

□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

48

Volume 48

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Excerpts from Criticism of the
Works of Today's Novelists, Poets,
Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters,
and Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Literary criticism is, by definition, “the art of evaluating or analyzing with knowledge and propriety works of literature.” The complexity and variety of the themes and forms of contemporary literature make the function of the critic especially important to today’s reader. It is the critic who assists the reader in identifying significant new writers, recognizing trends in critical methods, mastering new terminology, and monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion.

Until the publication of the first volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* in 1973, there existed no ongoing digest of current literary opinion. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need.

Scope of the Work

CLC presents significant passages from published criticism of works by today’s creative writers. Each volume of *CLC* includes excerpted criticism on about forty authors who are now living or who died after December 31, 1959. Nearly 2,000 authors have been included since the series began publication. The majority of authors covered by *CLC* are living writers who continue to publish; therefore, criticism on an author frequently appears in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, or the dramatization of a literary work as a film or television screenplay. For example, the present volume includes Richard Wright, whose 1940 novel *Native Son* continues to be read as a searing indictment of racial persecution; Nicolás Guillén, since 1961 the National Poet of Cuba; and Susan Cheever, whose book *Home before Dark* provides an intimate portrait of her father, acclaimed novelist and short story writer John Cheever. Perhaps most importantly, authors who appear frequently on the syllabuses of high school and college literature classes are heavily represented in *CLC*; Carson McCullers and Ezra Pound are examples of writers of this stature in the present volume. Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These are the contributors to the well-loved but nonscholarly genres of mystery and science fiction, as well as literary and social critics whose insights are considered valuable and informative. Foreign writers and authors who represent particular ethnic groups in the United States are also featured in each volume.

Format of the Book

Altogether there are about 600 individual excerpts in each volume—with approximately fifteen excerpts per author—taken from hundreds of literary reviews, general magazines, scholarly journals, and monographs. Contemporary criticism is loosely defined as that which is relevant to the evaluation of the author under discussion; this includes criticism written at the beginning of an author’s career as well as current commentary. Emphasis has been placed on expanding the sources for criticism by including an increasing number of scholarly and specialized periodicals. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers frequently find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by the editors supply them with vital information needed to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. However, complete bibliographical citations facilitate the location of the original source and provide all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

A *CLC* author entry consists of the following elements:

- The **author heading** cites the author’s full name, followed by birth date, and death date when applicable. The portion of the name outside 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 biographical and critical introduction. Also located at the beginning of the introduction to the author entry are any important name variations under which an author has written. Uncertainty as to a birth or death date is indicated by question marks.

- A **portrait** of the author is included when available.
- A brief **biographical and critical introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the excerpted criticism. However, *CLC* is not intended to be a definitive biographical source. Therefore, *cross-references* have been included to direct the reader to these useful sources published by Gale Research: *Contemporary Authors*, which includes detailed biographical and bibliographical sketches on nearly 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 of writers and illustrators who create books for children and young adults; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, which provides original evaluations and detailed biographies of authors important to literary history; *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, which offers autobiographical essays by prominent writers; and *Something about the Author Autobiography 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 in the introduction.
- The **excerpted criticism** represents various kinds of critical writing—a particular essay may be descriptive, interpretive, textual, appreciative, comparative, or generic. It may range in form from the brief review to the scholarly monograph. Essays are selected by the editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's literary career in general. The excerpts are presented chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. All titles by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type, which enables the reader to easily identify the works being discussed. Publication information (such as publisher names and book prices) and parenthetical numerical references (such as footnotes or page and line references to specific editions of a work) have been deleted at the editor's discretion to provide smoother reading of the text.
- 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. It does not, however, list every book or periodical consulted during the preparation of the volume.
- A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all the authors who have appeared in *CLC*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, with cross-references to these 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*. Readers 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, Ernest Hemingway is found in *CLC*, yet a writer often associated with him, F. Scott Fitzgerald, is found in *Twentieth-Century 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, e.g., *Collected Poems* (Berryman), *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, and essay collections are printed in italics, while all individual poems, short stories, essays, and songs 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 essays included in this volume, the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reprint rights, and the photographers and other individuals who provided portraits of the authors. We are 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. We also wish to thank Anthony Bogucki for his assistance with copyright research.

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 49 and 51, will feature critical excerpts on a number of authors not previously listed as well as criticism on newer works by authors included in earlier volumes. Volume 50 will be a yearbook devoted to an examination of the outstanding achievements and trends in literature during 1987.

To Be Included in Volume 49

- Richard Aldington (English poet, novelist, short story writer, critic, and autobiographer)—Regarded as one of the most significant poets of the Imagist movement, Aldington is also recognized for his later verse, in which he explored romantic love, modern warfare, and historical themes.
- Gwendolyn Brooks (American poet, novelist, autobiographer, and author of children's books)—The first black author to win a Pulitzer Prize, Brooks is distinguished for blending elevated speech and colloquial dialect in lyrical, inventive verse that objectively addresses the injustices confronted by contemporary urban black Americans.
- Humberto Costantini (Argentinian novelist, dramatist, poet, and short story writer)—In his novels *The Gods*, *The Little Guys*, and *the Police* and *The Long Night of Francisco Sanctis*, Costantini employs black humor and satire to depict political oppression in Argentina during the 1970s.
- H. L. Davis (American novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist, and critic)—Davis's works, set primarily in the American West during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, explore such universal concerns as initiation, alienation, the nature of love, and the relationship between past and present. The recent reissue of *Honey in the Horn*, his 1936 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, has generated renewed interest in Davis's career.
- Spalding Gray (American performance artist, dramatist, and actor)—Gray has won acclaim for his humorous dramatic monologues in which he transforms personal stories and anecdotes into larger reflections on contemporary society. His entry will cover *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, a collection of monologues, and *Swimming to Cambodia*, which relates Gray's experiences in Thailand during the filming of *The Killing Fields*.
- Tommaso Landolfi (Italian novelist, short story writer, critic, poet, dramatist, essayist, and translator)—Among the most innovative stylists in modern Italian fiction, Landolfi demonstrated a surreal vision and a preoccupation with language similar to those of Franz Kafka and Italo Calvino. His most respected books include *The Moon Stone* and *The Two Spinsters*.
- Elmer Rice (American dramatist, novelist, scriptwriter, editor, and autobiographer)—A prolific and diverse dramatist whose career spanned more than fifty years, Rice is best remembered for such plays as *The Adding Machine* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Street Scene*, which contributed to the development of a socially conscious American theater.
- Vladimir Voinovich (Russian-born novelist, short story writer, essayist, and nonfiction writer)—A Russian exile since 1980, Voinovich is well known for his satires of life in the Soviet Union. Recent works to be covered in his entry include *The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union*, a collection of prose pieces, and *Moscow 2042*, a futuristic novel.
- Terence de Vere White (Irish novelist, short story writer, biographer, nonfiction writer, memoirist, and editor)—In such novels as *An Affair with the Moon*, *Lucifer Falling*, and *The Distance and the Dark*, White combines mild social commentary with sophisticated humor to satirize the conventions of Irish gentility and explore the changes that have occurred in his country's social structures since the demise of British rule.
- W. S. Wilson (American short story writer and novelist)—Best known for his short story collection *Why I Don't Write Like Franz Kafka*, Wilson imbues his fiction with scientific and philosophical language and methodology to explore such topics as human relationships, epistemology, and the nature of fiction.

