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WILD TREES PRESS

COOPER, J. CALIFORNIA

1984-1993

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Great Expectations

by Claudia Tate

Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers, by Barbara Christian. New York: Pergamon, 1985, 262 pp., \$29.95 (HB), \$13.50 (PB)

When I saw the promotional material for Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism*, I immediately wrote the title in my notebook because this was a book I was anxious to read. I had read Christian's first book — *Black Women Novelists* (1980) — and was impressed by her comprehensive critical discourse and discerning analysis which located thematic and technical traditions in Black women's novels from Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) to Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). The title of this second book by Christian suggested to me that she would continue to develop her early discussion by including genres other than the novel and by placing her critical discourse within hermeneutic strategies informed by feminist theory.

But when I read *Black Feminist Criticism*, I was disappointed. Not only did I not find any delineation of feminist critical theory, but I could not locate a sustained definition of

what Christian meant by the term *black feminist criticism*. Moreover the reference to Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes in the introduction (her misspellings of their names notwithstanding) made me anticipate an application of French theory to the literary texts of Black women. But, I could locate neither French theory nor its general application; in fact, I did not see any additional references to these critic's names in the remainder of the text. Instead, I was to understand that Black feminist criticism was the practice of examining texts of Black female authors from a largely social perspective, albeit a Black female's social perspective. Granted, Christian possesses privileged insight that I do not underestimate here, but that privilege is based not so much on her critical strategies as on her experiences as a Black woman. Whether she intended to postulate an ethnic feminist critical theory and apply it to representative Black women's literary texts, as the title suggests, or whether the book is merely misnamed is not clear.

Most of the book is composed of reprinted essays, book reviews, and occasional papers that Christian wrote prior to the publication of her first book. Rather than see the development of her criticism from that point on, the reader is made privy to work that preceded it. In fact, when

these early pieces are placed alongside their headnotes, which detail their intellectual genesis, they read like brief notes or journal entries. Thus, the book reads like a critic's notebook, full of short preliminary drafts for future use.

These essays are promises of what is to come in Christian's future work.

Although it is generally convenient to have similar essays within a single text, their presentation here is problematic. As Christian explains, each essay was written as a single entity, to stand alone, as an independent critical presentation. When they are linked together to form a book-length text, they present a great deal of repetitive introductory information, which undermines the book's narrative cohesion and critical development. Rather than present well-developed chapters on Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison, for example, Christian presents several short, repetitive essays on each of these writers. With the exception of the last few essays, those preceding also exist in a critical vacuum, that is, they are not informed by current criticism on either the author under examination or related topics. Given

these characteristics, the book can inform only a reader who is unfamiliar with the literature of Black women.

The last three essays (excluding the review of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*) — "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction" (1983); "No More Buried Lives: The Theme of Lesbianism" (1984); and "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*" (1984) — remind me of the Christian who demonstrated her critical prowess in *Black Women Novelists*. These latter essays reflect research, attention to developing feminist themes, and genuine critical insight, although they are still not fully developed arguments. They are, instead, promises of what is to come in Christian's future work.

Perhaps Christian's first book raised my expectations, which resulted in heightening my disappointment with the second. In any event, I am confident that the promised book, a cohesive discussion of Black women's writing and feminist criticism, is forthcoming. We who await its appearance must be patient.

◆ Claudia Tate teaches literature at Howard University and is the author of *Black Women Writers at Work*.

New-Looking Older Women

by Maryviolet C. Burns

A Piece of Mine, by J. California Cooper. Wild Trees Press (Box 378, Navarro, CA 95463), 1984, \$7.95, 124 pp. (PB)

Forgive my exuberance, but I love *A Piece of Mine*. This collection of 12 short stories is the work of award-winning playwright, Joan California Cooper, and the first publication of Wild Trees Press, founded in 1984 by Alice Walker and Robert Allen.

In the acknowledgment, Cooper speculates that without Walker's and Allen's "encouragement and consideration my stories would still be sitting in a drawer, someday to be thrown out by someone saying, 'These are useless.'" Perhaps she would have kept them stored away had the publishers not been interested, but I cannot conceive of the fool who would have pronounced these stories "useless."

The label *short story* is a woefully inadequate description of these intensely, explicitly moral tales. *Parable* is more appropriate. Cooper's stories are rich in wisdom and insight. I found myself drawn to them for a second, third, and fourth reading, certain that I would discover even deeper meanings. Skillfully using Black folk idiom, Cooper "brings home" her message that unethical behavior will be punished and ignorance and acquiescence can be deadly. Her language is sometimes simple and straightforward — brash, even — then subtle and lyrical. I found myself wishing she were reading the stories to me with a musical accompaniment.

There are victims and romantics, weak women who aid in the deception of other women, and weak-willed women who participate in their own abuse. There are courageous women who transform circumstance and cunning women who outwit circumstance. The storyteller is always a sister, friend, or interested spectator (prompting Alice Walker to discuss,

I have often complained that while the novel and motion picture romance may have created false hope in White women, they also fostered the assumption that romance is a White woman's birthright. Black women have had no comparable body of myths serving the same function.



in her foreword, "the role of the She-Who-Listens-to-Other-Women in literature and life"). The narrator is sometimes unnamed, usually inferior by conventional standards or self-perception, and sometimes envious. But she tells the story with the care and caution that made her the trusted confidant of the protagonist, and from the vantage point of the loving and critical observer whose perspective brings reality into sharper focus. Frequently, she tells the story with such humor that it is impossible to refrain from laughing aloud. (Consider the description of an arrogant, philandering husband as "looking 50¢ worth of importance," or this statement in reference to an abusive female: "She was making him eat shit and nothing but a fool want to eat the same thing every day.")

I imagine that some critics will indict Cooper for her frequent inclusion of incidents of abuse; physical and sexual violence permeate the lives of these women. Both Alice Walker and Gloria Naylor have been denounced for focusing on the battering of Black women in their fiction. They are normally accused of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Black men, feeding the hostility that exists between Black men and women, promoting lesbianism, driving Black men into White women's arms, and being manipulated by White editors who

consider such fare highly marketable. Consistently missing from this diatribe is an acknowledgment that physical abuse is a common occurrence in Black women's lives, tolerated by the Black community. Cooper cloaks this evil in ordinariness, condemning it by revealing its normalcy.

In the story, "Who are the fools?," an adulterer and batterer seeks out his ex-wife to kill her but does not recognize the whole, healed person she has become since leaving him. Confused and in a drunken rage, he mistakes his mistress for his wife and stabs her to death. It is an appropriately ignominious ending for the woman who had observed in silence as he kicked his wife out the back door of their home and welcomed him following his regular explosions of cruelty to his wife.

The title of this review is a phrase from my favorite story, "The Free and the Caged." The protagonist, a middle-aged Black woman, leaves an empty marriage, sets off on a cross-country adventure, and eventually finds and accepts love on her own terms. In the margin of my book I have written: "Finally, a romantic myth for Black women." Several of Cooper's heroines leave unsatisfying or abusive relationships and find love and happiness. I have often complained that while the novel and motion picture romance may have created false hope in White women, they also fostered the assumption that romance is a White woman's birthright. Black women have had no comparable body of myths serving the same function. Far from being insignificant and antifeminist, Cooper's love stories with happy endings are so important that, in my estimation, they make the book required reading.

◆ Maryviolet C. Burns is a journalist and writer who lives in Seattle.

WOMEN & AGING

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CHAPTERS

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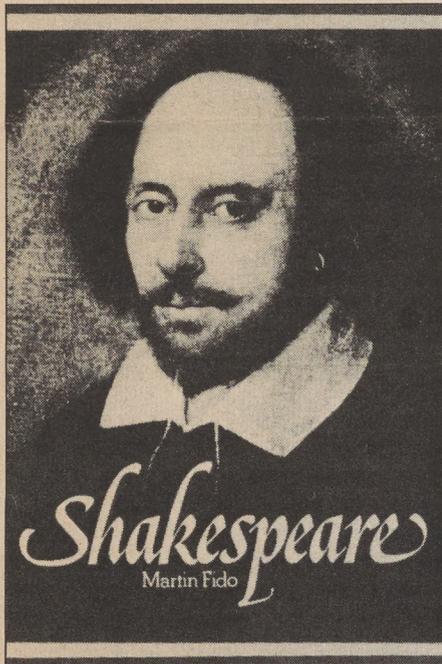
BIOGRAPHY

Goering
*The Iron Man*R. J. OVERY
Routledge & Kegan Paul, \$25.00 cloth,
ISBN 0-7100-9783-2

A welcome corrective to the popular image of Goering as a bloated buccaneer and medal-bedecked clown, Overy's study describes Goering's crucial role in the Third Reich's economy and war preparations. He also describes how Goering's obsessive empire-building—both within Germany proper and, later, over all of occupied Europe—played a critical part in Germany's lack of essential material and munitions in 1939—a lack that Goering, for all his braggadocio, conspicuously failed to correct.

Edmund WilsonDAVID CASTRONOVO
Ungar, \$15.50 cloth, ISBN 0-8044-2116-1

Edmund Wilson has long been regarded as the finest American literary critic of the century, but he was much more: playwright, novelist, poet, biographer, political theorist, linguist, journalist, and translator; and he made singular contributions in each area to which he turned his mind. David Castronovo's useful, well-written study of Wilson's life and work is a fine addition to the surprisingly small literature surrounding the writer. *Edmund Wilson* is a volume in Ungar's uneven, but needed, *Literature and Life* series of literary biographies.

**Oscar Wilde**
*An Illustrated Biography*MARTIN FIDO
Peter Bedrick Books, \$9.95 paper,
ISBN 0-87226-032-3**Shakespeare**
*An Illustrated Biography*MARTIN FIDO
Peter Bedrick Books, \$9.95 paper,
ISBN 0-87226-031-3

Both these offerings are attractive and intelligent. The texts are scholarly and the large number of photos and lithographs add demension, making these illustrated biographies entertaining as well as informative, revealing the controversies and intrigues surrounding these two enigmatic personalities.

ECOLOGY

Seeing Green
*The Politics of Ecology Explained*JONATHON PORRITT
Basil Blackwell, \$6.95 paper,
ISBN 0-631-14332-7

One third of Germany's forests have been destroyed by industrial pollutants in the last twenty years. Since 1949, Britain has lost 95 percent of its meadows. Scandinavia's lakes have been irreparably damaged by acid rain. Small wonder, then, that throughout Europe so-called "green parties," committed to halting the destruction of the environment, have become powerful political forces. In *Seeing Green*, Porritt, director of the U.K. branch of Friends of the Earth, presents a convincing account of the group's aims, foremost among them the abolition of both capitalism and communism—Porritt declares them to be really one ideology, industrialism—and the establishment of a politics in which ecology guides human actions.

