary Issues Criticism*, which presents excerpted commentary on the nonfiction works of authors who influence contemporary thought; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations of authors important to literary history; *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, which offers autobiographical essays by prominent writers; and *Something about the Author Autobiographical Series*, which presents autobiographical essays by authors of interest to young readers. Previous volumes of *CLC* in which the author has been featured are also listed. Cross-references are provided for both the authors and subjects of literary biographies. In *CLC Yearbook 1987*, for example, the entry on Victoria Glendinning's *Rebecca West: A Life* cites additional sources of information on both Glendinning and West.
- A list of **principal works**, including the author's first and last published work and other important works, is provided in entries in the "Obituaries" section in order to reflect the author's entire literary career. The list is chronological by date of first book publication and identifies the genre of each work. In the case of foreign authors where there are both foreign language publications and English translations, the title and date of the first English-language edition are given in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- A **portrait** of the author is included, when available, in entries in the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "Obituaries" sections.
- An **excerpt** from the author's work is included, when available, in entries in the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "Literary Biography" sections, in order to provide the reader with a sampling of the author's thematic approach and style.
- The **excerpted criticism**, included in all entries except those in "The Year in Review" section, represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's writing in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed.
- Selected critical excerpts are prefaced by **explanatory notes** that give important information regarding critics and their work and also provide a summary of the criticism.
- A complete **bibliographical citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, follows each excerpt.

Other Features

- A list of **Authors Forthcoming in CLC** previews the authors to be researched for future volumes.
- An **Appendix** lists the sources from which material in the volume has been reprinted. Many other sources have also been consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Index to Authors** lists all the authors who have appeared in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (including authors who are the subject of works of literary biography covered in the *Yearbook*); *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from*

1400-1800, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* along with cross-references to other Gale series: *Short Story Criticism*, *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Contemporary Authors Bibliographical Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, *Something about the Author Autobiography Series*, and *Yesterday's Authors of Books for Children*. Users will welcome this cumulated author index as a useful tool for locating an author within the various series. The index, which lists birth and death dates when available, will be particularly valuable for those authors who are identified with a certain period but whose death date causes them to be placed in another, or for those authors whose careers span two periods. For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald is found in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, yet a writer often associated with him, Ernest Hemingway, is found in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*.

- A **Cumulative Nationality Index** alphabetically lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by numbers corresponding to the volumes in which they appear.
- A **Title Index** alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the current volume of *CLC*. Titles are followed by the corresponding page numbers where they may be located. In cases where the same title is used by different authors, the authors' surnames are given in parentheses after the title; for example, *Collected Poems* (Berryman) and *Collected Poems* (Eliot). For foreign titles, a cross-reference is given to the translated English title. Titles of novels, novellas, dramas, films, record albums, and poetry, short story, essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks; when published separately (e.g., T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*), the title will also be printed in italics.
- In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale has also produced a special paperbound edition of the *CLC* title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers and will be published with the first volume of *CLC* issued in each calendar year. Additional copies of the index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index: it saves shelf space, is easily disposable upon receipt of the following year's cumulation, and is more portable and thus easier to use than was previously possible.

Acknowledgments

No work of this scope can be accomplished without the cooperation of many people. The editors especially wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism and photographs included in this volume, the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and Anthony Bogucki for assistance with copyright research. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Library, the University of Michigan Library, and the Wayne State University Library for making their resources available to us.

Suggestions Are Welcome

The editors welcome the comments and suggestions of readers to expand the coverage and enhance the usefulness of the series.

Authors Forthcoming in *CLC*

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volumes 51 and 52 will feature criticism on a number of authors not previously covered in this series as well as excerpted reviews of newer works by authors included in earlier volumes.

To Be Included in Volume 51

Chinua Achebe (Nigerian novelist, short story writer, poet, and essayist)—One of Africa's most important contemporary writers, Achebe chronicles the cultural and psychological effects of European colonization on the Ibo, a native Nigerian tribe. His entry will include reviews of his recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Anita Brookner (English novelist, nonfiction writer, and critic)—Best known as the author of *Hotel du Lac*, for which she received the Booker McConnell Prize for fiction, Brookner writes novels that focus upon well-educated, affluent women whose lives are often disrupted by unfaithful husbands and lovers. Recent works to be covered in her entry include *Family and Friends* and *The Misalliance*.