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 Coward works 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 actual 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 in her verse on discovering the extraordinary aspects of ordinary objects and events. Works 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.

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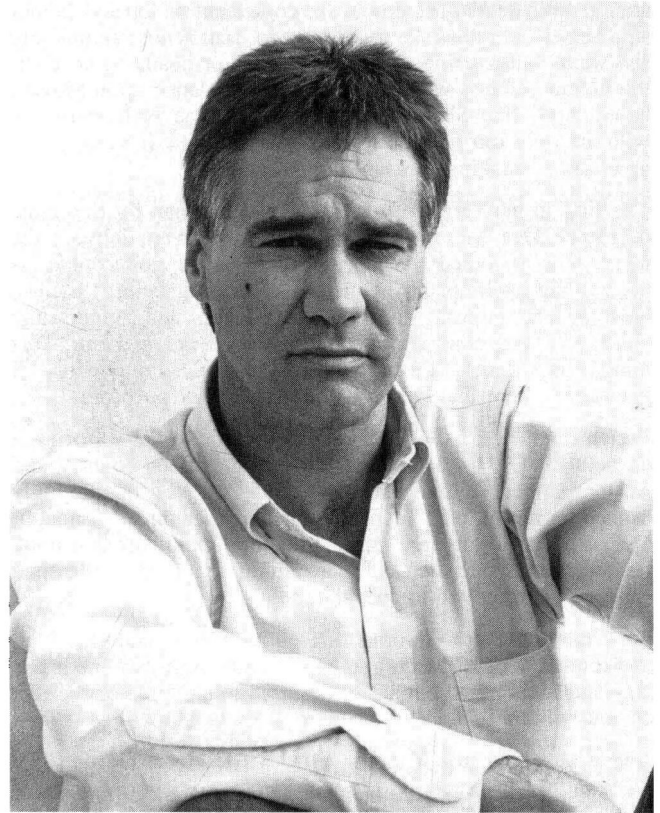
Lee K. Abbott, Jr.

19??-

American short story writer.

Abbott's fiction is characterized by energetic prose infused with hyperbole, verbal pyrotechnics, humor, and wordplay. Set primarily in the Southwest, his stories typically feature small-town men who engage the reader with their absurd, often exaggerated tales. Abbott has been compared to such writers as Barry Hannah and Harry Crews for his ribald humor and manic, unpredictable prose. Stephen Corey stated: "All of [his] word-mongering is in service of Abbott's deep ambition to make some approach, through the rich yet limited resources of speech, toward the complexities and difficulties of human thought, love, and communication."

In his stories, Abbott frequently highlights the outrageous excesses of characters who yearn to transcend feelings of emptiness and find meaning and purpose in their lives. The works in his first collection, *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting* (1980), center on vulnerable men who have been rejected by uncaring women but persist in trying to find a suitable mate. In his next volume, *Love Is the Crooked Thing* (1986), Abbott underscores the fragility of life through stories concerning such topics as death, substance abuse, and the Vietnam War. In *Strangers in Paradise* (1986), Abbott probes familial relationships, loss, and the effects of war by focusing on representative conflicts faced by characters who grew up in the American Southwest.



Photograph by Cynthia Farch. Courtesy of Lee K. Abbott, Jr.

SUSAN QUIST

Abbott writes some fulsome and fellatious prose, the kind that simply melts in your mouth, knocks your teeth down your throat. . . .

From the first word [in *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*] ("Friends"), you know you have entered the fabulous realm of Oral Roberts. And Pecos Bill and P. T. Barnum and the used car salesman and Vachel Lindsay and Muhammed Ali and Huckleberry Finn. The evangelist, the cowboy, the showman, the conman, the vagabond poet, the athlete, the bad-boy-who-will-not-growup—they're all here, more or less, and ruefully, in a contemporary, tongue-in-chic facsimile of the Tall Tale style, which is apropos to the content: i.e., the ragged individualist pursuing the American dream. Which, though not well, appears to be alive and kicking the hell out of any guy who dares to come near.

There is a lot of violence, mostly confined (thank you, Jesus) to the verbal attack. Here, for example, is Scooter E. Watts, "creepy, brilliant, a loser, weak and consumptive, his guts a quaking moil and true image of Modern Times." Who has "stuffed his clothes in a ditty bag and, hitching, lit out, heading south." . . .

Seeking his in a place called Goree, Texas, "a place of crude but serious beliefs," Scooter spies his battlefield—a golf course viewed through a barbed wire fence. Having landed here as

improbably as the golf balls he knocks into the appropriate holes in his roundabout way, Scooter proceeds to make a killing in gophers, club ladies, and longshots, spending most of his winnings on "clothes and gizmos," purchased at Neiman-Marcus with the comment that he doesn't know what it is, "but products gratify my inner self." As opposed to the poetic desserts he finally reaps.

These are delivered by a couple of karmic executioners who move through these stories like those hitchhikers you pass at sundown, only to see them finishing up their breakfast at the Hojo's just as you arrive, forty-five minutes behind them, and you're waiting for their table, but they're in no hurry to leave as they know whatever they do, they will always arrive forty-five minutes ahead of folks like you. . . .

[Another character, Rae Nell Tipton], is a holy terror. Various costumes in leather and chains, toreator pants, an ecru velveteen jumpsuit, spike heels, black short-shorts and a Spanish hairdo, a Peek-A-Boo bra from Frederick's of Hollywood, and nothing at all, Rae Nell is more than America's answer to Helen of Troy. A "140 pounds of flatland farmgirl," Rae Nell rises from this literary landscape like the Statue of Liberty, on the move and the make, leaving a trail of body parts and moral remains in her wake, the kind of woman men fight, kill, die and lie for, as she enjoys and encourages this form of courtship, loving the winner. But not as much as she loves the fight.