Killing the Hidden WatersCHARLES BOWDEN
University of Texas, \$7.95 paper,
ISBN 0-292-74306-8

Newly available in paperback, Bowden's study of the "mining" of water in the southwestern deserts, originally published in 1977, is required reading for anyone interested in the origins of the modern West and the terrible price that has been paid for it. Edward Abbey calls Bowden's book "the best all-around summary I've read yet, anywhere, of how our greed-driven, ever-expanding urban-industrial empire is consuming, wasting, poisoning, and destroying not only the resource basis of its own existence, but also the vital, sustaining basis of all life. . . . Charles Bowden is the best social critic and environmental journalist now working in the American Southwest."

ESSAYS

Sunrise with Seamonsters
*Travels and Discoveries*PAUL THEROUX
Houghton Mifflin, \$18.95 cloth,
ISBN 0-395-38221-1

Paul Theroux is one of the last great travelers, a rare class that can instantly pick up and go wherever whimsy and will dictate. In this book, Theroux has gathered the occasional essays and articles that have paid for his travels over the last twenty years. Pieces on Corsica, Afghanistan, southern Africa, Burma, and Indonesia appear side by side with Theroux's reflections on contemporary politics and literature. Admirers of Theroux's novels and travel books will find his new collection of interest, and those unfamiliar with his work will find *Sunrise with Seamonsters* an invitation to explore further.

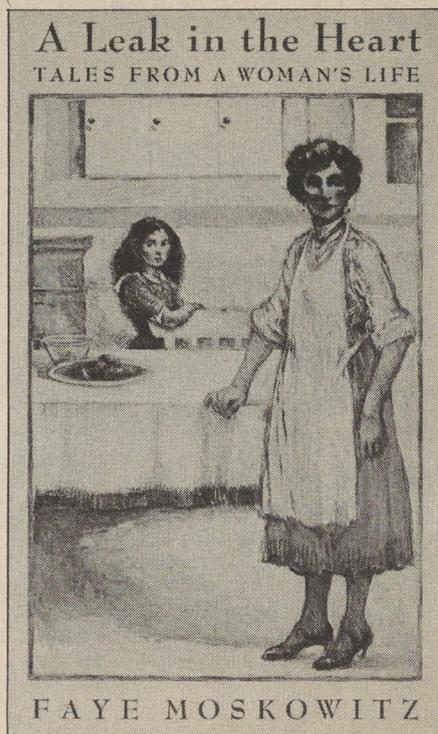
Beyond Manzanar
Views of Asian-American Womanhood

JEANNE WAKATSUKI HOUSTON

One Can Think about Life
After the Fish
Is in the Canoe
*And Other Coastal Sketches*JAMES D. HOUSTON
Capra, \$7.50 paper, ISBN 0-88496-230-X

The third book in the Capra Back-to-Back Series, this volume includes essays and

fiction by the husband and wife who wrote the book and screenplay *Farewell to Manzanar* (Bantam, 1974), which won a Humanitas Prize, a Christopher Award, and an Emmy nomination. Included are essays by Jeanne Houston and two chapters from her forthcoming novel. James Houston has contributed an essay on the effects of raging winter storms on California coastal residents and a modern western short story set in Santa Cruz.

**A Leak in the Heart**
*Tales from a Woman's Life*FAYE MOSKOWITZ
Godine, \$13.95 cloth, ISBN 0-87923-551-9

This collection of touching autobiographical story-essays begins in the 1930s and continues through a half-century of a young girl's life. Here are her memories and musings about growing up in a small-town, Orthodox Jewish family. Often confused, trying to fit in, Faye Moskowitz struggles with loving yet infuriating family matriarchs, the power of teachers, and the personal implications of political acts.

The Tremulous Private Body
*Essays on Subjection*FRANCIS BARKER
Methuen, \$19.95 cloth, ISBN 0-416-37840-4;
\$8.50 paper, ISBN 0-416-37850-1

Using such disparate sources as Jacobean drama, Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," Rembrandt's paintings, the philosophy of Descartes, Milton's *Areopagitica*, and Samuel Pepys' *Diary*, Barker marks profound changes in the conditions and representations of the human body in the seventeenth century. This study also engages the central themes of post-structuralism and presents a challenging analysis of the structure of modern culture.

FICTION

The Career of Magda V.JOSEPH MACHLIS
Norton, \$13.95 cloth, ISBN 0-393-01990-X

The difficult choice of career or love is the crux of this new novel. Set in Berlin in the 1930s, Machlis' heroine becomes one of the great and most controversial singers of her

time. The author, a professor of music at Queens' College and a member of the graduate faculty at the Juilliard School, brings to bear his first-hand knowledge of the milieu of the musical artist.

Opening NightsJANET BURROWAY
Atheneum, \$16.95 cloth, ISBN 0-689-11545-8

This behind-the-scenes novel centers on a New York theater director who is staging a play at his ex-wife's southern college, for which she is designing the costumes. In New York, his current wife is as curious to meet his ex, on opening night, as the ex is to meet her. All life, it appears, is a stage, as we follow these characters and the cast in public and in private, rehearsing, improvising, moving inevitably toward the drama of opening night. With its involvement in stagecraft and design, the intricate plot is a dazzling exploration of accidental patterns as well as the pattern of accidents.

A Piece of MineJ. CALIFORNIA COOPER
Wild Trees Press, \$7.95 paper,
ISBN 0-931125-00-6; P.O. Box 378,
Navarro, CA 95463

The first release from the small press founded by Alice Walker and Robert Allen, *A Piece of Mine* is a collection of twelve stories about black women and men in a small town. Told in a deceptively simple style, Cooper captures the humor and despair of life.

Dark Lessons
*Crime and Detection on Campus*MARCIA MULLER
and BILL PRONZINI
Macmillan, \$19.95 cloth, ISBN 0-02-599220-8

The classroom becomes the setting for murder and mystery in the third volume of the Macmillan Midnight Library series, *Dark Lessons*. This suspense anthology contains seventeen mystery stories, including works by Edgar Allan Poe, Graham Greene, and Shirley Jackson. Biographical notes and an introduction by the editors discuss the place of academe in the genre of suspense.

Spunk
The Selected Stories of
*Zora Neale Hurston*ZORA NEALE HURSTON
Turtle Island, \$8.95 paper,
ISBN 0-913666-79-3; 2845 Buena Vista Way,
Berkeley, CA 94708

Zora Neale Hurston, according to Alice Walker, "rescued and recreated a world which she labored to hand us whole, never underestimating the value of her gift, at times doubting the good sense of its recipients." This new collection of her stories contains many previously uncollected works, with several appearing for the first time. These stories represent some of Hurston's finest writing.

The Hugo Winners 1976-1979
*Volume Four*ISAAC ASIMOV
Doubleday, \$18.95 cloth, ISBN 0-385-18934-6

Time is as varied as theme in these thirteen works, which represent some of the best in science fiction from 1976-1979. Each story is preceded by an introduction written by Asimov, and the authors include Asimov, Joan D. Vinge, and Harlan Ellison.

FALL 1985

Wild Trees Press was formed in 1984 by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker and Robert Allen, former editor of *The Black Scholar*. In the small press tradition of "publishing only what we love," Wild Trees Press is devoted to bringing out works that evidence high literary quality and social insight.



WILD TREES PRESS

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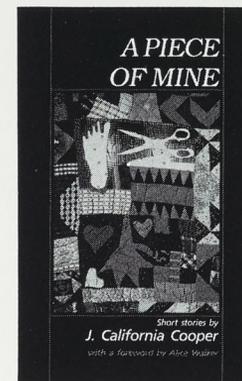
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A Piece of Mine

A New Short Story Collection

by J. California Cooper

with a Foreword by Alice Walker

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\$7.95 (Paperback) ISBN 0-931125-00-6

"... told with compassion and ebullience, even during the painful parts."
Patricia Holt, S.F. Chronicle

"The stories sparkle with warmth, humor and often, revenge."
Library Journal

"Both men and women are treated with such bemused love that these tales of passion gone astray are transformed into celebrations of life."
Publishers Weekly

"Feminist Bookstore News was several hours late to the printers because once I opened it, I couldn't put it down."

Carol Seajay, Publisher
Feminist Bookstore News



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Culture Shock

writing

THE FAWCETT SOCIETY BOOK PRIZE 1986 is an award for the book which best contributes to an understanding of women's position in society today. This year's non-fiction winner will be announced at a dinner at the Regent Suite, The Zoo, Regents Park on 28th May 7.30 for 8pm. Tickets £15. Further details from Ana Novakovic, The Fawcett Society, 46 Harleyford Rd., London SE11 5AY

THE ALBANY EMPIRE announce a **SECOND WAVE FESTIVAL OF YOUNG WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS** to run in October/November 1986 and want scripts from women between 13-30 submitted before 20th June. Further details and application form from Ann Considine, Second Wave, The Albany Empire, Douglas Way, London SE8 4AG

YOUNG UNKNOWN WRITERS? Contributions of poems and prose wanted for **HARD LINES 3** to be published early 1987. Submissions to arrive by mid-June 1986. Further details from the Publicity Dept., **HARD LINES 3**, Faber and Faber Ltd., 3 Queen Square, London WC1N 3AU. Tel. 01 278 6881

ICE AND FIRE by **Andrea Dworkin, Secker and Warburg, £9.50 hardback**

A girl is caught, put in a cage and hoisted up into the air by a group of boys while the girls look uncomfortably on - relieved at having escaped the ritual humiliation, but vaguely disappointed at not being chosen. The children's game masks a deep misogyny.

Later on, as an adult in the lower East Side of New York, the central character unconsciously repeats the patterns learnt in childhood. Her anger at her own and other women's debasement is internalized. She allows her body to be abused.

A dichotomy exists in her mind between her intellectual and physical identity - she treats her body as a commodity to be sold to numerous men and, more cynically, to various women while her artistic/creative side remains aloof and 'pure'. This is both a sad and naive attitude because ultimately, emotional depth is sacrificed and a lack of self-love leads her inevitably to callousness towards others. Her closest friend is shabbily abandoned by her to pain and squalor while she departs to Europe.