Noël Coward (English dramatist, lyricist, novelist, short story writer, scriptwriter, and autobiographer)—A prolific and versatile playwright, Coward is best remembered for whimsical social comedies that display his talent for creating imaginative plots and witty, acerbic dialogue. Recent revivals of such popular Coward plays as *Private Lives*, *Blithe Spirit*, and *Design for Living* have renewed interest in his work.

Kenneth Fearing (American poet, novelist, and editor)—Best known for the thriller novel *The Big Clock*, from which the recent film *No Way Out* was adapted, Fearing also distinguished himself during the Depression era as a poet whose verse attacked the dehumanizing effects of a capitalistic industrialized society.

Nadine Gordimer (South African novelist, short story writer, critic, and editor)—Gordimer is respected for examining the effects of the South African apartheid system on both ruling whites and oppressed blacks. Criticism in Gordimer's entry will focus upon her recent novel, *A Sport of Nature*.

Katherine Govier (Canadian novelist, short story writer, and journalist)—In her fiction, Govier often depicts female characters who must confront elements of their past in order to live contentedly in the present. Govier's interest in history is reflected in her recent novel, *Between Man*, which intertwines the stories of a contemporary history professor and an Indian woman who died mysteriously in the 1880s.

Patrick Hamilton (English dramatist, novelist, and scriptwriter)—Best known for his psychological plays *Rope* and *Angel Street*, Hamilton also wrote several novels during the 1930s and 1940s set in and around English pubs that portray the disordered lives of criminals, outcasts, and misfits.

Lisel Mueller (German-born American poet and critic)—Using such traditional techniques as metaphor, simile, and personification, Mueller concentrates on discovering the extraordinary aspects of ordinary objects and events. Collections of verse to be covered in her entry include *The Private Life* and *Second Language*.

Tom Wolfe (American essayist, journalist, editor, critic, and novelist)—Regarded as one of the most original stylists in contemporary literature, Wolfe figured prominently in the development of New Journalism, a form of expository writing that blends reporting with such techniques of fiction as stream of consciousness, extended dialogue, shifting points of view, and detailed scenarios. This entry will focus upon Wolfe's recent first novel, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko (Russian poet and novelist)—Among the most outspoken and controversial poets to emerge in the Soviet Union since the death of Stalin, Yevtushenko has written two recent novels, *Wild Berries*, and *Ardabiola*, in which he expands on the personal themes of his poetry.

To Be Included in Volume 52

Peter Ackroyd (English novelist, biographer, and critic)—An acclaimed biographer of such esteemed writers as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Ackroyd has also elicited significant praise for his novels focusing upon prominent literary figures. Among the works to be covered in his entry are *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Hawks-moor*, and *Chatterton*.

Conrad Aiken (American poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, dramatist, memoirist, and autobiographer)—A major figure in twentieth-century American literature who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 1930, Aiken employed formal stylistic techniques and an often somber tone in his verse to examine themes related to such topics as spirituality, philosophy, psychology, and science.

Woody Allen (American dramatist, short story writer, scriptwriter, and director)—Best known for his work as a comedian, actor, and filmmaker, Allen is also a noted author of fiction and drama. Criticism in his entry will focus upon the short story collections *Getting Even*, *Without Feathers*, and *Side Effects* and such plays as *Don't Drink the Water* and *Play It Again, Sam*.

Gregory Benford (American novelist and short story writer)—Benford has written several works of speculative science fiction in which he contrasts the negative and positive aspects of such phenomena as alien contact and technological advancement.

Maryse Conde (Guadeloupean-born French novelist, short story writer, and dramatist)—Conde's novels often portray the lives of contemporary Caribbean and African women. Included in her entry will be criticism of *Moi*, *Tituba, sorcière*, *Noire de Salem*, a fictionalized biography of Tituba, a Barbadian slave who was tried for witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts.

William Faulkner (American novelist, short story writer, poet, and scriptwriter)—A seminal figure in modern literature, Faulkner was best known for novels and short stories set in his fictional locale of Yoknapatawpha County. Criticism in this volume will focus upon *Absalom, Absalom!*, one of Faulkner's most frequently analyzed works.