"I'm a writer," she says. "I'm doing research and absorbing experience . . . I specialize in grief and overcoming . . . I want thrills and vanquishing."

Like the men who woo her, Rae Nell is, in her way, hellbound for disappointment as she simply cannot be vanquished, for she thrives on the effort to do it and grows stronger with every attempt. Whatever goes down, she comes out on top and cannot stop herself, nor does she try or want to, as it is not vanquishing she wants but a string of broken hearts, or heads—like Kali, the Indian goddess whose pleasure it is to dance upon Shiva's belly. And, like Shiva, these daredevils Rae Nell teams up with are only too pleased to lie down and take it as she is so agreeable, "making pleasant doggie noises."

The first in her series of escorts is a gentleman by the name of Fleece Dee Monroe and he is the one who delivers the message to Scooter E. Watts, out there on the golf course, as his golfbag itself speaks of medieval hoodoo, being "a cumbersome and infernal item, full of pockets and zippers and chains and three compartments with heavy locks on them. 'This thing's imported,'" Fleece advises his hapless opponent. "'I got stuff in here that works without reason or purpose.'"

Which might just as well be said in regards to these stories, I do believe. Or, as Billy Jack Eddy, the famous country and western singer, says of one of the hits Rae Nell has lovingly penned for him, it has "raunch and double meanings." Enough, one suspects, to engorge many a doctoral candidate and book reviewer. Even one such as I, who am rarely tempted to learned endeavor, am moved to speculate.

For example, there is something about Fleece and Rae Nell that reminds one of Jason and Medea, although this one is too lazy and ignorant to pursue it, assuming that some of the rest of you will.

And what about this irritating title? "The Heart Never FITS Its Wanting." Somehow, the word FITS does not. And so it does, by some perverse logic, as it sets your teeth on edge, the better to gnash them, my dear. . . .

Naturally, the title also raises some questions regarding phallic inadequacy, which herein appears unaVOIDable, given the nature of it as personified by Rae Nell, who explains, "I hear the call of bigger things."

It also may remind one of the old saw, "his eyes are bigger than his belly." As that is the case, in every case, this brings us to a minor beef, or bellyache: i.e., whilst reading these stories, one may occasionally feel that one has bitten off more than one can chew, as they are so rich and heavily spiced. I mean to tell you every paragraph is loaded with wit and internal rhymes more complex than poetry dares in these Modern Times, and literate and hip innuendo, and references to military combat, and commando imagery, and so forth, and ALL of this demands attention. So that after awhile one may feel a touch of indigestion. But then it does occur to one that this whopping compression of sensual stimuli may be part of some devious scheme and underlying theme: i.e., American greed. Not just in regards to products that gratify the inner self, but in regards to our quote lust for life unquote.

As Rae Nell so aptly puts it, "Quote I have a fat man's appetite for truth unquote."

While there is much here to ruminate, you do not have to, as these stories can be swallowed whole and absorbed directly

into the bloodstream, where they will warm to your cellular memories of your wasted youth and loonies you have known and loved and lost. But mostly, these stories will rekindle your love affair with the English language and for that reason alone should be read, as they are of a High Moral Order. Besides which, they're fun, even if they do have a serious intent, it is so well disguised you need not dwell upon it as you will do that when you least expect it. . . .

Susan Quist, in a review of "The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting," in *The American Book Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, March-April, 1981, p. 9.

WILLIAM MARLING

The pure products of America only go crazy in our literature, and then because a veiled narrator is stalking a Rip Van Winkle, a Quentin Compson, or an Elsie and hoping for a heart-shot on the nation's tawdriness. In fact, the pure products are still out there, tolerably happy, annoyingly able to quench their miseries in 3.2 beer and softball.

[In *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*] Lee Abbott has surveyed their landscape, a dusty stretch from Goree and Olney and Brownfield in Texas on through Oaks, Oklahoma, and out into Arkansas. It is a land "quote counterarticulate, mythopathic and wanton unquote, a meager skyline of grain silos, truck dealerships, saloons and an El Dorado of shit-kicker storefronts." The residents are mythopathic too, if Abbott's names mean anything: Billy Jack Eddy, Scooter E. Watts, Lamar Thibodeaux, Dallas Tanksley, Sgt. Donnie T. Bobo, Fast Eddie Morris, and Rae Nell Tipton. The characters in these ten stories take their own measures before we can confuse them with heroes. In their confessions of brokenheartedness, lust, and woefulness, they set themselves so far below us and are yet so hyperbolic in expression, that a tension of condescension results. "You can measure my need," cries Fast Eddie Morris; he has learned the "secret lingo for Need, and Interior Hurt and The Special Freeing Presence of a Woman." Language is our yardstick on him.

But it is easy, especially on first reading, to lose sight of the connection between the language and the emotion, for Abbott is a dazzling stylist. He works irony, hyperbole, epithet, and anticlimax into sentences that achieve speed by elision, by fragment, that sometimes begin and end with a participle. He uses truisms, aphorisms, and romantic sentiments—the favored American forms of wisdom—to whittle emotion down to size; he is particularly effective when he writes about his alter ego Rae Nell. . . . At once a satire on popular writing and a warning by Abbott to himself, Rae Nell expresses with broken brain the truth about us:

"I hear the call of bigger things," she was saying. "I don't know tender nor sweet nor innocence. I know fate and government secrets and little beatings in the chest. Hard is what I am, always was, always will be." She was quoting from one of her stories, purely autobiographical. "Hard like mysteries, and deep too. Deep as any insight. Deeper! Quote I have a fat man's appetite for truth unquote."

As in the work of Donald Barthelme, literary pyrotechnics conceal a concern with love: how can you revivify it except by holding it up, slashing it, burlesquing it? . . . Abbott uses the first person predominantly; his narrators are all hard-luck

kids, abject, love-struck and vulnerable. Their problems are heart problems—unrequited love, separation, jealousy—that they tackle with a directness (which Abbott's prose conceals) and a faith in luck that substitutes for Providence. (pp. 335-36)

What changes the lives of Abbott's characters is love; it breaks their luck and creates an empathy that lets them move around behind the hyperbolic language they speak. Their vulnerability becomes an emotional sail, to be filled with the breath of tall tales.