Scenes of violence and degradation abound in this novel, in certain instances condoned or directed by women themselves. On one occasion the main character is raped while another woman holds her down. In Europe the protagonist taking pity on an impotent man teaches him how to inflict pain on her without guilt; he learns to use ropes, tie knots, bite breasts etc. He is 'cured' but enjoys the violence too much, with calamitous results for his instructor. She eventually returns to New York as a committed feminist writer. Her body with its inherent carnality is still loathsome to her; it is at odds with the ethereal image she would like to project and this lack of acceptance has a crippling effect upon her.

In reviewing this novel it is impossible not to become embroiled in the debate on censorship and pornography currently raging within the women's movement, not just because of the author's identity, but because of the sensitive nature of the themes explored. The central figure in the book seems to be closely modelled on the writer, but how closely it would be dangerous to presume.

The novel's final irony may be, with its

depiction of the sexual subordination of women and their willingness in some cases to sustain pain, that it could fit very easily into Andrea Dworkin's own definition of pornography.

LINDA KINNAIRD

MUD by **Nicky Edwards, The Women's Press, £3.95 paperback**

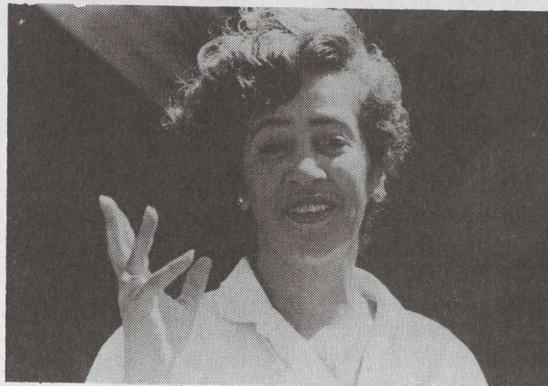
Mud is what Greenham women live in, what the First World War soldiers drowned in. It is also the self-doubt that political activists get stuck in.

Jo, ex-Greenham woman, meets Ada, who was married to a man who joined up in the First World War by accident, discovered that its violence had no meaning, and died (in a mud hole). As Jo researches this man's life for a play about why men join wars, she discovers that Greenham's non-violence has become a pointless response for her.

The plot is only partially successful. The characters remain distant, filtered through the preconceptions of Jo's radical feminist politics. I ended up disliking or disbelieving in everyone in the book.

Yet as a novel of ideas, *Mud* is challenging, taking into the arena of women's politics self-irony and honest doubt. During Jo's year at the peace camp, confrontation with 'the abstract forces of male evil' turned into getting kicked about by the police and the army. Non-violence became for her no more than 'absurd rules designed to give us some kind of moral half-nelson on the police.'

Her mixed feelings are communicated, in refreshing contrast to the radical smugness of Beryl, whose peace-is-a-diversion-for-women line buys the sanitised media images wholesale: 'Do you think that sitting around in the mud holding hands with a beatific smile will stop the bomb?'



J. California Cooper

And that's as far as it goes. *Mud* makes no attempt to push beyond the contradictions that Greenham and its representations have raised to find a way of continuing to be involved politically. I agree with Jo in *Mud* that even the most radical end of Greenham politics does contain an element of world-saving martyrdom, but 'leaving the men to get on with blowing each other up' doesn't seem an adequate alternative either as a strategy, or even as an analysis of what goes on in the world.

Mud doesn't offer any feminist alternative, let alone new direction to women's peace politics. But the book raises uncomfortable questions which haven't yet been satisfactorily answered.

BARBARA NORDEN

A PIECE OF MINE by **J. California Cooper, The Women's Press, £2.95 paperback, £7.95 hardback**

The twelve short stories in this book are about American Black women. We hear of their trials and tribulations - mainly in relation to their men - and their triumphs too, through the confidential narrative voice of a female best friend and observer.

Some of the stories are moving, such as 'Sins Leave Scars', the story of a young woman so beautiful that she

attracts the predatory attention of men and over the years accumulates physical scars as marks of the destruction they wreak. The beauty of another character, Zalina, is her undoing in the story 'Loved to Death'. The story is told by Zalina's crippled sister who witnessed her destruction from a point of safety. Her deformity kept her safe from the attention of men.

There is humour in the story 'Funeral Plans' in which, after a life of caring for invalid parents, a woman reveals her plot to find a 'good husband'. 'Liberated' is also a story about satisfaction coming to a woman late in life. After 40 years of marriage Middy discovers her husband's bank account, long kept secret from her. She claims the 50% of her contribution to their marriage (can a woman's work at home be calculated in cash terms?) and travels the world.

An award-winning playwright, the author's dramatic sense shines through in these stories. Always there is a point of satisfying resolution in her tales; often a sense of characters getting their just deserts.

One feels with and for her female characters. One can only marvel at her skill in creating this empathetic response in the space of, in some cases, a few short pages.

GRACE EVANS

BOOKS

The Dallas
Post Tribune

Cooper examines love/hate relationships

Contributed by Emma Rogers

Black Images Book Bazaar

A Piece of Mine, by J. California Cooper; foreword by Alice Walker
Wild Trees Press, Navarro,
California.

A Piece of Mine is the first book published by Wild Trees Press, whose publishers are Alice Walker and her partner, Robert Allen. It is the only book thus far that Wild Trees has published that is written by a black woman.

In twelve short stories, Cooper graphically retells stories from the third person's point of view. You feel like you are sitting with the storyteller as she prepares rolls and tells you the story about "To Hep to be Happy!" Cooper covers a variety of age old topics such as:

- Love so deep, that you can't touch the bottom.
- Free-spirited and free-willed love.
- Faithful and unappreciated wives, mistresses and significant others.
- Fool-hearted men who "wants to be the boss cause they's mens."
- Oppression: physical, mental and sexual abuse of women and children, especially young girls.
- Love triangles
- The relationships of: black man:white woman, and white man: black woman and in most cases white man: black "fresh" young girl.

A PIECE OF MINE



Short stories by
J. California Cooper

with a foreword by Alice Walker

"Say What You Willomay!" A motto that it only publishes what it loves, and readers will certainly discover why.

A Piece of Mine is a GREAT book!!! Wild Trees Press has a

Support your community!

The Poetic Worlds Of Up and Down

LETTER TO AN IMAGINARY FRIEND: Parts Three & Four

By Thomas McGrath
Copper Canyon Press (P.O. Box 271, Port
Townsend, WA 98368); 128 pages; \$16
cloth, \$9 paper

REVIEWED BY TOM CLARK

Thomas McGrath's "Letter to an Imaginary Friend: Parts Three & Four" is the conclusion of a grand visionary poem whose first two parts appeared in 1962 and 1970. It's a big (nearly 3500 lines in this volume), risky work, defying the cautiously functional, Swedish-modern, small-is-beautiful tendencies of most recent American poetry — and evoking instead such major, mountain-range-size poems as "Leaves of Grass," "The Cantos" and "Maximus." Not that McGrath imitates Whitman, Pound or Olson, all of whom he resembles more in his choice of a large canvas than in what he covers it with.

At the age of 70, McGrath is still the kind of writer who takes chances on every page, sticking his neck out on the premise that, while embarrassing yourself now

and then proves you're human ("so weak, so poor, in that cold wind"), it also thereby qualifies you to "leap / into heaven"; without doing one, you can't do the other, his work seems to say.

And, indeed, it's the tension between those two states that drives this book: that is, between what McGrath calls "the Horizontal, the World of Down" — that bleak existential plain, wide and cold as a winter prairie, wherein we fallen mortals toil — and what he terms "the World of Up, the Vertical," the world of magic and spirits into which his autobiographical boy-narrator ascends while dreaming in a Christmas sled. ("I climb on the shivering ladder of Quaking Aspen boughs...")

McGrath's "World of Up" is a theological conception, evoking a primal world of transcendence whose legacy to us is nature.

This poet has long made man's greedy arrogation of nature-as-property — the evil hunger for "power over the world" that turns it into "dead nature" . . . and so many board feet and so much profit and loss — the major villain of his work. Here he goes beyond simply decrying this greed and tries, in a poem he describes as a "revolutionary act," to supplant it with "a view which all primitives, anyone who has spent time in the woods or anyone simply in his/her right mind has always had: that Nature is just as alive as we are." (The quotes are from his preface.)

Of course this kind of "revolutionary" intention has inspired other poets before McGrath, most notably Wordsworth, who came back from a visit to the France of the Revolution with strange new ideas about the common life of nature in men, and other forms of being. And Wordsworth's exploration of "the birth of the poet's mind" in "The Prelude" contains a template for many passages here.

One is McGrath's remarkable ice-skating sequence, so close to Wordsworth in its grasp of the relation between the life of nature and the life of the imagination:

*Under us a lattice, thin as a
molecule, grows
Instantaneous — formed
(just under our feet as we flash
Forward over our world) like
the forming of winter ice
Over the river . . .
and we skate onward carol-
ling:
"Over the ice!"
Never aware how thin
That winter ice is . . . formed
for an instant under
our feet
Then vanishing . . .
Or in summer as waterwalk-
ers we skate*



*The dogday rivers . . .
the thin skin of the water hold-
ing*

*An instant that is ours forever
as we rush out to the
stars.*

The dramatic center of "Parts Three & Four" — that swings off into symbolic sub-orbits of Hopi mythology and medieval occultism before it's over — is a Christmas Eve and morning in a North Dakota frontier hamlet sometime in the early 1920s. In his narrative passages on the preparations for

Midnight Mass, the feast that follows and the sleigh ride home, we encounter that theological legacy of McGrath's at its most intense. He contacts the ancient experiences beneath the Christian rituals, reconstituting the icy awe and wonder of a long festive night — as filtered through the sensitized soul of a 10-year-old.

Memory is a dominant theme of McGrath's poem. He is obsessed with the uniqueness of event, the sadness that each thing happens once and no more (making past

experiences into so many turned-over "pages" in an endless book). What makes all these particular losses bearable, the poet seems to say, is their participation in greater chords of meaning that span decades and centuries.

Those chords, in fact, are his specialty. He finds natural metaphor everywhere — instances of a pulsing, difference-denying "life in nature" that carry out the plan of his poem, making it into vigorous actuality. The stars above his snowbound Dakota prairie don't just hang there, they "reel" and "rush" and "dance." The Northern Lights don't only shine, they "string a harp toward the far pole"; a rooster doesn't merely crow, it "prays for sunrise / Like a muezzin left in the rain so long that his voice is rusty."