Christopher Hope (South African novelist, poet, short story writer, and dramatist)—In his novels *A Separate Development* and *Kruger's Alp*, Hope employs black humor, surrealism, allegory, and satire to explore the implications of racial discrimination in South Africa under the apartheid system.

Louis MacNeice (Irish-born English poet, critic, translator, dramatist, scriptwriter, and novelist)—A member of the "Oxford Group" of poets of the 1930s that included W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, and Stephen Spender, MacNeice is best known for verse in which he examines social concerns and the vagaries of the human condition.

Gloria Naylor (American novelist and short story writer)—Recognized as the author of *The Women of Brewster Place*, for which she received the American Book Award for best first novel, Naylor often examines the experiences of black American women in her fiction. Criticism in Naylor's entry will focus upon her novels *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*.

Erika Ritter (Canadian dramatist, essayist, and short story writer)—Ritter's plays follow the plight of intelligent contemporary women who attempt to balance love and careers in the wake of the feminist movement. Ritter's entry will also include criticism of her collection of satirical essays, *Urban Scrawls*.

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The Year in Review

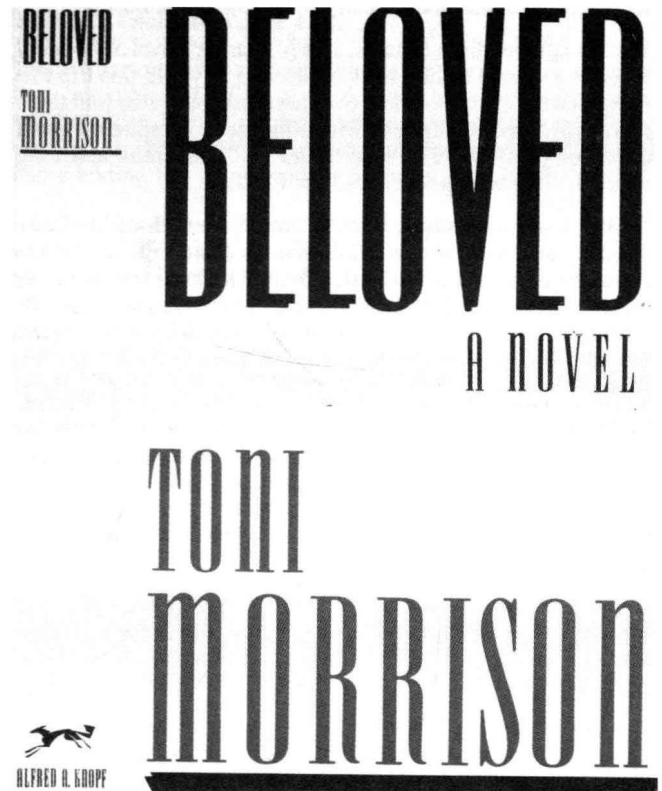
The Year in Fiction

by Robert Wilson

Few fiction writers are satisfied with the amount of critical attention their books receive. Many suspect conspiracies to repress their work, conspiracies including, at the very least, that superannuated book reviewer at a certain news magazine, the entire editorial staff of a major newspaper, the owner of an important literary journal, and several members of their own publisher's publicity department. The truth is that most reviewers and editors are too busy or too disorganized to participate in conspiracies. Many books get less attention than they deserve simply because there are too many books published each year. Sometimes a few books do get more than their share of what little critical attention there is to go around. But it's rare, a lot rarer than most writers believe, for a newspaper of the importance of *The New York Times* to mount a campaign on behalf of a particular book. It's rarer still—in fact, it's never happened before, in my memory—for a number of writers to band together to complain that a particular novel, lavishly reviewed from sea to shining sea, has not yet won a major prize.

Both happened in 1987 with the game book, Toni Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*. *The New York Times* gave an unusual if not unheard-of amount of space to the book. On August 26, it ran a 1,200-word interview with Morrison. On September 2, staff reviewer Michiko Kakutani called the book "extraordinary," and mentioned Morrison's "magisterial yet sensuous prose," comparing its characters to those of opera or Greek drama. On the front page of the September 13 *New York Times Book Review*, reviewer Margaret Atwood called the novel "another triumph." *Beloved* was nominated for a National Book Award, a National Book Critics Circle Award, and the \$50,000 Ritz Paris Hemingway prize.

