

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

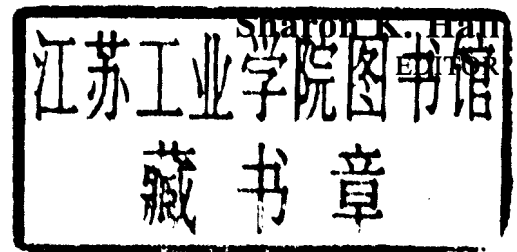
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Volume 39

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

## Yearbook 1985

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



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Contemporary  
Literary Criticism  
Yearbook 1985

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This series covers poets of all nationalities, movements, and periods of literary history.

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This series covers dramatists of all nationalities and periods of literary history.

## 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? What noteworthy works of literary criticism have been published, and how have they been received? 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 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 literary news, and marks 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 such nonfiction writers as literary biographers and critics, 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 literary activity. 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 1985* includes excerpted criticism on over 75 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 six sections: The Year in Review, New Authors, Prizewinners, Obituaries, Literary Biography, and Literary Criticism.

**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 1985* we have the advantage of viewing "The Year in Fiction" from the perspective of John Blades, literary critic, reporter, and columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. Blades, who serves on the board of The National Book Critics Circle, was one of three judges in Fiction for The American Book Awards in 1985. "The Year in Poetry" is presented by Academy-Institute Award-winning poet Dave Smith, who has published several poetry collections and who reviews poetry for many literary journals. In 1985 Smith published a new poetry collection, *The Roundhouse Voices*, and an essay collection, *Local Assays: On Contemporary American Poetry*, and also edited *The Morrow Anthology of Younger Poets* with David Bottoms. "The Year in Drama" is reviewed by Gerald Weales, a winner of the George Jean Nathan Award for drama criticism and an author of numerous books on drama and film, including his recently published *Canned Goods As Caviar: American Film Comedies of the 1930s*. Weales is a theater critic for such journals as *Commonweal* and *The Georgia Review*; his survey is reprinted from *The Georgia Review*. 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 1985* introduces eighteen writers whose first book, or first book in English-language translation, was published during 1985. 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 1985*, for example, presents the poet Norman Williams, short story writers Molly Giles, Amy Hempel, Lorrie Moore, and Pam Durban, the newly translated novelists Isabel Allende of Chile and Alexander Kaletski of Russia, as well as new American novelists such as Carolyn Chute, who brings to life the poor in backwoods Maine, and T.R. Pearson, who paints an amusing portrait of a small town in North Carolina.

**Prizewinners**—This section of the *Yearbook* begins with a list of Literary Prizes and Honors Announced in 1985, citing the award, its recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work. *CLC Yearbook 1985* then highlights twenty-four major prizewinners who will be featured in this volume. A Prize Commentary follows and discusses each award that is featured in the *Yearbook*; the Prize Commentary indicates 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 by writers to 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 Keri Hulme, and Canada's Governor General's Literary Awards, presented to Josef Skvorecky for Fiction and Judith Thompson for Drama. We have, of course, also featured the literary world's most prestigious award, the Nobel Prize in literature, bestowed on French fiction writer Claude Simon.

**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 1985*, for example, presents entries on Heinrich Boll, Italo Calvino, Robert Graves, Philip Larkin, and E.B. White, 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 biographical perspective on the authors who are the subjects of the literary biographies, this section also introduces readers to today's biographers, their methods, styles, and approaches to biography. This *Yearbook* discusses seven literary biographies, including Peter Manso's celebrated biography of Norman Mailer, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, Janet Morgan's "authorized" biography of Agatha Christie, and two biographies of Ernest Hemingway: one by Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography*, which is only the second full-scale biography on Hemingway to have appeared since his death in 1961, and the other biography by Peter Griffin, *Along with Youth: Hemingway, the Early Years*, which is the first of a projected three-volume work.

**Literary Criticism**—While the works of several major literary critics have been covered periodically in regular *CLC* volumes, the new *Yearbook* format allows us to devote an entire section to this important genre. In this section we focus on noteworthy works of literary criticism published in the past year, both important works devoted to a single author in the *CLC* time period and general works that reflect contemporary theories or analyses of literature. *CLC Yearbook 1985* considers five such studies, including works by the venerable critics Malcolm Cowley and Mary McCarthy. This comprehensive treatment of works of literary criticism is another special feature of the *Yearbook*.