The best test of how much light a poet is directing in his poems is whether the beam of his attention on his chosen subject also illuminates things around it, crystalizing and giving shape to a whole field of objects, making them glow with shared clarity. In opening up one cell of reality, the poet's attention spills over and penetrates the next. This process of overflowing operates all through McGrath's long poem. ■

Berkeley writer Tom Clark, former poetry editor of the *Paris Review*, is the author of the long poem "The Border."

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Books for Adventurous Readers

Most of these books are excellent first works of fiction by unknown writers. Some are uneven and amateurish, but adventurous readers will find flashes of brilliance and extraordinary promise in all.

"THE ART OF THE KNOCK" by Philip Graham (Morrow). Funny, dark, manic existential stories centering on unlikely door-to-door salesman and his unusual items: Dissolving Toothpick, Guilt Remover, Toothless Comb. In another story, a family has "banished the voice" to speak only by "the ten strong throats attached to our hands." Stunning, startling imagery.

"THE UPPER ROOM" by Mary Monroe (St. Martin's). Vibrant, extraordinary first novel about demonic, funny, terrifying Mama Ruby and her clan of followers in Goons, Florida. Written by former Choctaw, County, Ala., cotton picker who now lives in Oakland.

"HER FIRST AMERICAN" by Lore Segal (Knopf). Begins as an "innocent immigrant burlesque in the manner of 'The Education of Hyman Kaplan'" but develops into poignant love story and parable about America as a land of outsiders. Funny, touching, profound.

"GENTHE'S PHOTOGRAPHS OF SAN FRANCISCO'S OLD CHINATOWN" by John Kuo Wei Tchen (Dover). German-born photographer Arnold Genthe determined to capture "exotic" Chinatown at turn of the century and did, but only by scraping out evidence of "white society" from his glass plates. Fascinating look at the way American history is often made.

"ROUGH TRANSLATIONS" by Molly Giles (University of Georgia Press). Moments of discovery — painful, tender and without irony — become epiphanies "in which the heart faces its reflection in others and does not turn away." Bay Area writer Giles brings us stories of "exploration and direct statement, often tempered with a great, hushed humor."

"SELF-HELP" by Lorrie Moore (Knopf). Almost entirely written in the second person, this witty and deeply affecting collection of stories sounds like a how-to manual explaining how to have an affair with a married man, cheer up your divorced mother, keep your lover from leaving you, fall out of love with the man of your dreams. Fresh, acidic, funny.

"THE BONE PEOPLE" by Keri Hulme (Louisiana State

University Press). A massive novel using language, dreams, symbolism and artifacts (quite literally, the bones of ancestors) of New Zealand's Maori (aboriginal) tribes. Hulme, who is part Maori, tells both violent and intellectual story of man, woman and child whose lives are locked together in adversity and love. 1985 winner of England's Booker Prize.

"THE BEANS OF EGYPT, MAINE" by Carolyn Chute (Ticknor & Fields). Highly original first novel about ignorant, bone-poor family named Bean in rural Maine. Both humorous and appalling — the Beans cohabit indiscriminately and their eating habits make us sick — yet gripping and insightful as narrator Earlene takes up with the Beans to show us real people behind backwoods stereotypes.

"A PIECE OF MINE" by J. California Cooper (Wild Trees). Wry, wise, beautifully written stories by Oakland playwright who knows how to "talk" her stories to us, as though each of them is told by a kindly and concerned friend. While content of these stories is often harsh or brutal, the sound of them is lovely, memorable, haunting. ■

— Patricia Holt

Books

Short stories are alive and doing well

A STAY BY THE RIVER

By Susan Engberg
Viking Press, 256 pp., \$15.95

A PIECE OF MINE

By J. California Cooper
Wild Trees Press (P.O. Box 378, Navarro, Calif. 95463), 124 pp., \$7.95 paper

HERE'S THE STORY: Fiction with Heart

Edited by Morty Sklar
The Spirit That Moves Us Press (P.O. Box 1585, Iowa City, Iowa 52244), 192 pp., \$6 paper

AN EVENING PERFORMANCE

By George Garrett
Doubleday, 518 pp., \$18.95

By Heidi Ellison

JUST a few years ago everyone was lamenting the demise of the short story. Publishers aren't interested, writers complained. They don't sell, publishers complained. But things have changed. The world now seems to be awash in a sea of short stories.

As the managing editor of Fiction Network magazine, it often seems to me that every American goes home at night from his or her job, whether it be construction worker, corporate executive or data-entry clerk, and writes short stories. Even governors are not exempt from this national obsession — Fiction Network recently received a submission entitled "At Last, the Presidency" from Colorado Gov. Richard E. Lamm. Many Americans wait until they retire before they start pouring out their fantasies, fears and frustrations into the short-story form. Writing a story has become more than just a literary exercise; it must now qualify as the great unrecognized American self-therapy.

Unfortunately, self-therapy does not a good short story make. Most of the thousands of stories we receive each year are competently written, but they lack artfulness. They are character sketches (portrait of a dear, departed grandmother), incidents (you wouldn't believe what happened to me last week!), or problems (my fish tank had snails and this is what I did about it). Many are rip-offs of television shows or movies.

Coming up for air from the slush pile (the publishing world's name for a mass of unsolicited manuscripts), it's sometimes distressingly hard to believe that any good stories are being written. Fortunately, as is demonstrated by some of this fall's offerings from both large and small presses, that is not true. The diversity of these new books also belies the myth that only "New Yorker-style" stories have a chance at publication.

Closest to this stereotype of the New Yorker story are Susan Engberg's stories in

"A Stay by the River," because they are about well-educated, introspective, white, middle-class Americans. Engberg's stories transcend the stereotype, however. They are quiet stories about people examining their lives at turning points, at times of heightened awareness or during periods of rest. Her characters are watchful people; they take the time and have the patience to see deeply into themselves and others.

Images are very important to them. They treasure them: "I carried an image . . . it seemed a configuring image, a stillness that wanted to grow, planted in my mind beyond my planning." They give them as gifts: "What can I give to Melanie? Tonight my sight is perfectly clear; I have countless images to give away."

The characters are capable of other sensory impressions as well: "Vivaldi: an expanse of vertical sound that I felt in my spine. I think how all week the bones of my body have extended themselves into a garden hoe. Now I feel myself straightening up, sending up liquid sparks of sensation."

But there is more to these stories than sensual language. They feel complete; there is a sense of triumph in them, of the possibility of well-being in spite of the struggles of daily living, that leaves the reader well-satisfied.

Strangely, that same sense of well-being comes through in the stories of the playwright J. California Cooper in "A Piece of Mine," though her characters inhabit a world light-years away from the middle-class comfort enjoyed by Engberg's.

Cooper's stories are gritty with the tragedies of life: violence, death, alcoholism and sexual abuse, but the narrator takes such joy in telling stories and wondering at the amazing foolishness of people that the stories are uplifting rather than depressing. Her cheerful voice seems to say, "That's the way some people are. Can you believe it?"

Most of the stories are told in black dialect, and one, "Loved to Death," is reminiscent of Alice Walker's "The Color Purple." In the story, a crippled, black woman who considers herself ugly and unworthy gains self-respect through her relationship with her beautiful sister.

It is no coincidence that the foreword to the book was written by Walker. "A Piece of Mine" is the first book published by Wild Trees Press, founded by Walker and a partner. One wishes they had exercised a more rigorous hand in editing the stories; the use of dialect is inconsistent, and the author has an unfortunate addiction to exclamation points. Cooper is a discovery, though, and we must be

grateful to Walker for being the first to publish these delightful stories.

"Here's the Story: Fiction With Heart," edited by Morty Sklar, is another story collection from a small press. Many of the stories in this anthology are about a member of an ethnic group: Mexicans, Poles, Jews and Russians are among those represented.

Many of them also have in common a working-class sensibility: People struggle to make ends meet and there is a concern about money completely absent from Engberg's stories.

Like those in "A Piece of Mine," these stories aren't polished. There is a lively rawness to many of them; they seem very close to the experiences described and have a youthful, autobiographical flavor. Many end too abruptly and seem unfinished.

Only a couple of these stories are really unsuccessful, however. Though they are not all perfect, most are likable in their vigor and power of storytelling. Probably the best story in the group is Sallie Bingham's "Reunion," about a hilariously tragic Southern family with a new element introduced: The prodigal, lesbian daughter comes home with her immensely practical lover, who takes the whole family in hand.

This book suffers from poor proofreading and a college-magazine look derived from the gratuitous inclusion of a portfolio of poorly reproduced paintings. The stories deserve better treatment.

Better treatment is what one hopes George Garrett will be getting now that Doubleday has published "An Evening Performance," a collection of 30 years' worth of his stories. Although the book lists 21 books of fiction, poetry, plays and biography published by Garrett, only one is still in print, and I confess that I hadn't heard of him before.

Garrett is a writer of the old school. His stories are not about the anomie of modern life; they are about, for example, soldiers, circus performers, a small-town politician. Their variety is impressive, though some of them seem dated, especially those about bored, desperate housewives who can't explain their malaise.

Perhaps the publication of this book will end the neglect of this fine storyteller.

It's sad that all those people writing out there don't have the talent to produce good short stories. Maybe the better form of therapy would be to read stories by the authors of excellent collections like these. ■

Ellison is the managing editor of Fiction Network magazine.

Best sellers

Includes last week's rating, weeks on list

FICTION

- LAKE WOBEGON DAYS**, Keillor; Viking, \$17.95. Recollections of life in a small American town. 2, 3.
- LUCKY**, Collins; Simon & Schuster, \$17.95. The heiress of a crime lord takes on the heiress of a shipping tycoon in fashionable spots all over the world. 1, 4.
- SKELETON CREW**, King; Putnam's, \$18.95. Twenty-two tales of horror set in contemporary America. 3, 13.
- THE FOURTH DEADLY SIN**, Sanders; Putnam's, \$17.95. Which of six suspects murdered a saintly New York psychiatrist? 4, 9.
- THE TWO MRS. GRENVILLES**, Dunne; Crown, \$14.95. Romance, scandal and murder in New York's high society. 6, 5.
- THE HUNT FOR RED OCTOBER**, Clancy; Naval Institute Press, \$14.95. A Lithuanian submariner defects to the United States with the Soviet Union's most advanced nuclear secrets. 5, 26.
- LONESOME DOVE**, McMurtry; Simon & Schuster, \$18.95. The Old West seen larger than life. 8, 12.
- TOO MUCH, TOO SOON**, Briskin; Putnam's, \$17.95. Three sisters find their destinies bound by an obsession with the same man. 9, 4.
- THE CIDER HOUSE RULES**, Irving; Morrow, \$18.95. Life in a Maine orphanage earlier in this century. 7, 17.
- JUBAL SACKETT**, L'Amour; Bantam, \$16.95. In this 18th novel of the Sackett saga, a restless explorer scouts the American wilderness. 13, 17.