When, in November, *Beloved* did not win the National Book Award, *The New York Times* ran several news stories commenting upon how surprised certain unspecified members of the New York literati were. Then on November 16, Kakutani wrote a controversial 1,400-word "Critic's Notebook" column unfavorably comparing *Paco's Story*, the 1986 novel by Larry Heinemann that won the award, with *Beloved*, which Kakutani then proceeded to review again. In January, after *Beloved* did not win the National Book Critics Circle Fiction award (which Morrison had won for her previous novel, *Song of Solomon*), *The New York Times* gave more than half a page of space in its January 24 *Book Review* to a letter and a statement signed by forty-eight writers protesting that Morrison "has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize"—an obvious attempt to intimidate the Pulitzer Prize jury, which would announce its winners at the end of March. It also ran a 500-word news story about the protest and yet another "Critic's Notebook," this time by Walter Goodman, speculating on whether the lobbying on Morrison's behalf for the Pulitzer would have any effect. One hopes and assumes that the Pulitzer board is above such pressure. In any event, Morrison did win the prize.



Dust jacket of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Jacket design by R. D. Scudellari. Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Beloved, which tells the heartwrenching story of an escaped slave woman who murders her baby rather than allow her to grow up enslaved, has been widely recognized as one of the most significant novels of the year. Most reviewers admired the book, and most review publications gave their reviews prominent display. It has been reported that the letter and statement in *The New York Times* were not written at Morrison's request, but in response to a friend's observation that Morrison was dispirited at not winning an award. Which takes me back to where I began.

Prominent Contemporaries

This was a year when others of our most prominent fiction writers might also have been less than satisfied with the critical reception of their books. Novels published this year by Saul Bellow (*More Die of Heartbreak*), John Barth (*The Tidewater Tales*), James Dickey (*Alnilam*), Stanley Elkin (*The Rabbi of Lud*), Gail Godwin (*A Southern Family*), Joyce Carol Oates (*You Must Remember This*), Cynthia Ozick (*The Messiah of*

Stockholm), Walker Percy (*The Thanatos Syndrome*), Wallace Stegner (*Crossing to Safety*) and Kurt Vonnegut (*Bluebeard*) were generally judged not to be up to the best work their authors have done, although many of them were favorably reviewed anyway.

Bellow's narrator is a chatterbox named Kenneth Trachtenberg, who spends his time studying his uncle, Benn Crader, a botanist with a genius for plants and a typically Bellovian incompetence with women and the world at large. Although *More Die of Heartbreak* is both brilliant and funny at times, it can also be too digressive and occasionally even somewhat boring.

Barth's compendium of tales, like his earlier novel *Sabbatical*, features a couple sailing the Chesapeake Bay. On this trip they happen across Odysseus and Scheherazade, and also find themselves involved in CIA and Mafia business. Despite the abundance of plot, *The Tidewater Tales* is "ponderous and long-winded," according to critic Tom LeClair.

Dickey's massive novel, several times the length of his *Deliverance*, has to do with a blind man in search of information about the death of his son, a flier at an Air Corps training camp during World War II. *Alnilam*'s story is melodramatic and the writing often windy, but occasionally, especially when Dickey has the blind man imagining scenes of aerial combat, the prose soars.

In *The Rabbi of Lud* Elkin offers up another of his novels that are short on plot and long on verbal firepower and black humor; it is the story of a rabbi graduate of an "offshore yeshiva" who conducts burial services in a New Jersey town named Lud that is almost wholly devoted to the business of death.