### Format of the Book

With the exception of essays found in The Year in Review section, which are original survey essays written for this publication, the *Yearbook* is comprised of excerpted criticism. There are approximately 575 individual excerpts in

*CLC Yearbook 1985* taken from hundreds of literary reviews, general magazines, distinguished newspapers, and scholarly journals. The excerpts included reflect the critical attention the authors and their works have received by critics writing in English and by foreign criticism in translation; 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 and Literary Criticism sections, cites the complete title of the book followed by the biographer's or critic's name. In cases where there is an editor of a book as well as an author, the editor's name is also given.
- 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 entries in all sections, except The Year in Review, to direct the reader to other useful sources published by the Gale Research Company: *Contemporary Authors* now includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches on more than 82,000 authors; *Children's Literature Review* presents excerpted criticism on the works of authors of children's books; *Something about the Author* contains heavily illustrated biographical sketches on writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Contemporary Issues Criticism* presents excerpted commentary on the nonfiction works of authors who influence contemporary thought; *Dictionary of Literary Biography* provides original evaluations of authors important to literary history; and the new *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* offers autobiographical essays by prominent writers. 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 and literary criticism when applicable. In *CLC Yearbook 1985*, for example, the entry on Janet Morgan's *Agatha Christie: A Biography* cites additional sources of information on both Morgan and Christie.
- A list of **principal works**, including the author's first and last published work and other important work, 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; in the Literary Biography section, **illustrations** of the subject, representing different stages in his or her life, are included whenever possible.
- Illustrations of **dust jackets** are included, when available, to complement the critical discussion in entries in The Year in Review, Prizewinners, Literary Biography, and Literary Criticism sections.
- An **excerpt** from the author's work is included, when available, in entries in the New Authors, Prizewinners, Literary Biography, and Literary Criticism sections, in order to provide the reader with a sampling of the author's theme and style.
- The **excerpted criticism**, included in all entries except those in The Year in Review section, represents essays selected by the 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. An asterisk (\*) at the end of a citation indicates the essay is on more than one author.

#### 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 subjects of works of literary biography and literary criticism covered in the *Yearbook*); *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, along with cross-references to other Gale series: *Children's Literature Review*, *Authors in the News*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *Something about the Author*, 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 Index to Critics** lists the critics and the author entries in which the critics' essays appear.

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Suggestions Are Welcome

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

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# **The Year in Review**



# The Year in Fiction

by John Blades

Judging strictly by the headlines, 1985 couldn't have helped but be disheartening—even distressing—for those who put a high value on fiction as an art rather than a commodity. As never before, American publishers seemed to be gripped by the profit motive, determined not only to produce blockbusters but to launch them with maximum impact.

The biggest of these was Jean M. Auel's *The Mammoth Hunters*, the third in her series of "Earth's Children" novels. The news about Auel's fiction was not so much whether it was good or bad—though critics did seem to agree that it was eons away in quality from her first Cro-Magnon epic, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*—but that it had set a publishing record with a first printing of a million copies. In the process, Auel's novel beat—by 250,000 copies—the previous record-holder, James Michener's equally mammoth diorama, *Texas*, published a few months earlier. Meantime, Bantam Books was claiming yet another record—the \$1 million they paid Sally Beauman for her first novel, *Destiny*, was claimed to be the highest for a writer without a "track record."

But American publishers weren't so bewitched by the forces of commerce (or darkness) as the evidence superficially seemed to indicate. The real bottom line is that there were more good works of fiction in 1985—short story collections as well as novels—than anyone had reason to expect. If Auel's book, for example, ended the year on a mercenary note, it began with the publication of two novels of exceptionally high quality, one by an unknown, the other by a writer who had been producing exceptional novels for more than a decade.

The first of these was Carolyn Chute, whose *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, was a horrifyingly funny detour into the backwoods of modern New England, a region the author herself calls home. Chute's episodic story and her savage but empathetic portraits of the rural poor didn't please everyone, especially not her neighbors; but whatever the book's imperfections, there was no contesting the force and prodigality of the author's writing talents.