NON-FICTION

- YEAGER: An Autobiography**, Yeager and Janos; Bantam, \$17.95. From West Virginia hillbilly to World War II fighter pilot to first man to fly faster than sound. 1, 10.
- IACOCCA: An Autobiography**, Iacocca; Bantam, \$19.95. The rise of the automobile executive from immigrants' son to top jobs at Ford and Chrysler. 2, 46.
- A PASSION FOR EXCELLENCE**, Peters and Austin; Random House, \$19.95. Ways to achieve distinction in management. 3, 19.
- SMART WOMEN, FOOLISH CHOICES**, Cowan and Kinder; Clarkson N. Potter, \$13.95. Two clinical psychologists analyze the successes and failures of modern women in looking for acceptable men. 4, 24.
- LOVING EACH OTHER**, Buscaglia; Slack-Holt, \$13.95. Suggestions for "setting our priorities right in order to enjoy life to the fullest." 5, 54.
- THE MICK**, Mantle; Doubleday, \$15.95. The autobiography of the Oklahoma farm boy who became a New York Yankees star. 6, 8.
- THE AMATEURS**, Halberstam; Morrow, \$14.95. Four American men seek the 1984 Olympic single-sculling championship. 7, 5.
- HAMMER OF THE GODS: The Led Zeppelin Saga**, Davis; Morrow, \$15.95. The British heavy-metal group's boisterous tours of the 1970s. 8, 6.
- FINAL CUT**, Bach; Morrow, \$19.95. How the making of the film "Heaven's Gate" proved the unmaking of United Artists. 12, 2.
- CONFESSIONS OF A HOOKER**, Hope; Doubleday, \$17.95. Memories of more than 50 years of golfing, by the comedian. 10, 18.

What They're Reading



Henry Montgomery

What are you reading? Every week the Mercury News asks one member of the community that question. This week we asked Henry Montgomery, 49, president and chief executive officer of Trilogy Ltd., Cupertino-based developers of electronic devices.

"On Wings of Eagles" by Ken Follett: "This is about the rescue of two employees of Electronic Data Systems who were trapped in Iran after the revolution. Two years ago I heard Ross Perot, founder of EDS, speak about this at a conference. The whole crowd stood up cheering. We've just entered a joint venture with Elec-

tronic Data Systems, but it's a wonderful story, whether you know the people involved or not."

Montgomery is getting a double dose of the life and work of Harold S. Geneen, chairman of International Telephone and Telegraph. He's reading "Geneen," a biography by Robert Schoenberg, and "Managing," Geneen's own book of business advice. "It's outstanding, especially the chapter on executive ego and alcoholism. You'd be amazed how many times a company can be ruined by executive ego.

"I got my basic business education at ITT, where I worked from 1960-67; these books talk about people I know." ■

★Cooper, J. California. *A Piece of Mine.*

Wild Trees Pr., P.O. Box 378, Navarro, CA
95463. Dec. 1984. 124p. fwd. by Alice Walker.
ISBN 0-931125-00-6. pap. \$7.95. F

This collection of short stories is something of a literary event: it is the first collection of stories to be published by dramatist Cooper, who was named Black Playwright of the Year in 1978, and it is the first book to be published by a new small press founded by Pulitzer Prize-winner Alice Walker and former *Black Scholar* editor Robert Allen. Further, the stories are wonderful, very human tales of the life struggles of women and their men. Most are told in a folksy, conversational manner by a "trusted other," a female friend of the woman in the story, and while these women suffer many woes in their lives, the stories sparkle with warmth, humor, and, often, revenge. Libraries should purchase liberally: Cooper's stories deserve a wide audience.—Ann H. Fisher, Radford P.L., Va.

BOOKS IN REVIEW

A Piece of Mine

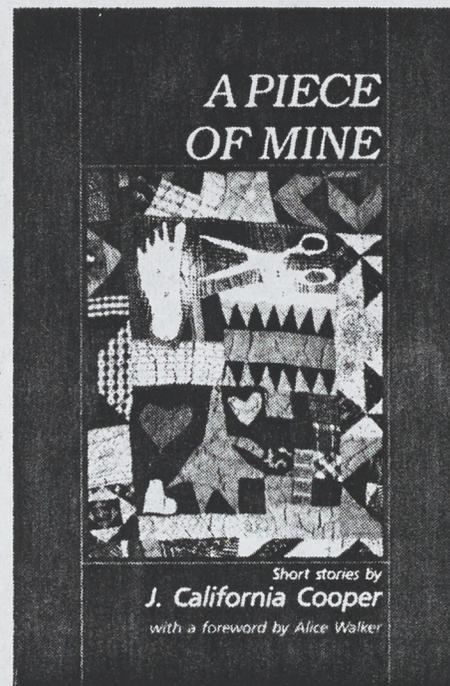
By J. California Cooper
Wild Trees Press, Navarro, CA
1984; 124 pp. \$7.95

Reviewed by Paula Ross

The appearance of the first book from Alice Walker and Robert Allen's new publishing venture, Wild Trees Press, has been a quiet one as far as I can tell. For the last six months, I'd been hearing subdued rumblings that Walker had established her own press. What, I wondered, would the author of *The Color Purple* and *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*; poet of *Revolutionary Petunias and Good Night*, *Willie Lee*, *I'll See You in the Morning*; and editor of *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, *A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* choose as the vehicle to launch her personal publishing ship into the uncertain and precarious waters that buffet the efforts of independent publishers to remain afloat? Over a late summer lunch, with a new acquaintance, another Black woman writer who moved in literary circles I knew only by reputation, I found out.

Wild Trees Press set sail with a collection of work by Black Oakland playwright J. California Cooper. *A Piece of Mine* contains twelve short stories. According to Walker's brief but cogent foreword, it is a perfect illustration of the infant press' motto: "We publish only what we love."

Anyone familiar with Walker's Gracie Mae Still ("Nineteen Fifty-Five"); Hannah Kemhuff ("The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff"); or Celie (*The Color Purple*), will instantly recognize why Cooper's women found a home with Wild Trees. These are women who work hard, try to hold themselves and their families together in spite of beatings and rapes and the heavy feet of economic oppression, sexism and white racism on their own necks and the necks of the people they love. Sometimes they



triumph, thumbing their noses at the odds. Sometimes they are trampled under the weight. Sometimes they simply persevere, cooking the meals, washing the clothes, planting the gardens, loving their men (and their women), gossiping and laughing with their best girl friends. They all live, in the best way they know how.

Cooper possesses a fine ear for the diction of southern Black, primarily working class and rural speech. She draws heavily on that skill to quickly set the scene for many of her stories here.

I'm telling you, say what you willomay, these mornings, early like this, is just too beautiful! People think that here in the country there ain't nothing but boredom, day after day. But they wrong! These is big days following great big days! Lookit them trees

Coming up! 1/85

down that road and that big fat cow over there! And that sun coming up! Now ain't that pretty?!

"Say What You Willomay!"

It is as if, anxious to push forward her different storytellers, eager to let them spin their tales, she quickly sketches in a few lines, rapid strokes that silhouette a town or a piece of countryside. She is impatient to get to the real center of the stage — the people. Mindful of the limits imposed by the short story form, she economically allows her narrators, her tellers of tales, to outline the stories' settings, using the words of their conversations as the pieces of charcoal, the pencils and the paintbrush.

Most of the pieces here use the device of the minor character as narrator. Cooper conjures up, as Walker points out, the spirit of Zora Neale Hurston's character Phoeby, the best friend of Janie Crawford in Hurston's sublime novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Phoeby, and women like her, exist on the sidelines, in the margins of the lives of their more flamboyant sisters and friends. And it is the Phoebys who collect the stories, who are trusted not to forget, who are ultimately the best loved and cherished.

It would not be difficult to fly right by the evidence of love between women in *A Piece of Mine*, however. As I read here story after story of women physically and emotionally battered by men who sought to prove their manhood by having "...to stand on our shoulders, tear us down, make us look like nothing to make yourself big enough to do what you want to do!" ("Color Me Real"), I felt pounded into the ground, despairing of yet more portrayals of Black women's suffering at the hands of Black men. But perhaps because I needed to know that the world Cooper evokes was not unremitting in its bleak messages, I combed the stories for some relief. And it is there. At fifteen, Letta becomes the sole support of her parents, crushed beneath a white man's tractor, "all in fun." She still finds the time to help her Phoeby friend build a house ("Funeral Plans"). Middy, whose husband James "got an extra woman, Sally,..." not because he really wanted one, but because "...there was a long-lived rumor still going around that a man had to have an extra woman

on the side or he wasn't a man!" buys Sally the house Sally rents from James and deeds it to her. Sharing with Sally what it means to break out of her life as a mule of all work, Middy tells her, "You better do something for yourself before it's too late" ("Liberated"). And at ninety, Ruby visits two or three times a week the graveyard where her friend Pearl is buried. She sits in a rocking chair under a sycamore tree, visits with her dead friends, eats her lunch and rests. Then she gets to work — chipping, grinding and breaking away at the fancy gravestone that adorns Pearl's husband's grave. "...he don't deserve no stone since he stole Pearl's" ("A Jewel for a Friend").

The love and caring which save *A Piece of Mine* from unrelieved grimness, are not confined to relationships between female characters. It is interesting to speculate whether or not critics like Ishmael Reed and David Bradley, Black male writers who castigate Black women writers like Walker, Audre Lorde, and now, I would guess, Cooper, will be capable of seeing all of what *A Piece of Mine* contains. Many of Cooper's men are abusive, short-sighted, stingy, deeply suspicious of and hostile towards women. It is easy, then, to overlook the men who are genuinely loving, supportive and generous, who want women in their lives to be equal partners, not subjugated servants. These men may not be readily apparent, due in part to the aspect of Cooper's style which depends heavily on dialogue or dialogue-like descriptions. She often rushes the reader through incidents of horror — rape, incest, battering — at such a pace, and with such vividness, there is little time to notice anything else. However, in at least half of the stories, women and men develop strong, deep and loving bonds with each other. Marriages endure and dreams are shared. But in the stories where this is so, the successful relationships often play a Phoeby-like role similar to that of the stories' narrators — they are on the sidelines, in the margins. Still, without them, the core of the stories would be severely weakened.