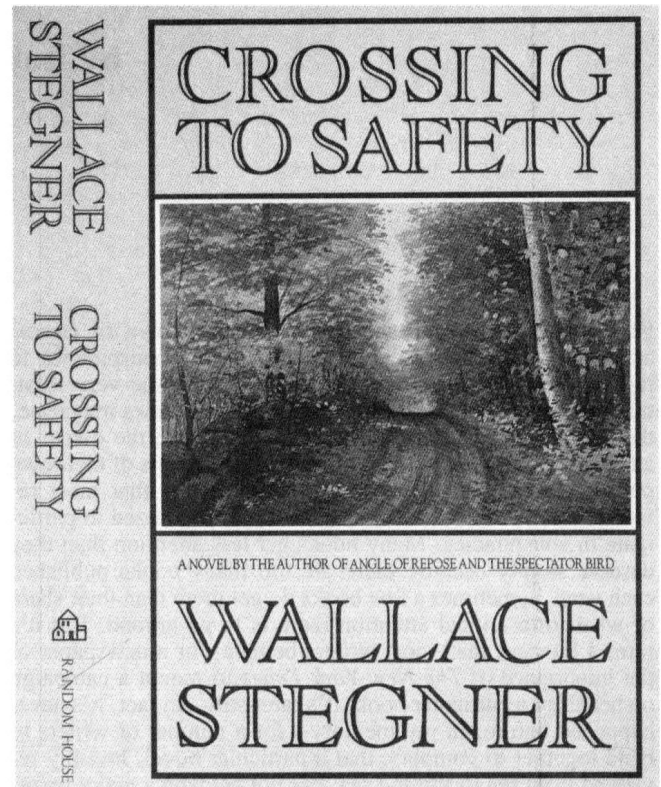
Godwin's generic title—*A Southern Family*—is at least descriptive of her novel about a Southern family whose reunion explodes in violence with the supposed murder-suicide of a son and his companion, leaving the other family members to piece together what has happened.

You Must Remember This, Oates's major effort of the year (she is nothing if not productive), is set in upstate New York during the '50s, and it is rife with details of the period: the Rosenberg execution, bomb shelters, McCarthyism. The texture of her characters' lives is typically, for Oates, gray and gritty, and its energy, also typically, comes from the violence bubbling beneath the surface of such lives.

Ozick's new novel, *The Messiah of Stockholm*—a nominee for the 1988 PEN/Faulkner award—features a Swedish book reviewer who becomes convinced that he is the illegitimate son of the real-life writer Bruno Schulz, a Polish Jew murdered by the Nazis in 1942. Amid various questions of authenticity and forgery, a manuscript emerges that is purported to be Schulz's last, lost work, "The Messiah." Ozick is so concerned with such big questions as the idolatry of art that she occasionally slips from the profound into the abstruse.

Percy brings back Dr. Tom More from *Love in the Ruins* to track down a medical mystery featuring social engineering on the lower Mississippi, against a backdrop of this death-loving century, which is in its last decade in the book. Percy's speculative novels are not quite his best, but *The Thanatos Syndrome* is nonetheless a dazzling, thoughtful book.

Stegner's *Crossing to Safety* follows the lives of two bright academic couples who are devoted to each other and to a pond house they visit together each summer in Vermont. In the present tense of the book, the couples are old, and one of the



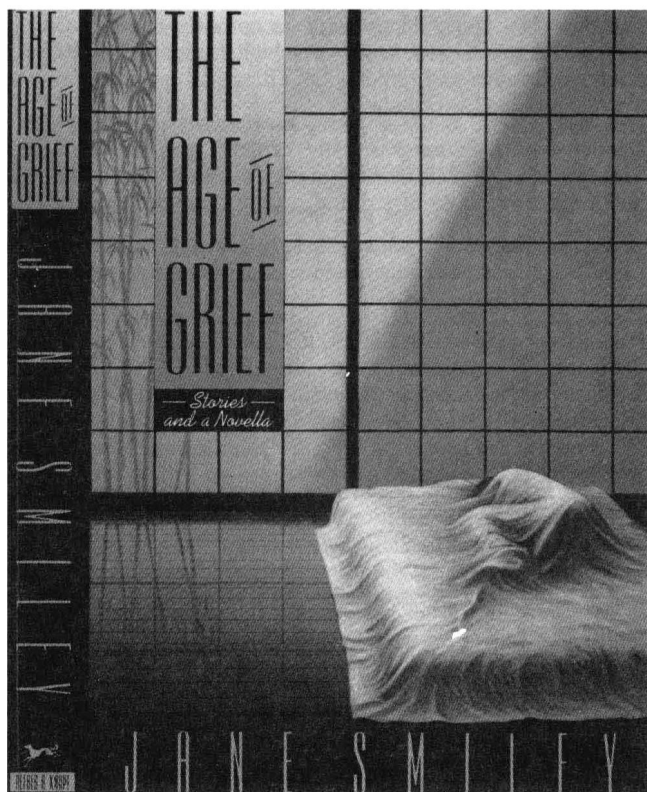
Dust jacket of Crossing to Safety, by Wallace Stegner. Random House, 1987. Jacket design and illustration by Wendell Minor. Courtesy of Random House, Inc.