The veteran novelist was Don DeLillo, whose *White Noise* was considered his finest work by most critics, including judges of The American Book Awards, who gave him the top prize in fiction. Like Chute's novel, this combined sobering realism with savage satire, but the characters and the milieu could scarcely have been further apart. Set on a Midwestern campus, the book dealt with the high-tech anxiety and death obsessions of a professor of Hitler studies, his wife and children, and various academic colleagues, during a "toxic event" (a deadly gas leakage).

The excellence of DeLillo's book was also recognized by the National Book Critics Circle, whose membership nominated it as one of the five most distinguished novels of 1985. The award itself, however, went to Anne Tyler, another novelist many felt had reached her apogee, in this case with *The Ac-*

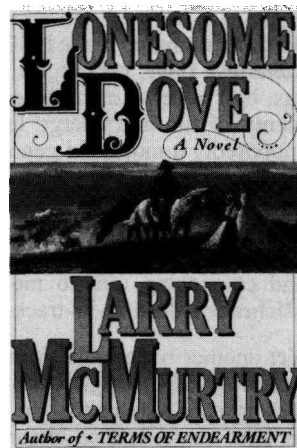
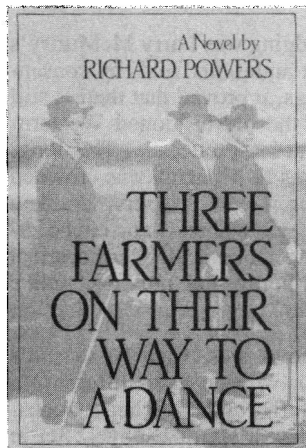
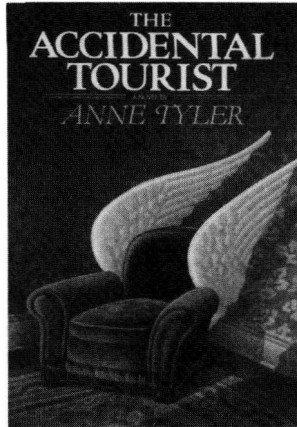
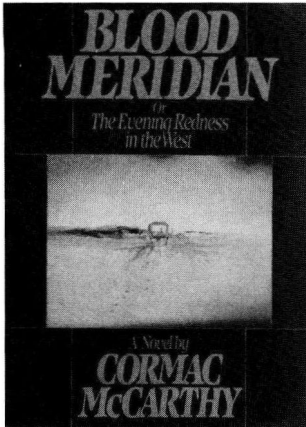
*cidental Tourist*, the story of a travel writer whose eccentricities lead him down an offbeat romantic path, after a painful marital breakup and the even more painful death of his son. While written with Tyler's customary economy and skill, and displaying her customary affection for her odd characters, the book was not received with universal affection; a good many critics found it painfully contrived and full of artificial sweeteners, a situation tragicomedy.

A strong runnerup in the NBCC judging was Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, his longest, most ambitious, and, by consensus, best novel. Among other things, it proved that there's still plenty of life and energy left in the old-fashioned Western, supposedly a moribund genre for at least a decade. This long, tall tale of a cattle drive from Texas to Montana was crowded with stock characters—hard-riding Texas Rangers, drunken gamblers, deadly Indians, pure-hearted whores—and cliché situations, but McMurtry managed to make it all seem original and convincing, not to mention funny and moving, unlike Michener's dead-in-its-tracks *Texas*.

Yet another remarkable frontier novel was Hugh Nissenson's *A Tree of Life*, though it couldn't have been more different, in size or scope, from either the McMurtry or the Michener books. In fact, it was less an historical than a spiritual novel. Set in a much earlier American West (Ohio during the early 19th Century), this was a bleak, spare, humorless book that took the form of a journal, in which a farmer/minister recorded not just the external details of pioneer life (the price of nails, for example) but his own internal anguish—a crisis of faith, the temptations of the flesh, and other Bergmanesque concerns.