So much happens with this language that we forget the structure of Abbott's stories and only on reflection notice that many of them lack narrative necessity. He has difficulty closing a piece at the pitch he sustains for the first three-quarters of it; in fact, he seems loath to part with his characters, and most of his stories simply linger to an end. His plots need to rise above his art more, and since his themes touch the matter of the human heart, his resolutions demand a sense of *consequence*.

If these stories are also concentrated—reading them is rather like eating a box of chocolates—and sometimes unframed, there is also a sense right to the end of impressive craft, of serious intent. Scooter E. Watts seems to speak for Abbott when he says "that if there weren't meaning or purpose or reason in this good life, there had to be something—sum, quotient, salty residue. 'There's paste or ash or goo,' he said. 'Me, I'm gonna find it, shake its muscular hand.'" (pp. 336-37)

William Marling "Heart Problems of Hard-Luck Kids," in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 66, No. 3, Summer, 1981, pp. 335-37.

ELLEN FRIEDMAN

The voice of Abbott's ten stories [in *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*] is manic, garrulous, at moments hysterical, and always just barely sane. One reads these stories to listen to this engaging voice which strings together ideas and physical and abstract images with a calculated indiscrimination. Adding to the sense of randomness is Abbott's obsessive use of the conjunction "and." Its repeated use in linking ideas has the effect of defying our reasonable expectation that prose consist not only of words but also that it express the logical relationships between them. Abbott's language is evocative and suggestive, stubbornly resisting being tied to a specific meaning. In control, this experiment in voice allows true and illuminating portraits, as in this description of a golfer from the story, "Near the Heart Place of Grue": "Lamar Thibodeux was a B card pro, slump-shouldered and pot-bellied, his work a study in secret momentums and human will."

At times, however, the voice is incapable of the right note, and there is a passage of frustrating opacity as in this description taken from the same passage as above. The narrator says, "In front of him toiled a foursome of men, the most anguished of whom had a Puritan swing, all kneecaps and elbows, protobad and reactionary, his follow-through as novel as war, his weak Vardon grip a violation of things beautiful."

Often enough, though, Abbott's governing voice imbues his cartoon-like characters with depth and embroiders his tales with a soulful yearning. And although the voice is not equally compelling in these ten Southwestern tales through which the same handful of characters confront or avoid or desire one another, it succeeds brilliantly in the title story, "The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting." The story's narrator, an air force man and ex-baseball player, is grieving over the loss of his wife, Rae Nell,

a writer, who has left him for the fourth time. After recounting their bizarre relationship in terms of his longing and her cruel abandonments, the narrator concludes sorrowfully and yet with characteristic wit: "So here I am, frazzled and a shame to my uniform, knowing I'm doomed and wanting my Rae Nell and eager to get back in her stories again." (pp. 93-4)

Ellen Friedman, "High Pressure Fiction," in *The Ontario Review*, No. 15, Fall-Winter, 1981-82, pp. 93-100.

WILLIAM KOON

[The stories in *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*] identify Lee Abbott, who teaches at Case Western Reserve, as one of America's really promising young writers, as one of the few new writers who really has a striking voice. The comparisons are going to be with Hunter Thompson, Harry Crews, and Barry Hannah because Abbott's prose has their same wacky energy and unpredictable craziness. Take the opening of the first story in *The Heart Never Fits*:

Friends, at thirty-four, on the edge of triple ruin, his crazed and minutely crenate brain steaming with waste, Scooter E. Watts was a bona fide numero furtivo—creepy, brilliant, a loser, weak and consumptive, his guts a quaking moil and true image of Modern Times.

(p. 98)

This style is the right vehicle for Abbott's strange world and his stranger characters. Scooter is a wanderer, a man whose dreams get wiped out on a regular basis, one who plays golf at night, hugging himself when he hits a ball well, firing his machine pistol at gophers when he mis-hits. He goes back on the road again after losing the big match to a character who wears burlap on the golf course and rubs his driver against Rae Nell's chest before teeing off. Angry women in their underwear attack minor league baseball players with shotguns, on the playing field. Army privates in Viet Nam wear Bermuda shorts, golf hats, and alligator shirts into combat. The same privates try to lure the Viet Cong out of their caves by offering them Otis Redding records. The senior trip for a high school class is to a whore house in Juarez.

The remarkable thing about all this is that Abbott's characters come out of his wild and disjointed world looking strangely human. Their peculiar situations seem to emphasize their humanity. Love is their primary strength and/or weakness. And it stands out distinctly as necessity in Abbott's absurd world. Pfc. Donnie Bobo, in his Bermudas, may be trying to do away with the enemy, but he would much rather love one of their women. And Tump, who rides with Black Jack Pershing, ends up with a cozy chat with Pancho Villa—much better than fighting.

The blends, I think, are good ones—a tough world and some interesting characters trying to work their way through it on their most basic emotions, a bright young writer with something to say and a startling way of saying it. We should watch for much more from Lee Abbott. (p. 99)

William Koon, in a review of "The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Winter, 1982, pp. 98-9.

HILARY MASTERS

The people that rip and tear through the stories of Lee K. Abbott, Jr. (*The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*) also seem compelled to suffer in domains as restricted as the minor-league ball-parks that field some of his characters. Abbott has genuine affection for his people and where violence occurs it is organic and not laid on, but strangely enough, his remarkable gift of language seems to imprison the people in these stories so they never rise above the sentimental level of the country-and-western songs that throb in the background.

Read singly, many of the stories give off a guileless power, but read in one sitting, as a collection, they begin to sound very monotonous, rather like driving through Abbott's Southwest, the car radio fixed on the same funny-sad songs about women deserting men at the K-Mart. The language, at first illuminating and delightful, begins to get tiresome, long-winded—like that of a joke meant to delay an overfamiliar punchline. . . . [Abbott's] voice intrudes on his characters' lives and limits their possibilities, keeps them at a minimum, to serve the purpose of his rhetoric. Almost all of [the stories] are told in the first person, but whether the *I* is a small-town ball player, a third-rate country-western singer or an oil-rigger, it is all the same voice: the good-ole-boy persona of Lee K. Abbott, Jr.

If the men are interchangeable, the women in these stories are fiercely individual, but with a shared characteristic. They always seem to be "leaving" (some attention might be paid to the *heavy* significance put on that soft word by our pop culture), and they pursue the men in the tales with a single-minded devotion only equalled by the female praying mantis. The sexual act smacks of cannibalism and the males surrender to it in flights of little boy dirty talk as if to mask their vulnerability to these Southwestern *succubi*. It is an amusing view, on paper anyway, and in one case a lover returns more and more crippled from each rendezvous—eventually requiring hospitalization. This is a tale told since Boccaccio, and Mr. Abbott gives it no new dimensions, simply setting it to the chords of a ten-string guitar, so the story becomes, like the collection, a kind of bluegrass camp.