Cooper is not always successful in maintaining a high level of interest (for the reader) in these pieces. After the first three of four, I grew tired of the unchanging Phoeby voice of her storytellers. Although they are presented as dif-

(continued on page 38)

Cooper...

(continued from page 34)

ferent women, of different ages, different circumstances, after a while they sounded all alike to me. So I was reassured when I found "Mrs. Eustace B. (for Bernard) Walker and I am Ida R. Walker, myself" of "Too Hep To Be Happy!" After almost eighty pages, she was a new voice, a gust of fresh air. It is another welcome, and needed breather, when Vilma in "The Free and the Caged" takes some time out.

She decorated the cottage with flowers and leaves, planting wild flowers in bottles and jars and hanging them around the eaves of the little house. Rocks were made into designs around the yard with novel pieces of wood. Feathers were made into bouquets in odd little containers. She had improvised a bird bath and to her great delight, the birds used it. She visited the fat brown cows and petted their warm skins and shooed flies away from their eyes. ...A cat from somewhere attached itself to her; it came every morning and she fed it, then they sat together each with their own thoughts till each evening the cat would go away to some-

thing somewhere of its own.

This oasis, this pause in the rapid-fire volley of talk which impels Cooper's stories down the track, was too rare. More time out would not only allow the reader a chance to digest the onslaught of impressions, to distinguish one woman's story from another, but technically, it would be legitimate from the point of the view of the various narrators, one of whose chief functions is to *observe* and to communicate those observations. The keenest eyes and ears could not possibly produce such accurate records as *A Piece of Mine* holds if the train on which they are passengers moves eternally at breakneck speed, never halting in any station along the way.

Having written seven plays, and with drawers full of other manuscripts, according to my lunch companion of last summer, Cooper will undoubtedly continue to write. *A Piece of Mine* gives us a whirlwind introduction to her considerable skill at telling stories and creating totally believable characters. On the next trip, I hope she'll allow herself, and us, the luxury of spending more time in one corner of the world she knows so well.

Alice Walker back on scene as poet and publisher

By Diana Ketcham
The Tribune

Alice Walker is back in public view, after spending a quiet year in the country following "The Color Purple's" sweep of the literary prizes in 1983.

Walker has a new book of poems out this month, "Horses Make a Landscape More Beautiful." She will be signing copies at Berkeley's Cody's Books on Nov. 20 at 8 p.m.

Using some of her earnings from "The Color Purple," Walker has launched another career as a publisher. With her friend Robert Allen, former editor of The Black Scholar, Walker has set up Wild Trees Press in Navarro. They expect their first book in the stores by the end of November.

If "A Piece of Mine," by Oakland writer J. California Cooper, indicates what Wild Trees has to offer, Walker and Allen are off to a promising start.

Cooper's stories of small town life satisfy as moral fables as well as with their earthy humor. A former orphan girl is so successful selling vegetables that she can found a home for black orphans. The patient wife of a violent drunkard is rewarded by a second marriage to a gentle man.

"In its strong folk flavor," Walker said, "Cooper's work reminds us of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Like theirs, her style is deceptively simple and direct, and the vale of tears in which some of her characters reside is never so deep that a rich chuckle at a foolish person's foolishness can not be heard."

As their second book, Walker and Allen are bringing out a first novel by Virginia writer Jo Anne Brasil. Entitled "Escape from Ellie's Barbecue," it chronicles the coming of age of a white teenager in Boston in the '60s.



J. California Cooper, left, is one of the writers published by Wild Trees Press, set up by Alice Walker, right.

Calling Wild Trees a small press that will publish only a few books a year, Walker said they had their eye out for "manuscripts we love and can't bear to not have available."

"California (Cooper) has written stories a large number of people will just

plain enjoy," she said. "These are the stories that the world might lose. They are stores that could be spoken. What is unique is that she has written them down."

Wild Trees does not intend to limit



itself by ethnicity, sex, expertise or genre, Walker said. Cooper, an Oakland playwright who has had many plays produced locally, had never written stories until Walker encouraged her to try.

■ ■ ■

THE TRIBUNE CALENDAR Sunday, November 11, 1984

OAKLAND, CALIF.

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LIFESTYLE

KFYI takes first sh

See Bill Mann, Page D-7



By Angela Pancrazio/The Tribune

After a variety of jobs over the years, California Cooper has settled down to full-time writing and has had her first book, 'Pieces of Mine,' published.

A teller of folk tales finds vocation at last

By Diana Ketcham
The Tribune

California Cooper launched into a story. "There were these two women in the South just before the Civil War. One was black and one was white. They were mistress and slave. The war came and all the men went off to fight. The two women had to figure out how get along together . . ."

Other stories spilled out as Cooper talked. They continued as this tiny woman jumped up to snatch books from the shelves, or point to the paintings propped on every surface in her Oakland living room.

California Cooper has been telling herself stories ever since she was a child, growing up in what she calls a "poor family" in Berkeley.

"I played alone a lot. I told stories to the dog, told stories to the tree," she recalled.

Now Cooper's work has been published for the first time in "Pieces of Mine," the first book of Wild Trees Press, whose founder, Alice Walker, has praised them for their "strong folk flavor."

The stories take place among simple people in

WEDNESDAY BOOKS

small towns — small enough so that neighbors know each other's business.

Everybody knows when Miss Mary's vegetable market goes into a decline, and suspects that it is the doing of her fancy man. Everybody knows that Mrs. Rembo is too good for her husband, and rejoices in her love for the gentle grocer, Mr. Wellington.

"People assume my stories are set in the South," said Cooper, who was born in Berkeley and has lived in Oakland most of her life. Her father's family comes from Marshall, Texas, and she has gathered ideas for stories on visits there.

"In the South, there are new stories every day. They love to gossip, to mind everybody's business. I get into town, and neighbors came right over and said, 'Where's your husband, where's your children?'"

In recent years, Cooper has visited Texas with her 88-year-old Aunt Charlie, who lives near her in

Oakland. "I wanted her to help me find my roots," Cooper said. "We visited a 90-year-old woman who was her schoolteacher. Some of my best friends there are in their 80s."

"I got my aunt telling me stories about our family — about her grandfather, who was a slave, about my father, who whitewashed houses in Marin County for a living. She told me stories about how he played the harmonica in a blues band."

Walker has identified Cooper's stories as folk tales of the kind told among women. She calls the teller of Cooper's stories "a best friend, occasionally a sister."

"Cooper creates vividly the voice of the sister-witness that all of us, if we are lucky, and if we are loved, have in our lives," Walker said.

Although she has written all her life, California Cooper did not find an audience until 1978, when she had a play produced by the Black Repertory Theater.

"I went to Nora Vaughn to audition for a part

See FOLK, Page D-2

Folk

Continued from Page D-1

and read from one of my own plays," she recalled. Since then the Peralta School District has staged Cooper's play about Oakland teenagers, "Suckers, the System and Success," and others have been produced at the Intersection theater and the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

It was at the time of her first play that Joan Cooper took the pen name California. Earlier, she had named her only daughter Paris.

"I had always wanted to go to Paris, and I thought I never would. So I had my own Paris," Cooper explained.

Cooper was sitting in her three-room East Oakland cottage. Outside, the garden was thick with the 16 trees she planted herself. Inside, the fire from a Franklin stove threw its light over a clutter of art books, paper flowers, piles of old 78 rpm records, museum prints of Gauguin and Renoir, and the oil paintings Cooper does herself.

This is where Cooper has lived for the three years she has been a full-time writer. In 1981, she quit her 9-to-5 job and rented out her house so that she could stay home and write.

Before that Cooper worked at a variety of jobs to support herself and her daughter. She was a manicurist, a credit union interviewer and a secretary. She was one of the first black loan officers at Fidelity Savings in Oakland, and was once a Jet centerfold.

"I used to say I wouldn't work at anything more than a year, to keep learning things and to keep from getting bored."

Cooper worked on the Alaska pipeline, where she made a small nest egg that has helped her "retire" to write.

"People ask me how I can live on \$200 a month," she said. "I

eat once a day. I go out to the library.

"I still haven't made any money from my writing, even though my plays have been produced. But I'm hoping that will change."

A tiny woman with enormous dark eyes, Cooper turned into a whirlwind when she talked. She pulled books off the shelves to illustrate her observations on writing.

"Can you believe this, a woman in Texas was going to throw this book away," she sputtered, fingering a volume entitled "The Bedside Book of Famous French Stories."

"This is what I mean about how words can change the way you see the world," she said, reading from a Flaubert story about the beheading of John the Baptist.

When the decadent revelers at the dinner ask to see the head of John brought in on a platter, the author wrote: "And the dead eyes looked into the lifeless ones."

"See the thought that went into that description?" Cooper exclaimed. "He knew that people who are alive can be lifeless."

After 20 years of working, Cooper spends much of her newfound free time reading history and biography. "I didn't have the advantage of going to college. When I started to read history on my own, I had to learn how to think.

"Everyone should take off six months and try to do what they have always wanted to do," Cooper said. "In my story 'Liberated,' I show how fast your life can go by. Then there you are on your deathbed asking why you never did what you loved."

California Cooper will be reading from her stories at 8 p.m. Jan. 31 at Cody's Books in Berkeley.

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F I C T I O N

"Della and Smitty were married nine years when I got to know them. At first, because of the way the world looks at things, they seemed an unlikely, funny couple. But remember, the heart has its own way of picking a partner..."

HE WAS A MAN! (BUT HE DONE HIMSELF WRONG)

I have always been the kind of person who wonders about people and things, and I have some neighbors who have kept me pretty busy with plenty to wonder about! It's not real important how or where Smitty and Della met, the main thing is they were married nine years when I got to know them. At first, because of the way the world looks at things, they seemed an unlikely, funny couple. He was short, five feet or so, 125 pounds, while Della was five feet seven or so, and 207 pounds. You pictured them making love, and in your mind it was real funny, but you shouldn't do that picturing stuff because making love, real love, is never funny! Remember, the heart has its own way of picking a partner and never asks for measurements.

Anyway, Smitty was a feisty, loudmouthed, bragging, aggressive little man. Always trying to outtalk or outdo some taller man. But Della loved him even beyond the love-is-blind thing. Anything Smitty did was all right with Della.