There were several other historical novels worthy of mention; John Calvin Batchelor's *American Falls*, a straightforward but stylish story of espionage during the Civil War; and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, a disturbing and ultraviolent tale of Indian warfare in the 1850s Southwest. Skipping many decades ahead into a much more placid era of America's past, there was E. L. Doctorow's autobiographical novella, *World's Fair*, about a boy (named Edgar) growing up in the Bronx at the time of the 1939 exposition. It was well reviewed, but its slender charms and consciously prosaic writing made the book seem nearly weightless in comparison to the versatile Doctorow's more substantial and poetic work, such as *The Book of Daniel* and *Loon Lake*.

Richard Powers also drew on historic materials—most obviously a classic pre-World War I photograph by August Sander—as the foundation and inspiration for his *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, perhaps the year's most impressive first novel (and the single one to be nominated for an NBCC fiction prize); with its three intersecting stories and extensive moral/philosophical/historical digressions, however, the book often seemed disjointed and ruminative, for all its brilliant prose and intellectual legerdemain.



Dust jacket of *Blood Meridian*; or, *The Evening Redness in the West*, by Cormac McCarthy. Random House, 1985. Courtesy of Random House, Inc. Dust jacket of *Lonesome Dove*, by Larry McMurtry. Simon and Schuster, 1985. Copyright © by Larry McMurtry. Courtesy of Simon & Schuster, Inc. Dust jacket of *Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance*, by Richard Powers. Beech Tree Books, 1985. Courtesy of Beech Tree Books (A Division of William Morrow & Company, Inc.). Frontispiece © The Estate of August Sander. Courtesy of The Sander Gallery, New York, NY. Dust jacket of *The Accidental Tourist*, by Anne Tyler. Knopf, 1985. Courtesy of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Powers's unassuming book took critics by surprise, which was not the case with award-winning short story writer Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, one of the year's most heralded first novels. All the advance publicity may have been counterproductive, however, because this honest, touching but somewhat drab and enervated story—which dealt with a teen-aged girl's attempt to find some meaning in the Vietnam War—earned respectful but not overwhelmingly enthusiastic critical notice.

Ann Beattie, whose incisive short stories have made her one of the most admired (and imitated) writers of her generation, was not at her best, either, with the novel, *Love Always*; indeed, she seemed distinctly out of her element in this mock soap-operatic farce that centered around a dizzy, advice-to-the-love-lorn columnist and her colleagues on a slick exurban-living magazine. Yet another distinctive writer of short stories, Frederick Barthelme, published a brisk novella, *Tracer*, and even

though the characters had a bizarre charm, as they acted out assorted marital and extramarital misadventures at Florida resorts, the story didn't have much tensile strength when stretched to book length.

While temporarily forsaken by such accomplished practitioners as Mason, Beattie, and Barthelme, the short story was scarcely allowed to fall into neglect; if for nothing else, 1985 was distinguished for the abundance and variety of its short fiction. Perhaps the most distinguished of these was *The Old Forest and Other Stories*, a generous sampling from Peter Taylor, whom many readers consider the grandmaster of the form. These were archetypal Taylor stories, stately, traditional, centered on highly cultivated members of the upper or upper-middle classes, usually in Memphis or St. Louis, grappling with economic, social, domestic, and, occasionally, psychological problems.

For some modern readers, Taylor's stories are *too* stately and traditional, to the point of monotony and dullness. Neither of these, however, are criticisms that could be applied to George Garrett, another older master whose *An Evening Performance and Other Stories* brought together his best short work of 30 years, which seemed nearly infinite in voice and subject: from Gothic comedy to Faulknerian tragedy to both rural and urban alienation.