four is near death, which casts a melancholy shadow over lives that have been lived thoughtfully and well. Enduring friendship, dignity in age, the human and finally hopeless need to make order out of chaos, all are themes in a book that, although small in scale compared to his award-winning earlier novels, is one of the most satisfying novels of 1987.

In *Bluebeard* Vonnegut casts his story in the form of an autobiography, that of a failed abstract-expressionist painter named Rebo Karabekian (a minor character in his 1973 novel, *Breakfast of Champions*) who has grown rich by having fortuitously collected the works of such artist friends as Rothko and Pollock before they were worth anything. The book features familiar Vonnegut mannerisms and uncommon, even for Vonnegut, high spirits.

One writer who belongs close to the head of this class did produce a work that many reviewers judged the best of a distinguished career. Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* once again features the writer's alter ego, Nathan Zuckerman, in a fractured narrative in which Zuckerman dies and then doesn't die, and in which Roth's old subjects of sexuality and Jewish identity are taken up in writing of impressive virtuosity. The novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction. Other nominees for the award, besides Morrison, included Stegner, Tom Wolfe for *The Bonfire of the Vanities* and Jane Smiley for a story collection called *The Age of Grief*.

Among other works published in 1987 by serious writers who are household names, at least in bookish households, was the posthumous appearance of what is apparently the only surviving fragment (or perhaps all that was ever written) of *Answered*



Dust jacket of *The Age of Grief*, by Jane Smiley. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Jacket painting by Guy Gladwell. Jacket design by Sue Keston. Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Prayers, which Truman Capote claimed would be his masterwork. Most reviewers agreed that publishing what amounted to salacious gossip about the rich or the fashionable was a large mistake, besmirching a career at its most lustrous in *In Cold Blood*.

Speaking of writers who live among the wealthy and the powerful, and who are almost as famous as television personalities as they are as novelists, Gore Vidal published the latest in his series of American historical chronicles. This one, *Empire*, moves to the turn-of-the century administrations of McKinley and Roosevelt, to illustrate themes of greed and imperialism. As usual, Vidal was praised in the reviews both as novelist and historian.

Finally, among our literary heavy-weights, John Updike published *Trust Me*, a collection of short stories. As ever, these stories are sparkingly written, concerning themselves with the achy yearnings and sweet sorrows of upper-middle-class life in these times.

First Novelists

Those are fifteen writers, then, who didn't need to go begging for critical attention. Did they displace writers less well known whose works also deserved recognition? Probably. It is an odd truth about the reviewing of fiction in this country, however, that a novelist who is completely unknown is more likely to get attention than one who has published a book or more but has not yet won the gold. Perhaps because of the general cultural tendency to celebrate what is young or new, reviewers seem hungry to discover first-time novelists. So here are fifteen novelists who weren't novelist before 1987 rolled around.