However, these stories are to be recommended. The voice is young and there's every hope that the future will bring longer, more mature works in which the characters will be allowed to stand at the plate on their own without the "ostentatious and contrived" pose Abbott gives to a minor-league hitter in his current line-up. (pp. 127-28)

Hilary Masters, "Some New Totalitarians, and Other Views," in The Ohio Review, No. 27, 1982, pp. 122-31.

KIRKUS REVIEWS

[*Love Is the Crooked Thing* contains] stories of verbal flash and pyrotechnic drive but with less satisfying results beneath the surface. . . .

Fearless and omnivorous in their stylistic reach, these stories too often seem to be conceived more of energy and dash than of durable substance. . . . Striving for a Robert Coover-esque intensity of satire, Abbott too often fails to rise above the flashing surface of his own prose, and at other times falls into an unexplored banality that poses as thoughtfulness. "*We Get Smashed and Our Endings Are Swift*" is the story of two soldiers trained as elite assassins; the horror-descriptions, though,

carry the story along as an end in themselves, replacing what ought to reveal itself of the satirist's higher reach: "Oh, I did love the murder: the life-affirming 'Aaaarrggghhh!' the dying made when they spied the vast What-Not opening to greet them." What is the alternative to such madness-violence? "*Stand in a Row and Learn*," another army story, suggests only a dewy-eyed ignorance-as-bliss: the narrator's apotheosis takes him to "that place, free of threat and worry, where, in the company of pride and ignorance, we could live handsome and free forever."

Highly ambitious in a number of literary ways, these are stories of undeniable flash and sweep constructed on a foundation of the too-often jejune. . . . In sum: less at the core than meets the eye.

A review of "Love Is the Crooked Thing," in Kirkus Reviews, Vol. LIV, No. 2, January 15, 1986, p. 64.

AMY HEMPEL

The implicit code behind Lee K. Abbott's fiction seems to be: if you haven't gone *too* far, you haven't gone far enough. Or as a California comic put it back in the 1970's, "There is a light within you—burn it out!"

Not that the lights in the lives of [the eleven stories contained in *Love Is the Crooked Thing*] burn so brightly to begin with. Living in the author's native Southwest—a landscape of dry arroyos, of "trees and buttes and colors from Mister Disney"—Mr. Abbott's characters include a local rocker known as Dr. Filth, a coked-out college professor, a "sissy" outlaw, and assorted "dipsticks" and would-be smoothies.

These are people who "live apart from grace"; that is how Mr. Abbott put it in his earlier collection, *The Heart Never Fits Its Wanting*. The first book showed the author to be something of a linguistic hellion in the manner of such hard-barked wordslingers as Barry Hannah and Thomas McGuane. . . .

Here, as before, Mr. Abbott's stylized hyperbolic prose and loopy humor steal the show. The "bifurcated and multifarious" lectures of the college professor who falls in love with cocaine in "*The Eldest of Things*" give way to his classroom declaration that "he had vaulted across the decades, from gamete to scholar, without benefit of the swerve and downwardness of adolescence." He looks forward to turning on one of his female students with what his drug dealer has promised will be "a mixture likened to the tears of a lost people." . . .

"*The Purpose of This Creature Man*" gives us the patchy career of a group of 1940's Oklahoma outlaws headed up by a desperado chiropractor named—what else?—Doc. (Reference is made to Doc's autobiography, *Hands Up!*) "I want the massive, love-loose and wicked," Doc says, interviewing prospective no-accounts for a new gang. Accepted are the narrator, a poet who is in it for "seasoning" and the Verdigris Kid, who calls out to his gang as a robbery is foiled, "Darlings, we have company." The gang does time and then regroups. The poet, now minus one ear, says, "I have fled poetry. . . . I am now an essayist. Let's ride." And they do, with admirable self-parody, into the final chapter of Doc's autobiography.

If that last quote sounds more than a little like Barry Hannah, there are plenty of other noises of that kind throughout this collection. And a Vietnam story, "*We Get Smashed and Our Endings Are Swift*," is territory covered better 11 years ago in Mr. Hannah's story "Midnight and I'm Not Famous Yet."

Mr. Abbott's enthusiastic wordplay is a great deal of fun, as in the following alliterative riff when a soldier puts the war behind him and says goodbye to "that sound the muscles make in the more hormonal moments of menace." But there are times when his craving for the new earns him only obfuscation, times when speech proceeds on the broken leg of non sequitur.

When Mr. Abbott stows the be-bop speed rap for a little peace and quiet, he writes quietly powerful stories like **"Having the Human Thing of Joy"** and **"The Final Proof of Fate and Circumstance."** . . .

"The Final Proof of Fate and Circumstance" is a father-son love story having to do with getting to "that place, made habitable by age and self-absorption and fatigue, that says much about those heretofore pantywaist emotions like pity and fear." The father tells his son an old and terrible story (about an accident in which he killed a man) as a prelude to a new and terrible tale, one whose moral, the son later tells his wife, is "Everything is fragile." This reduction is and is not the whole story, but *this* story closes the book in a moving way.

It's a fact that Mr. Abbott's characters mostly sound alike—an outlaw in the '40s and a judge in the '80s, American women and Vietcong all use the same wiggy argot. But it's language coded for laughs, done up with tremendous energy. Mr. Abbott is right when he says, through his outlaw Doc, "Words redeem and give the heart something to beat for."

Amy Hempel, "Linguistic Whiz-Bangs," in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 16, 1986, p. 10

SUSAN WOOD

"Every time Garland told the story . . . he gave it a new title, his favorites being those with sweep and miracle." So begins the first story in Lee Abbott's impressive collection, *Love Is the Crooked Thing*. Indeed, Abbott himself favors titles with sweep and miracle (**"The Purpose of This Creature Man,"** **"The Final Proof of Fate and Circumstance"**) every time he tells *the* story, the one story that all 11 of his stories tell. It could, in fact, be summed up in two of Abbott's titles: that inevitably **"We Get Smashed and Our Endings Are Swift"** makes **"Having the Human Thing of Joy"** all the more precious and imperative.