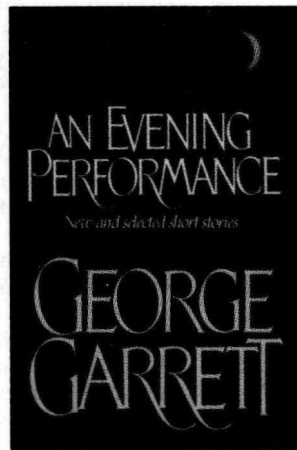
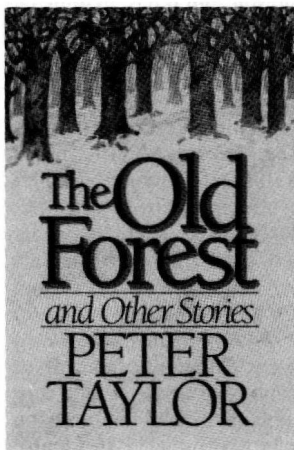
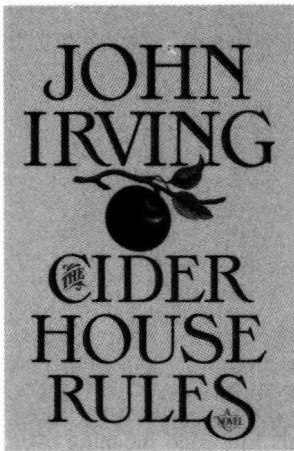
Another highly unconventional writer, Grace Paley, published her third collection, *Later the Same Day*, which was immediately recognizable for its breezy language and quirkily appealing characters, especially Paley's alter ego, Faith. While it was generously praised, many critics seemed to feel that it wasn't quite as captivating or consequential as her previous two books.

*Mid-Air* marked the return of Frank Conroy, twenty years after his autobiographical landmark, *Stop-Time*, with stories that seemed to reinforce, rather than enlarge upon, themes of that earlier book. In her second book of stories, *The Bus of Dreams*, Mary Morris gave us understated portraits of youthful lovers and middle-aged dreamers, glimpses of what one critic called "pent-up romantic longing."

Perhaps the most successful debut of the year in the short story was that of Bob Shacochis, whose *Easy in the Islands* not only brought him comparisons with Conrad and Graham Greene, among others, but an American Book Award for first fiction. Alice Adams' *Return Trips* represented some of her finest short work, stories of characters struggling to make sense of their pasts.

However, the charmingly erratic Barry Hannah simply seemed erratic in *Captain Maximus*, a book that one critic called a "publishing mistake." Among the other collections that helped prove the vitality of the short story were those by Tobias Wolff (*Back in the World*), Amy Hempel (*Reasons to Live*), Stephen King (*Skeleton Crew*), Sharon Sheeche Stark (*The Dealer's Yard*), T. Coraghessan Boyle (*Greasy Lake*), and Lorrie Moore (*Self-Help*), to cite only a few.

Shifting the focus back to longer fiction, 1985 was a vintage year for vintage writers, whose new work may not have made readers forget previous triumphs but was welcome and worthwhile nonetheless. Foremost among these was Kurt Vonnegut, whose *Galapagos* was not only a healthy best seller but an evolutionary tour de farce that took readers a million years into the future, a post-apocalyptic vision that was more whimsical than depressing. In *The Call*, John Hersey returned to his birth-



Dust jacket of *The Cider House Rules*, by John Irving. Morrow, 1985. Copyright © 1985 by Garp Enterprises Ltd. Courtesy of William Morrow & Company, Inc. Dust jacket of *The Bus of Dreams*, by Mary Morris. Houghton Mifflin, 1985. Jacket illustration copyright © 1985 by David Tamura. Used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company. Dust jacket of *The Old Forest and Other Stories*, by Peter Taylor. The Dial Press, 1985. Dust jacket of *An Evening Performance*, by George Garrett. Doubleday, 1985. Both reproduced courtesy of Doubleday & Company, Inc.

place, China, to tell at great length the story of the country's entry into the 20th century, as seen by an American missionary couple. Herman Wouk's *Inside, Outside* was also autobiographical fiction, relating the author's upward struggle from Bronx ghetto to Columbia University to naval duty in World War II.

If for no other reason, William Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic* was remarkable for its brevity; at 200 pages it was little more than a broadside by comparison with the author's other monuments, *The Recognitions* and *JR*; but it had numerous other virtues: an expressionist, claustrophobic, inhuman comedy, it was also a furious and splenetic denunciation of all that is wrong with contemporary America, and much of the world.

Russell Banks, a fine if not sufficiently appreciated writer, had one of the year's most deservedly praised novels with *Con-*

*mental Drift*, which told of a tragic convergence in the lives of a Florida charter-boat captain and a Haitian refugee. After the nearly insufferable whimsy of his previous novel, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, John Irving's *The Cider House Rules* seemed especially engaging and amiable, even though it was set in a New England orphanage and was concerned, to a great degree, with abortion. Stanley Elkin took considerable risks with *The Magic Kingdom*, which followed seven fatally ill children through Disney World, a novel that mixed pathos, comedy, and grotesquerie, not always successfully.