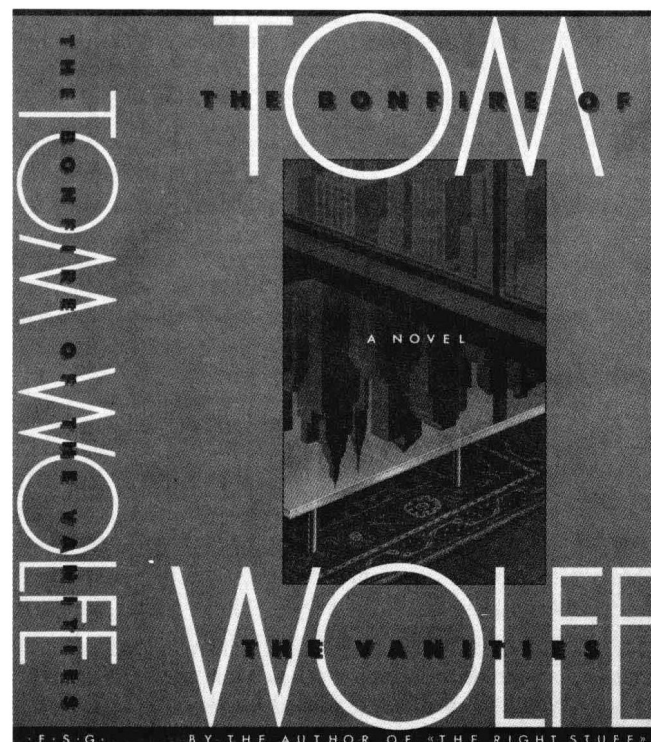
Unfortunately for my scheme, *all* of them weren't unknown. Most prominent among the year's first novelists was Tom Wolfe, a literary celebrity for two decades for his energetic and carefully observed journalism. *The Bonfire of the Vanities* was not just a critical success and an award nominee, it was an immediate best-seller. The story of the downfall of Sherman McCoy, a Wall Street high roller who thinks of himself as a "Master of the Universe" is distinguished by Wolfe's reportorial gifts, his attention to the details of class and culture that only the great novelists have. Yet the novel devolves into a kind of police procedural, and Wolfe's lack of feeling for any of his characters finally flaws the book.

Another first novel to ride high on the best-seller lists in some ways resembled *Bonfire*, as critic Jonathan Yardley pointed out. But Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* is much more deliberately a crime story, a courtroom drama set in Chicago whose ending left many readers feeling manipulated.

Far down the best-seller lists from these two, and yet a local best-seller in Washington, D.C., in whose suburbs its author lives, *The World as I found It* by Bruce Duffy takes as its unlikely protagonist the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Critic Bruce Allen's choice for best novel of the year was a first effort by Maria Thomas, called *Antonia Saw the Oryx First*. Set in East Africa, it tells the story of a white woman doctor who must compete with a native healer, but who nonetheless bemoans the passage of the old ways, and looks with bemusement at Africa in transition.

A nominee for the National Book Award, Howard Norman's *The Northern Lights* tells about a small town in the Canadian



Dust jacket of *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, by Tom Wolfe. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987. Jacket design © 1987 by Fred Marcellino. Reproduced by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc.

north isolated from the world except for what it can hear on shortwave radio.

Two other widely admired first novels included *First Light*, by Charles Baxter, a book with an imploding structure that takes its title from the first atomic explosion at Los Alamos, and *Imagining Argentina*, by Lawrence Thornton, a brilliant, nightmarish story of a husband whose wife has been disappeared by the Argentine military, written by a writer who has never been to that country. The latter was nominated for a PEN/Faulkner award.

One of my favorite first novels of the year was *Renifleur's Daughter*, a book by Candida Frazee that is both sensual and sensuous, about a young woman growing up in a wonderful Georgetown house that has an odiferous garden. Renifleur is a Freudian term for a person sexually stimulated by odors. The title is no doubt meant to echo that of Hawthorne's tale, also set largely in a garden, "Rappaccini's Daughter."

A novel that got some of its attention because of the attention paid to the novels of his wife, Louise Erdrich—which she says he collaborated on—Michael Dorris's *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* is said by him to be a collaboration with her. Like her *Love Medicine*, and somewhat less like her *The Beet Queen*, it is a saga of an American Indian family, involving three generations of women on a Montana reservation.

Among other first novels singled out for attention in 1987; *The Automotive History of Lucky Kellerman*, by Steve Heller, about an older man ruminating on his life as he restores a car in rural Oklahoma; *The Broom of the System*, by David Foster Wallace, a verbally exuberant, Pynchonesque story set in Cleveland in 1990; *Crooked Hearts*, by Robert Boswell, a story about family love featuring an eccentric Midwestern family starting over in Yuma, Arizona; *Ellen Foster*, by Kaye Gibbons, the tale of a Southern, female David Copperfield; *Mama*, by Terry McMillan, a comic novel about a poor black family in Point Haven, Michigan, and eventually in Southern California; and *The Object of My Affection*, by Stephen McCauley, a funny novel about life in New York City in the '80s featuring the unlikely duo of an unwed mother and her live-in male homosexual friend.