But the "discrete and illuminated landscape of wanting love and having it" is not always easy to find, and for Abbott's characters the way there is frequently hazardous, almost always touching and often funny, whether it takes them to Vietnam, Cleveland, Ohio, or Deming, New Mexico. What Abbott's characters—these ordinary Burls and Doyles and Dwights and Lamars—must learn is the ordinary lesson, extraordinary for each of us in its discovery, that, as one of them says, "Everything is fragile."

Such knowledge comes in various shapes of loss. For Pfc. Garland H. Steeples [in **"When Our Dream World Finds Us, and These Hard Times Are Gone"**], it comes in the form of a young Vietnamese woman met, and lost, in the Greyhound bus station in Deming, where she is briefly stopped over on her way to becoming a rock and roll star after "working for Jesus." . . . For Garland it is love, the kind in which his heart "just flops over," and the story of this brief encounter becomes "a thing he told maybe a thousand times in 1968," in Vietnam, a legend that survives long after Garland ships out to be repeated again and again, either "embellished or picked clean," by everybody from Edward Landsdale himself to O. T. Wil-

liams, "a Roy Acuff look-alike from Houston." Eventually, the story makes it back home to "the World," to be told for the last time by a Vietnam vet named Onan Motley in a moment of passion "which may have been the high point of an entire life" in which he feels "for an instant or two the shining presence of Garland himself."

Often, the shape of knowledge is death, or its prospect. . . . For Lamar Hoyt, in **"The Human Thing of Joy,"** the knowledge comes in a snapshot he finds among his mother's belongings after her death, a snapshot of his mother as a young, beautiful, and very naked woman, knowledge that he only really understands years later when he discovers that his wife has been unfaithful:

I have seen it written in a story-book [my son] Buddy has that life is a train ride, with many stations and much clickety-clack—which, though it is only metaphor, may be true; but the ride is not straight because every now and then—as between one event and another—it is revealed, so the book says, that quote you are making a curve and a light is thrown back showing a mountain of meaning rising behind you on the way you've come unquote. . . .

Not all of these stories work equally well. In some of them the voice is so oracular, so extravagant that one feels bludgeoned and the voices begin to sound exactly alike. This is particularly true when Abbott moves out of his familiar world. . . .

The best of them, though, are rife with the miracle and tragedy of life. My favorites are those which feature Lamar T. Hoyt, the golf-playing Chevrolet dealer from Deming, or some variation of this small-town Everyman (sometimes called Dwight, Doyle or Tyler), and given Abbott's recent stories in *The Atlantic*, this seems to be the direction his work is taking. Here is Lamar, recently divorced and about to go out on the town for the first time:

I stood in front of the mirror for an hour perhaps, studying myself as I have seen others look at my automobiles they can't afford. I said to myself such hopeful phrases as "You look good, Lamar, you really do," and splashed myself with a modern fragrance my son Buddy sent for Xmas. I smelled like a jungle, I thought, which was maybe right for this world.

Lee Abbott is right for this world all right, with all its sorrows and joys, and we can be glad for these stories which remind us that, like Garland Steeples' dreamgirl, we must "Take up the light and shake self's tailfeathers," stories that offer us "a moral which was complex and finicky and a thing as fundamental as shelter, a moral, you know, which resisted all words save those which trafficked in fortune and love."

Susan Wood, "The Illuminated Landscape of Love," in *Book World—The Washington Post*, May 11, 1986, p. 9.

W. C. HAMLIN

[*Love Is the Crooked Thing*] will not be received without reservation by any number of traditionalists, principally because of what appears—at least in some of the stories—to be quaint little subplots devoted primarily to the manipulation of language. . . . That is the bad news. The good news is that Abbott

in his 11 tales does indeed take a look at love through a fractured lens in a hazy world; and if love sometimes comes a cropper, it does, nevertheless, keep coming, as it must. This in itself is comforting amid persistent confusion and chaos, and it is good to know that Abbott has channeled his considerable talent and energy into mining the only lode in the universe rich enough for everyone.

W. C. Hamlin, in a review of *"Love Is the Crooked Thing,"* in *Choice*, Vol. 23, Nos. 11-12, July-August, 1986, p. 1671.

THE VIRGINIA QUARTERLY REVIEW

[Abbott's stories in *Love Is the Crooked Thing*] grab a reader and take him along for a big ride and a heartfelt lesson. His characters move, act, and speak often "supported only by a wish and a marvel, and a near miss with love," and they are compelling even in their most foolish posturing. And whether he is writing about soldiers in Vietnam, lovers, rock stars or a gang of outrageously charming bank robbers, Abbott's linguistic power is impressive. His sentences seem to flower and bloom with sheer exuberance, releasing words and intentions into a rich space above logic, a space wrought by pure, romping imagination. But make no mistake. Abbott is more than a word wizard, more than a fired-up poet exploding phrase and rhyme. One would be wrong to take Mr. Abbott and his fiction as anything less than fresh and innovative.

A review of *"Love Is the Crooked Thing,"* in *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4, Autumn, 1986, p. 125.

KIRKUS REVIEWS

Abbott's third book of stories [*Strangers in Paradise*] . . . shows him still working eagerly and rambunctiously for vivid effects, but mainly on the surface of things.

"**The End of Grief**" is an affecting story of a man haunted by his brother's death in the Bataan Death March, but in the pieces that follow, a hyped-up boyishness of tone serves often to undercut the very substance and profundities that Abbott seems to insist repeatedly are there. . . . "X" begins as the story of a father's terrible and comic rages, then loses force as it falls in love with its own voice and degenerates into the tropes of the tall tale before succumbing still later to a wash of father-son sentimentality. A vast and threatening world-doom is said to crouch in the wings in these stories ("we are all central, I believe, to events which are leading us . . . to the dry paradise that is the end of things," says one narrator), but Abbott's ambitious comedy tends less to recognize the threat than to diminish and simplify responses to it. "**The World Is Almost Rotten**," about a lifelong golf rivalry, showcases the author's magical and inventive excessiveness with words and image, yet falls prey by end to a merely breezy style and a comic-book hyperbole; war in general ("**Youth on Mars**") and Vietnam in particular ("**Category Z**"; "**Rolling Thunder**"; "**Where Is Garland Steeples Now?**") come on stage, but one feels even there that the words are getting in the way of the subject—pushing, nudging, inflating. A blithe and post-hippie contentedness, it seems, is the true foundation for the whole here holding the fiction at the ground-level of the sentimental. . . .

Gifted in style, and with high claims for the deep probe, but best for those who really want only to close their eyes and listen to the music.