For many, Mary Gordon's *Men and Angels* was even better than her celebrated first novel, *Final Payments*; this was an unusually (but, for Gordon, typically) somber work that ranged over questions of maternity, art, and religious obsessions. Obsessions of another kind—those of a young girl for a woman who almost unwittingly becomes her tutor—dominated Gail Godwin's *The Finishing School*, a psychological detective story with (deliberate?) overtones of Daphne DuMaurier. Ursula LeGuin's staggering *Always Coming Home*, packaged with a complementary audiocassette recording of songs and poetry, was undeniably impressive—it was nominated for an American Book Award—but more as a work of fictional anthropology than as anthropological fiction.

Jay McInerney's second novel, *Ransom*, was a best-selling paperback original, like his first, *Bright Lights, Big City*, a seriocomic excursion through New York's cocaine culture; *Ransom*, however, was a world apart in style and locale, a martial-arts melodrama set in Japan. An old hand at melodrama, Elmore Leonard, scored with what the publishing industry likes to call a "breakthrough" book, *Glitz*, a best-selling revenge story that was written with the author's flawless ear for tough-guy idiom and with his unerring skill at creating believably creepy villains.

Ray Bradbury published his first novel in more than a quarter-century, not science fiction but a detective story, *Death Is a Lonely Business*, which was less successful as a mystery than an homage (occasionally an unintentional parody) of Raymond Chandler and other Southern California noir novelists.

Garrison Keillor's first novel, *Lake Wobegon Days*, besides being a huge best seller was a skillful recycling and elaboration of material developed on his popular National Public Radio show, the *Prairie Home Companion*: homespun satire but with a scattering of dark threads.

There was so much remarkable fiction published during 1985 that it seems necessary to conclude by merely listing a few of the more remarkable books, an honor roll that includes Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*, Julius Lester's *Do Lord Remember Me*, Tom Robbins's *Jitterbug Perfume*, Denis Johnson's *Fiskadero*, Lee Smith's *Family Linen*, Elizabeth Tallent's *Museum Pieces*, Thomas Berger's *Nowhere*, Joyce Carol Oates's *Solstice*, and, finally, four books of uncommon interest from Chicago writers: Lore Segal's *Her First American*, Charles Dickinson's *Crows*, Jan Novak's *The Willys Dream Kit*, and James McManus's *Chin Music*.

It would, no doubt, be just as easy to draw up a dishonor roll of 1985 fiction, but in a year with so much to sing about, why end on a downbeat note?

Book Critic  
*Chicago Tribune*

# The Year in Poetry

by Dave Smith

One hundred years ago, in 1885, Ezra Pound was born to tell poets "make it new." The Modernists, William Carlos Williams (b.1883) and T. S. Eliot (b.1888) especially, whom Pound spoke for, faced a radically changed and changing world. In the end, these writers proved as thoroughly modern as Millie and as revolutionary as Rotarians: if they roared forward to claim the "new," they faced backward to secure a heritage. They questioned the nature and function of poetry itself, seeking a right form in all the facsimiles. To understand their anxiety we need only look at our own age: technology is replacing television, telephones, records, automobiles, and hand-delivered mail; our bodies become bionic; our lives grow extended, eased, enhanced. Yet everywhere wars, guerilla lunacy, disease, poverty, spiritual hunger, and fear dominate. Everything we have known blurs. Can poetry express this world?

In 1985 poets stand again at the edge of joyful possibility and dismal sameness. But ours is not a climate of the "new" in poetry; rather, a conservatism grips us in form and vision. Reminiscent of the quiet 1950s, the 1980s appear to prefer a poetry of rationality, subdued emotion, disengagement from public issues, with a "disappeared" speaker whose voice is startlingly metrical, stanzaically sculpted and tidy, whose great concern is domestic tranquillity. The wildly various poetries of the 1960s-70s decade which enfranchised all causes, all forms, and all ethnic sides seems safely sequestered. While many books continue to deliver the jolting beauty and truth we expect, many others lack passion and content themselves with a miniaturist art whose appeal is primarily to small, esoteric audiences. In these the heroes of consciousness remain, ironically, revolutionary poets, painters, musicians who have become the tradition. The books I have reviewed below are only a portion of those submitted to me from the 1985 crop, representing those I consider the best poetry, not most exemplary of these trends. Those listed as "Recommended" were, I thought, worthy of mention but less compelling than those reviewed.