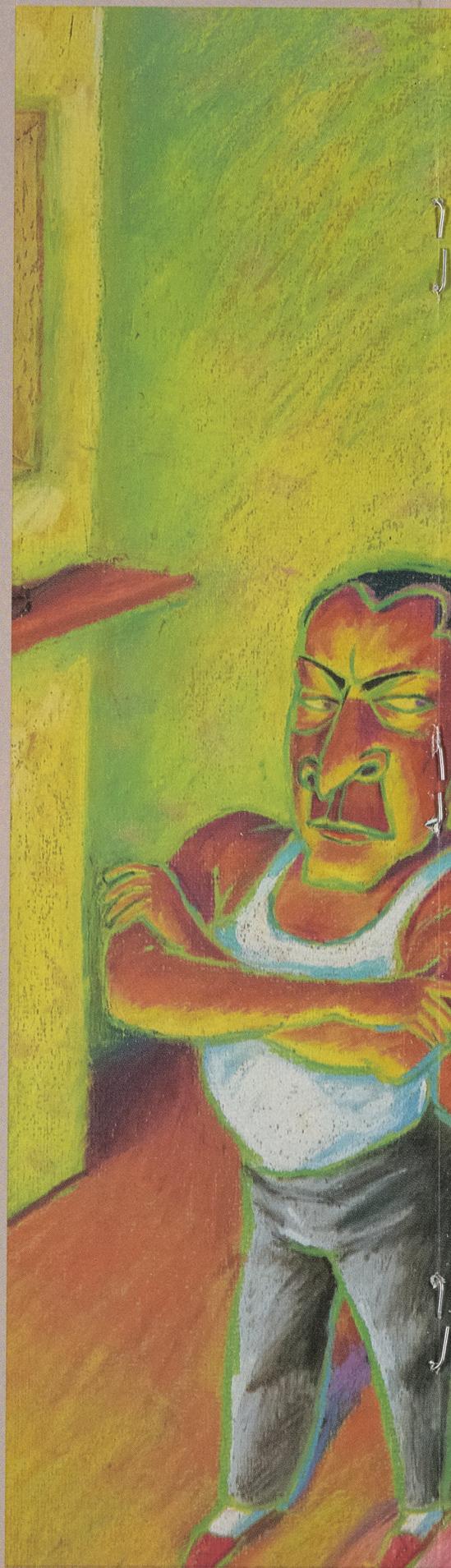
I mean even the way she cooked his meals; he had so many things he disliked, and his food had to be just right. I mean *just right!* He was the kind of man who even liked gravy on his lamb chops! Very few vegetables, hardly any fruit and all that! All of which made Della gain more weight, because of course she had to taste it to be sure it was just right. She could make homemade bread that would make you kill yourself. She did everything, Della did. Wash, cook, clean, garden, shop, chauffeur, watch football games, listen to him lie, pet, massage and make love too. Maybe more, you know, I don't know everything.

I know he was proud of Della, he was always bragging down there at the pool hall and at work about her, but he never told her, thinking just staying with her was enough. Well, after nine years, maybe he was right. Their marriage musta been strong, because they got over some real big hurdles, which made me wonder at the way it all turned out.

Like one time I ran over to their house. They had a nice little house, sitting all by itself on a neat little lot, that they rented. Anyway, I went over there, and he was standing on a box directing her how to tie a rope over a beam so he could hang her. Shouting, "I am the man! You gon have to do what I say! I ain't taking *no* shit!" Della [CONTINUED ON PAGE 88]

Anna Rich

By J. California Cooper





just crying, trying to tie that rope like he telling her. Well, I talked them out of it that time. I think he was glad because he didn't know no other way to back down and give her her life back. I told her later, "You are a fool! Big as you is, you gonna let that littler man kill you? Help him kill you?!" That's when I found out it wasn't the first time. Anyway, she just said, "I don't think he was really gonna do it!" and, smiling, went on about cooking him something special. I just really want you to know she thought he was special, that he had power, black and otherwise! Whatever he said, she believed him. I mean, that man had him a woman!

Now, there's always a little hell waiting round paradise, and Della's hell was that

HE WAS A MAN (BUT HE DONE HIMSELF WRONG)

"Smitty stuck out his chest and waited for Della to say the word that would give him his old good life back. But there was only silence"

every once in a while, Smitty hit her, abused her. It hurt and it didn't hurt! But it seemed to do so much for him, being so small and all, hitting a woman so large, she never tried to hit him back. He would tell everyone down at the pool hall and work (again), "I know I am boss!" He pranced as he told them, his chest stuck out in pride—he had a lot of that! He had whipped his woman, all 207 pounds of her—all those pounds that loved him!

Their bed had to be braced up by bricks underneath so the mattress wouldn't tilt when Della got in bed and bring him crashing over to her side, reminding him of his size. One night when they were sleeping, someone broke into their house. Don't know what they came for, cause Della and Smitty didn't have nothing much special. Just one of these crazy people that don't have sense enough to be honest and ain't got sense enough to know how to be dishonest and rob somebody with something! Anyway, Della heard the noise and woke Smitty up. He lay there a moment, then said, "Let's go see what's going on." He hollered from the bed, "Who's there! Who's in this house?"

They got up and went into the hall, and there was this dope addict or something looking raggedy and holding a gun. Smitty ran past him, going to get his gun, I guess, and Della got scared and tried to follow him

past the robber, who was then squashed against the wall, with Della screaming at him to let her go! She must have hit him or something, he was really trying to get out of that tight spot with all that mouth wide open screaming in his ears, and probably hoping somebody would come in and save him from his victims, but their house stood all alone and the café-bar across the street made so much noise, nobody could hear them. The gun went off around that time, and Della thought Smitty had saved her when Smitty came rushing around a corner hollering Della's name, guess he thought she had been shot, and the robber slid down the wall at her feet, dead.

Smitty hadn't been able to find his gun. They grabbed each other and looked at the dead man; he had shot himself with Smitty's gun ... accidentally. Della said, "We gotta call the police!" Smitty said back, "Wait a minute! Let's talk about this!" So they did. Smitty continued: "Now listen, if we call them cops we gon have a lot of trouble! That's my gun! And I ain't got no license for it! And I can't prove I didn't pull that trigger and put that gun in his hand! All them cops look at TV, and ain't no tellin what they gon decide happened here!" Della's eyes grew even wider. "Well, what else can we do? We can't throw him outside in the street!" Smitty shot back, "Oh, yes we can! That's just what we got to do!"

He ran to look out the window with Della following him, her large white flannel gown billowing around her. No one was in sight, and the music blasting from the café. It was settled in Smitty's mind—the dead man was going outside. Della started crying till Smitty slapped her into just whimpering and sniffing. She went to get her robe and a cap, and Smitty went to get an old blanket out of his car. She noticed the blood that had flowed from the man's wound and went to get a Band-Aid, Smitty came back and snatched it and stuck it in the man's shirt pocket. In fact, they did all the wrong things you see on TV. They rolled the man up, and when the café closed and all was dark, they carried the corpse over to the empty lot and left it! Went home, cleaned up, wiped off the gun, put it back in the drawer and went to bed with Smitty explaining, "I didn't kill him, you didn't kill him, so we ain't got nothing to do with it! He broke in our house, took our gun [everything was suddenly "our"] and shot his own self! We didn't know him before, we don't know him now! So go to sleep and forget the whole thing!" So they did. See, what I mean, something that's big like death, they stepped over that like it was a broom!

Anyway, the police found the body the next day, took it somewhere and did something, and since the man was Black the case

was closed, even with all those clues, stamped "killed by person or persons unknown ... CLOSED!" and that was that. Smitty and Della picked up their life and went on as usual. He felt smart cause he had handled it real smart, so he began to add, when they had arguments, "You ain't got no sense! If it wasn't for me, a man in this house, ain't no telling what would happen to you!" Della smiled at all that, she was used to it and she loved her Smitty!

Then this thing happened that made me wonder at them, because they had been through such big things and this seemed little to me, you might say.

It was a day that Della had not been feeling well—maybe lost a baby or something almost as important; she was always trying to make one. Also her special cake for Smitty had burned while she was trying to untangle something in the washing machine wringer, and when she put the cake on the sink she burnt her hand, and in flinging her arm out she hit the filled dish-drainer rack. It fell to the floor, and dishes and glass flew everywhere! She was barefoot and cut her foot tipping across the floor. She burst into loud, dreadful tears and ran into the hall past the sign that read GOD BLESS THIS HOME through the pink door she had painted because pink made her feel like a woman going into a romantic bedroom. She flung herself across the bed onto the spread she had crocheted painstakingly to laugh and love on. She cried herself to sleep.

When Smitty came home, he did his lion's roar at the door, and receiving no answer he went through the house and found Della asleep and... he got mad! He started stomping around and shouting at her about the dirt (there was no dirt), the filthy kitchen (just broken dishes, that's all), no dinner (well, there was none, but my lord!), the messed-up favorite cake (as if it was on purpose) and anything else his little mind could come up with! He never did ask her what was wrong. He kept shouting, "A man this and a man that."

Della swung her legs around and sat on the edge of the bed and tried to smile and explain. She was still trying to smile and explain when Smitty came rushing up and slapped her twice! One way and then back the other! Her arm must have shot out instinctively in reaction, and she caught him solid and he flew all the way cross the room, through the door and hit the wall in the hall and blacked out! Now, that alone was bad enough, but Della went and picked him up and placed him in bed! That Della was strong! So when he woke up, an hour or so later, he looked around him and... cried. Now, he really was a man, ain't no question, but he cried—him! Smitty!

Della came rushing into the room at the sound of the crying, and when she saw him she started crying too. "What's wrong? Are you hurt, daddy? What's the matter, baby?" But he pushed her away, snot and spit flying, then he snarled at her from his pain. An ego can be a danger- [CONTINUED ON PAGE 146]

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HE WAS A MAN!

• continued from page 88

ous, painful thing. "Get away from me! Get away! I hate you, you big, fat, ugly bear! You a ape! A gorilla! You ain't no woman!"

"But, Smitty," she began to whine and try to ease him, but he wouldn't have any of that! He got up, trying to move without showing his pain, and got the little raggedy suitcase (they didn't never go anywhere, so they didn't need no new ones) and began to throw things in it. Della's eyes were big and red and swollen, she kept trying to grab his shirts and underwear from him, but he done stopped crying now and was really talking mean to her, calling her all kinds of names, sloppy fat bitches and things like that! It was untrue and it hurt her. You could almost see her drawing up, shrinking, every time a word struck her. Seemed like the words were razor blades cutting her to ribbons. This was her Smitty talking to her!