A review of *"Strangers in Paradise,"* in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. LIV, No. 24, December 15, 1986, p. 1810.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

The same characters keep turning up in the 14 stories in [*Strangers in Paradise*]. They're the men of Deming, N.M.—car salesmen, World War II veterans, teachers and bank officers. Golf at the Mimbres Valley Country Club is central to their lives, as is liquor, the relationship of fathers and sons, and an exuberant, lush style of speech. Sensitive to the humor and dark disappointments at the heart of these lives, Abbott endows their basic ordinariness with epic, often hilariously comic, qualities. . . . While [Abbott's] imagination is extravagant and his ear for the ebullient and generous speech of his characters true, they often speak in the same voice, diminishing each story's individual punch. Abbott writes in the short-story form . . . but, for this volume, the novel genre might have been more appropriate.

A review of *"Strangers in Paradise,"* in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 230, No. 25, December 19, 1986, p. 46.

WILLIAM FERGUSON

[In *Strangers in Paradise*, plots] tend to overlap, a peculiarity that often becomes a virtue; it is as if several fields of force were being directed at a single invisible core of meaning, in a prose at once exuberant and inventive.

Speech comes easily to Mr. Abbott's characters, whether they are cursing under fire at Khe Sanh or speaking in tongues in the locker room of a country club. Communication, by contrast, proves supremely difficult. One of the most successful stories, "**The End of Grief**," is about how the shocks of war can send incoherence ringing down whole decades. . . .

Strategies of discourse are always suggestive, often desperately sad, as in the bittersweet story about a disturbed soldier in Vietnam who chooses a stray dog as his confidant; under fire, "faced with the impossible choice between life and love," he finds it necessary to kill the animal to protect his hiding place. Back in America, as a peripatetic bandit, he invariably includes the "Vietnam dog story" in his holdup notes, and soon petty bureaucrats across the land—in an image that should please aspiring writers everywhere—are being forced to read imaginative prose at gunpoint.

"**Living Alone in Iota**" is perhaps the least successful of the 14 stories. Reese, the hapless antihero, has lost his girlfriend; in describing his buffoonish reaction, the author unfortunately retreats into writerly self-parodies (Reese's face is "a moil of desire and grue"). The humor is so unrelentingly Olympian that it begins to feel unnerving and hubristic.

Echoing at times "**The End of Grief**," "X" investigates the darker side of family relationships. The narrator attempts to understand a lunatic childhood experience in which his father, unhappy over a game of golf, destroyed an entire locker room at the local country club. For the son this bizarre episode represents the unknowable X of the human soul; in a truly fearful capitulation, he concludes that he and his dad are the same: "two creatures made blind by the same light." Whatever else Mr. Abbott's X may be, it surely equals a fiction of craft and pathos.

William Ferguson, "Havoc at the 19th Hole," in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 8, 1987, p. 12.

MARCIA TAGER

Like the American Southwest that is their setting, [the stories in *Strangers in Paradise*] are scorched and crude and sometimes poignantly beautiful. A main character, variously named, threads through many of them. He has grown up in New Mexico and returned there to live, and his spiritual deformity perhaps reflects the deformity of our culture. . . . In some of the stories Abbott becomes both maudlin and macho and even his black humor doesn't save his prose from sounding like a country-western lyric in which everyone is betrayed by faithless love. But in the best of these stories Abbott is clear-eyed, compassionate, funny, and lyrical.

Marcia Tager, in a review of "*Strangers in Paradise*," in *Library Journal*, Vol. 112, No. 3, February 15, 1987, p. 159.

STEPHEN COREY

In "*The Eldest of Things*," fifth of eleven stories in this distinctive collection [*Love Is the Crooked Thing*], we hear of an automobile "so sweetly tuned it seemed capable of speech—a thunder as throaty and pure . . . as oratory itself." Few readers could get this far into *Love Is the Crooked Thing* without realizing how this odd and rhythmic description also refers obliquely to the prose style of its author. Lee K. Abbott is a high-powered lover of language—its sounds and ambiguities, its syntax and silliness—and all his main characters are fellow *amateurs*.

Some of Abbott's word-merchants are registered loonies like Bobby Stoops, the former rock musician attempting a middle-aged comeback in "*The Unfinished Business of Childhood*": "Fierce wars and faithful loves shall moralize my songs. . . . I suspect I will be vast, and a mighty turmoil to the ignorant many." Others are somewhat saner types from unusual professions, like the turn-of-the-century outlaw, Doc Leroy Toolchin, in "*The Purpose of This Creature Man*." . . . Still others are ordinary citizens inspired, whether by life or Abbott's fancy, to make active use of language. . . . (p. 442)

All of this wordmongering is in service of Abbott's deep ambition to make some approach, through the rich yet limited resources of speech, toward the complexities and difficulties of human thought, love, and communication. Abbott refuses to join the swelling army of contemporary fiction writers who propound this or that variety of bastardized and too-often-lame Hemingwayism. He prefers instead titles with "sweep and

miracle"; stories "that featured comedy in large doses and not a little horridness"; stories "about mystery, about the strange union of innocence and loss, which sometimes stands for wisdom." Employing a lush and often wild diction, he is unwilling to settle for Wordsworth's "real language of men in a state of vivid sensation," but seems rather to be trying to invent the languages people might speak if their vocabularies and vocal cords could match their feelings.

The *love* in the book's title manifests itself—sometimes curiously or even perversely—in every story, but it is deepest and clearest (as is Abbott's prose) in the half-dozen tales about families and lovers. In "*When Our Dream World Finds Us, and These Hard Times Are Gone*," a legendary story is born from a young man's constant retelling of his brief encounter with a "dream girl" in a New Mexico bus depot. His endlessly reworked fantasy carries him through the Vietnam war—an undercurrent present throughout this book—and later serves to comfort others who pass it along to their own loved ones. . . . (pp. 442-43)

[Abbott's] stories are concerned with the painful adjustments we must make for any relationship to endure. In "*The Final Proof of Fate and Circumstance*," a father reveals to his grown son a whole prior existence involving a first wife and her early death. The father makes himself vulnerable to the son, who then recognizes that every human life is "a scene of hope followed by another of misfortune and doom." And vulnerability is at the center of "*Having the Human Thing of Joy*"—arguably the finest story in the collection—where both the dead and the living are put at risk: the narrator discovers things about his deceased parents and then about his wife, intimate secrets with the potential to crush his images of all three. But with wrenching and gentle selflessness, he accepts their "common, ancient desires" and learns to love them yet again—and more than ever.