## Younger American Poets

The youngest poets are ordinarily the brash, the restless, the idealistic who are furious with the energies of change in a callously indifferent universe. Arthur Smith, winner of the 1984 Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize for *Elegy on Independence Day* (University of Pittsburgh Press), shows the surprising quietism in favor with "It is good, I think, / To be sitting in a warm room / While the lawn whitens with frost." If, despite Coleridge, this is banal, Smith's elegaic gift remains seductively celebrative in poems like "Twelve Pole" and "Hurricane Warning." In *Henry Purcell in Japan* (Knopf) Mary Jo Salter proves the prototype new poet. Her Anglicized diction prefers "queuing" to the American "standing in line." Pentameter pages, fastidious bric-a-brac scenic descriptions, and sentimentality (a bee's death is called "murder") suggest the chat up character of English verse that has little subject and less force, though parlors-full of skill and grace. Kathy Fagan's

*The Raft* (Dutton), one of five National Poetry Series winners, views poetry as something much more flexible, something that drifts more than finishes. Every poem has sharp intelligence and talent, but too many wind up posturing, wanting things like "the withheld breast that is this life" and moaning over its absence. Matisse is her painter. Monet is Janet Sylvester's. *That Mulberry Wine* (Wesleyan University Press), like Fagan and Salter, sometimes lapses into a humm, but it has an unusual punch in wry fables of a resilient woman who has survived family, sexual initiation, physical abuse, and travels in the country. This is a fine first collection.

Three first books from 1985 favor traditional verse but employ it to achieve original expression. *The Unlovely Child* (Knopf) is an auspicious debut by Norman Williams, a lawyer by trade. He makes verse a liberator of feeling and turns a trip to a barber shop into a ritual experience. His descriptions of smelt-fishers are runic and sharp as fresh-minted brail. Still, Williams's strength, a historical consciousness, sometimes suckers him into easy generalization. Eric Pankey has the same problem in a more untraditional verse. His *For the New Year* (Atheneum) won the 1984 Walt Whitman Award. Often reminiscent of Norman Dubie, Pankey writes anecdotal narratives which turn out to be private meditations with a sly and ghostly compulsion the reader follows as effortlessly as a bird's flight. "The Guard: 1934" is a haunting look at responsibility. In *Saints & Strangers* (Houghton Mifflin) Andrew Hudgins shows a fine ear for memorably pulsed traditional verse but, like Eric Pankey, he joins this to invented dramatic monologues (Sidney Lanier, Audubon, Zelda Fitzgerald, etc) which sometimes seem more precious than pressured. His painter is, gulp, Botticelli. Granting his first-book infelicities, Hudgins, I think, sees a deeper, more complicated world than most, wants to say it accurately, and knows whatever we yearn for comes only at cost, if at all. His gift seems Bosch-like:

The birds outside the stained-glass windows  
brawl and copulate beneath the eaves—  
what dark spasmodic shapes they make  
behind the thieves and bright crucifixion!

"The Stoker's Sunday Morning"

Many poets hope for successively better books and few are so rewarded. Rodney Jones's *The Unborn* (Atlantic Monthly Press) shows how hard work makes luck. His second book, *The Unborn*, combines countryman wit, narrative ease, and a superior clarity to make memories become metaphors. Poems about Edison, Thoreau, laundromats, and unpainted houses suggest he can write about anything. Baron Wormser's gifts make him a satiric moralist whose second collection, *Good Trembling* (Houghton Mifflin), is cunning, funny, and sharply epigrammatic ("Poems are gestures swallowed by history"). His painter is Matisse. Elizabeth Spires is not a verse poet and shows no favorite painter in *Swan's Island* (Holt Rinehart Winston), although a culture consciousness is pronounced in her work.