Contemporaries

And what of those novelists in the middle, neither new and shiny nor literary superstars? Here in brief are two dozen of dozens in this category that I might mention:

In *An Adultery*, Alexander Theroux (brother of Paul) writes and sometimes overwrites the story of an artist-in-residence at a New England prep school who falls passionately in love with another man's wife.

AEgypt is John Crowley's story of an upstate New York historian who turns to "ancient theologies, old magic systems" to find meanings in life beyond those conventionally accepted.

Age, by Hortense Calisher, is a short novel about an aging couple who decide to face up to the fact that one will die before the other by each keeping a journal for the surviving spouse to take comfort in.

The American Ambassador, by Ward Just, an international thriller featuring a U.S. diplomat and his terrorist son, is often well-written but has a preposterous plot involving the son's plan to assassinate his father.

Cigarettes, by Harry Mathews, is a complex but ingeniously designed experimental novel in which thirteen characters in Saratoga Springs and Greenwich Village all have in common a woman named Elizabeth.

Dancing at the Rascal Fair, the second novel in Ivan Doig's Montana trilogy, features two young Scotsmen who homestead in Montana in hopes of striking it rich in silver.

In *Five Hundred Scorpions*, Shelby Hearon's tenth novel, a middle-aged lawyer finds new ways of seeing the world on a visit to Mexico.

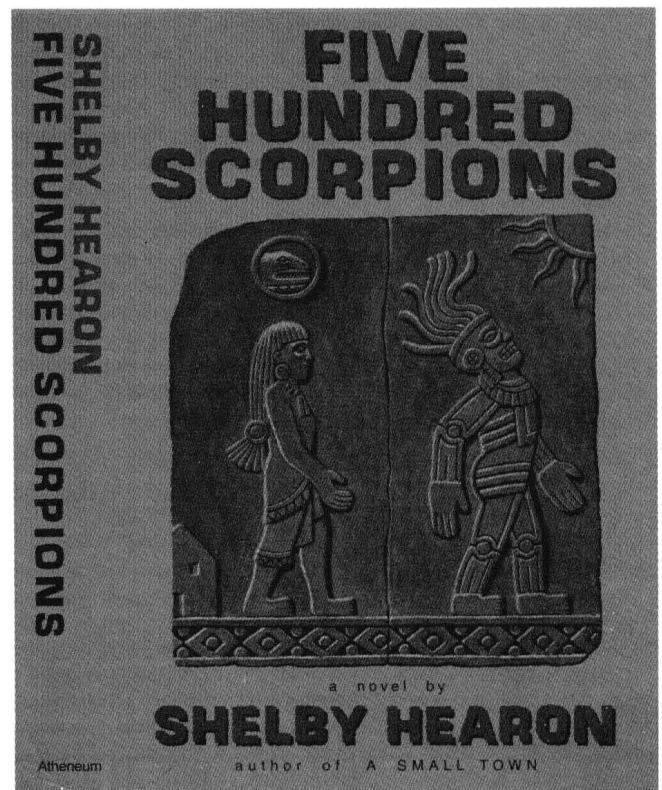
Poet and novelist Marge Piercy, in *Gone to Soldiers*, intertwines the stories of ten characters as different as a WAF pilot and a teenager in the French underground, struggling to live through World War II.

A decade after the publication of her novel *The Women's Room*, Marilyn French brought out *Her Mother's Daughter* in 1987. It tells about four generations of women who pass their anger and frustrations on to their daughters.

In *the Country of Last Things*, Paul Auster tells the story of a woman looking for her brother in a future world that has suffered large-scale destruction. One reviewer described the book as Orwell written by Kafka.

Life during Wartime, by Lucius Shepard, is a futuristic novel about war in Central America, seen through the eyes of a young U.S. soldier.

Mother Love, by Candace Flynt, the author of a fine first novel called *Chasing Dad*, tells the story of three sisters in Greens-



Dust jacket of *Five Hundred Scorpions*, by Shelby Hearon. Atheneum, 1987. Jacket design copyright © 1987 by James Steinberg. Reproduced by permission of James Steinberg.