Like the poets, psychotherapists, and stand-up comics he resembles, Abbott is not equally successful with all of his lines. His machine of words sometimes runs out of control, driving his prose toward self-parody; and even his best stories should be absorbed one at a time, because some of his narrators can come to sound too much alike. At his strongest he makes us forget any samenesses, but occasionally—most noticeably in "*The Eldest of Things*," the tale of a drugged-up and dragged-out professor—Abbott seems to be striving for special effects instead of using his brilliant, singular style to lead us to the startling insights of his finest work. (p. 443)

Stephen Corey, in a review of "*Love Is the Crooked Thing*," in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XLI, No. 2, Summer, 1987, pp. 442-43.

George (Granville) Barker

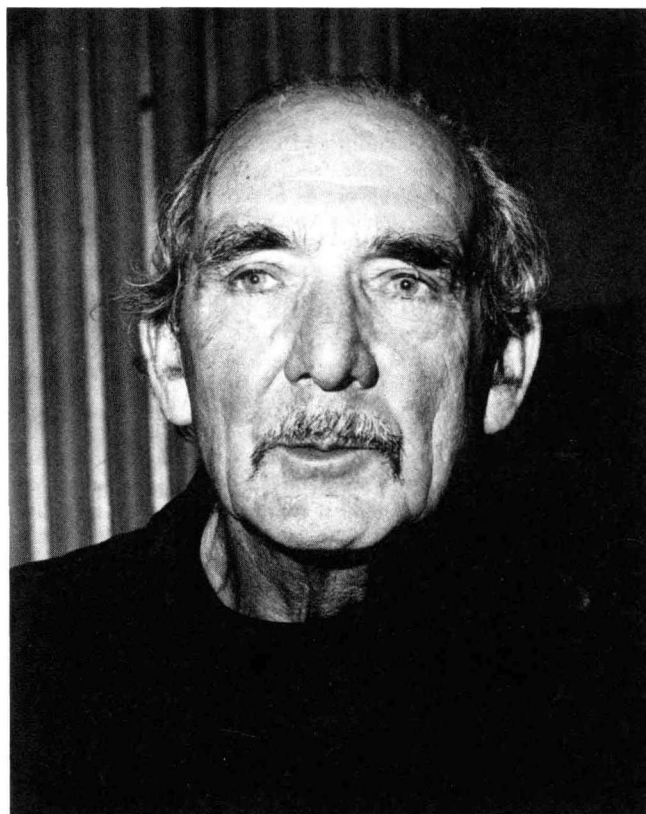
1913-

English poet, novelist, dramatist, critic, editor, and author of children's books.

In his poetry, Barker blends assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme to convey the physical and spiritual aspects of human life. While much of his early writing demonstrates a social awareness in the manner of such prominent poets of the 1930s as W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Stephen Spender, Barker's subsequent work is generally considered to parallel Dylan Thomas's neo-Romantic verse in his exploration of metaphysical themes and his rejection of social and political concerns. These later poems exhibit a more direct confrontation of such issues as the existence of God, the nature of religious faith, and human mortality and sexuality. Barker's ability to evolve different styles throughout his career and the moral concepts that unify his work prompted David Gascoyne to comment: "I recognize and salute in George Barker a poet whose work has never ceased to develop, who has been almost uninterruptedly prolific, whose themes have been basic and perennial, and who has remained faithful to his exceptional gift, enriching our language and literature."

Barker received no formal education after the age of fourteen. When he was twenty, he published his first collection of verse, *Thirty Preliminary Poems* (1933). Many of these pieces were later republished in *Poems* (1935) and evidence in their elegiac subject matter Barker's preoccupation with death. While these poems were often commended for Barker's inventive use of images, aural techniques, and language, many critics found such elements verbally extravagant at the expense of clarity, a contention leveled against much of his work. However, these verses earned the respect of T. S. Eliot, who was largely responsible for the publication of *Poems*, and William Butler Yeats, who concluded *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* with four of Barker's pieces. Barker's most celebrated works of the 1930s are *Calamiterror* (1937) and *Elegy on Spain* (1939). The ten cantos of *Calamiterror* present images drawn from bucolic and industrial landscapes to document both the beautiful and the unpleasant characteristics of the world. The title poem of *Elegy on Spain*, which is also included in *Lament and Triumph* (1940), is admired for the nondogmatic contrast Barker provides to the Marxist poems on the Spanish Civil War written by Auden and Spender.

Barker's next collections of new poems, *Sacred and Secular Elegies* (1943), *Eros in Dogma* (1944), and *Love Poems* (1947), mark a gradual change in his verse style. Less syntactically complex, these works feature numerous Biblical allusions, greater erotic content, and references to World War II as well as a more objective point of view. The prophetic tone and Manichean qualities of these volumes, which have elicited critical comparisons to the Romantic writings of William Blake and Lord Byron, prompted Martha Fodaski to note: "In revealing the meaning of the hell and death of the modern world, Barker asserts the value of their opposites and makes poetry of the dualities. At their worst, the middle [period] poems are full of empty rhetoric; at their best, they represent the artistic reconciliation of interpenetrating opposites and a prophecy of better things to come."



Photograph by Mark Gerson

In his later verse, Barker continues to explore themes related to death and love and to document the search for faith in an increasingly complex world. *News of the World* (1950), *The True Confession of George Barker* (1950; expanded, 1964), and *A Vision of Beasts and Gods* (1954) are characterized by Barker's experimentation with different styles and evidence his reading of such poets as Charles Baudelaire, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and William Butler Yeats. In *The True Confession of George Barker*, for example, he adopts the poetic form of François Villon's "The Testament" and Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil*, creating a work that was labeled by many critics as sacrilegious and obscene. Similarly, the rhymed quatrains of *The Golden Chains* (1968) display a stylistic resemblance to the poems of A. E. Housman. *Poems of Places and People* (1971), *In Memory of David Archer* (1973), *Villa Stellar* (1978), and *Anno Domini* (1984) include discussions of sex and mortality. *Selected Poems* (1941), *Collected Poems, 1930-1955* (1957), *Collected Poems, 1930-1965* (1965), and *Collected Poems* (1987) provide selections from various stages of Barker's career. Barker's characteristic thematic concerns also pervade his novels *Alanna Autumnal* (1933), *Janus* (1935), and *The Dead Seagull* (1950), as well as his numerous dramatic pieces.

(See also CLC, Vol. 8; *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 9-12, rev. ed.; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 7; and *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 20.)