As Smitty got to the door he turned: "I can't never live with you no more! You always gonna think you bettern me! That's what you want—to be the man! Well, I ain't staying nowhere I can't be the man! You get yourself and your stuff together and get out of my house as soon as you get some money! I'm takin all we got now cause I done made it all while you sat there on your ass! You the man now, you can get you some more!" Della reached for him, "Please, daddy, baby, please, daddy, don't go! Don't leave me! I'm sorry! [She screamed that.] I didn't mean to hit you! Please don't go! I'm begging you! Daddy, I'm begging you!" She grabbed his arm and such a hate in his face went down to his arm and he struck her so hard she just let go and stood there with her arms hanging, and her tears pouring down. He left, leaving the door open so she could watch him leaving, wobbling away dragging that suitcase, taking the car. She finally shut the door and went to bed, for two weeks.

I tended her and checked on her, but she wouldn't eat nothing or talk, and usually she's a big talker. But time takes care of everything, and time took care of her. Pretty soon she got up and got out to find work. She was still grieving, but with everything bad there's some good, and she was losing weight like thunder. Smitty had got him a room somewhere and was busy telling everybody everywhere that he done left Della. "Wasn't gonna keep no woman who wants to be the man in his family. Della didn't know how to treat no man, but she would before he set foot in that house again." He meant it too, he said! But every day when he come out of that door at work, lunch and quitting time, he seemed to be looking for somebody. Pretty soon, he would go to the windows and peer out all through the day, but nobody was there, least not Della. He let everybody know where he lived, but she didn't go there either!

I caught her one day, just a-cussing to herself, crying. I said, "What's the matter with you, Della?" "Nothing," she answered, "just repeating all the names Smitty called me so I don't forget and go running after him." Well, that was Della's formula, and it seemed to work. She didn't go! As she kept crying and grieving she grew thinner and her clothes began to hang on her. She looked terrible but she didn't care. I tried to make her eat but she wouldn't.

There was a church social coming up, and I talked two days to get her to go and even helped her to buy some new things to wear that fit her. I can tell you honestly that Della at 135 pounds was a whole new better Della than she was at 207 pounds! She was good-looking!! And with that big, sweet, innocent, sad smile, she was pretty, and the men let her know it! She danced every dance once I got her started, and laughed and laughed and laughed with happiness! Smitty wasn't there, he was probably at the pool hall bragging bout his hold on her. I ain't gonna say a lot about it, but there was a nice man there named Charles, and he took to Della like wet takes to water! Soon they was going out together, being seen a lot. Smitty heard about it. He wanted to come around and save his ego at the same time, so he began to come around the house and tell her she had to move out, he needed a place. I know he wanted her to say, "Come on home, then," but she didn't. Instead she said, "Give me a month to see what I'm gonna do and

how, then I be gone." He didn't really want that house, he wanted Della, but his pride and ego kept him from telling her. I don't really know what would have happened if he had told her, but anyway Charlie told her to move in with him, he was buying his own house. She just said she would think about it.

One day Smitty came by to check on his "house" and Charlie was there. Smitty said, blustering, "Well, I'm here now and you better go! This is a husband talkin to his wife and you oughta leave!"

Charlie answered softly, "Well, Smitty, I didn't come to see you at your invitation. I came to see Della at her invitation, so you can't tell me to go, only Della can do that!" Smitty said, taken aback, "This is my house! I say what goes on here! And this is my wife!" Della said softly, "This is the landlord's house, and I been paying the rent, Smitty, so it's not your house." She looked neat and clean and pretty, and you could smell the food cooking! Smitty repeated, stubborn, "I want to talk to my wife!" Charlie said, just as stubborn, "When she tells me to go, I will!" Della said, "I invited him to supper, Smitty, I can't tell my company to go!" Smitty said, "I'm your man, invite me to supper!" Della said back, "No, you said you wasn't my man, that I was the man. Charlie don't think I'm a man."

Smitty, quick to think wrong: "Why don't he think you a man? What you been doin with him?" He balled his fist up! Charlie put in, "I hope to marry Della someday."

Smitty said, "She already married! To me!" They both looked surprised when Della said, "I ain't made up my mind about anything!" She looked thoughtful for a minute, then continued, "Charlie will eat supper, then he will go, then you can come back and talk." Smitty was outdone! "Come back?" he asked. Della was up to it. "If you want to!"

So Smitty left, but before he was out of the door completely, Charlie said, standing in the doorway like it was his, "Smitty, I am interested in Della and she is my friend, so if I leave, it ain't so you can do whatever you want to her. Don't hurt her, don't touch her, because I will know about it!" Smitty left mumbling to himself that wasn't nobody gonna do nothin to him!

Now, all the time I been knowing Della, she always said how Smitty didn't remember no birthday presents or Valentine's Day or nothing. She always gave him things, but when Smitty came back he was dressed up and had a bag of candy in his right hand and some flowers in his left hand. But he came in fussing, "Ain't you gon offer me no dinner or cake or nothin? Are you just gonna give some to that Charles that don't want nothin but to go to bed with you? Then he gon be gone, just like he done all them other women I done heard of!" Della jumped up and went to get some cake, and don't you think Smitty didn't take heart from that! "Sure," she said, "I got plenty cake. You want some coffee?" Smitty leaned back, smiling, "Yes, I would like some coffee too!"

As he ate the cake Della was quiet, but he talked a lot about how well he was doing. "And I been thinking bout takin a trip, like a vacation!" Della sighed; he went on talking: "Maybe putting some money in this house to make it look a little better!" Della looked around the room and nodded. He smiled and went on, "Might even go head and try to get one of my own!" Della's eyes opened wide and she said, "It must be nice to own your own house!" That encouraged him, his chest came out, and he decided to play his ace card and hit Della with something that would wake her up and make her realize she didn't want to lose him!

"Della," he said, serious-like in a new deep voice, as he wiped the last cake crumb from the saucer with his finger, "Della, we gon have to do something—now—or I'm going to get a divorce!" The room was real quiet while Della stared at Smitty, her man for so long.

"You done found somebody else you love, Smitty?"

He laughed. "No, I don't want none of these women that keep running after me! They worry me to death!" He flicked off a speck from his pants as he waited for her to cry out, "I don't want no divorce, Smitty!" But she didn't. She just sat there staring down at the floor, and pretty soon tears came slowly down her cheeks.

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 148]



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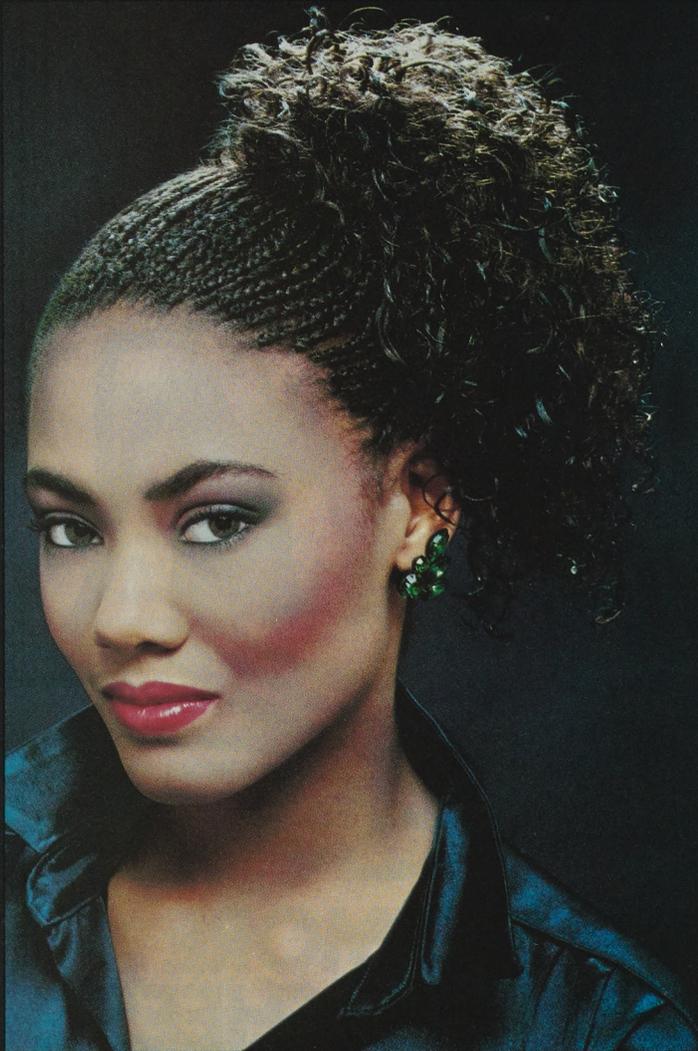


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HE WAS A MAN!

● continued from page 147

Smitty saw this and felt his point was won. He stood up and stuck out his chest, saying, "Well, Della, we can't go on like this—I'm a man!" Della looked up and the tears stopped and dried. "I need a woman! And if it's gonna be you, then say so, if it ain't, then I better get on bout my business and [he leaned toward her] get my divorce!" He waited a moment for her to say the word that would give him his old good life back, but there was only silence, Della looking at the floor again. He straightened up and looked around the home toward the bedroom, where he really wanted to go and lay his big pride down. He tried to think of a way to stretch his visit out but had played his ace too soon, so he cleared his throat and gave himself the next invitation. "I'll be by in a few days to get your answer, and I'm gonna come with my bags, Della!" It was said almost like a question.

Della started crying, and he went to put his arms around her and rub her on her back. "Della, you know I'm your man, now act like you got some sense, girl, and cut out all this dating and stuff! You my wife, and you lucky I didn't kick ass this day!" She stepped back from his arms. He continued, "Go wash your face and go to bed, no more company tonight! I'll be back in a few days, Friday, with my bags and get your life back together again cause you acting like a fool!" (Sometimes I wonder about people.) She let him kiss her and then led him to the door, and he left feeling good about being a man about the whole thing.

Della didn't sleep much that night and got up saying she "might as well get this over with" and went downtown and got a lawyer and filed for a divorce, which takes 30 days in this town, then came back home and moved most of her stuff in my house. When Friday came she went over and sat on a chair right in front of the door and waited for Smitty. He came grinning in with his suitcase without knocking, and she handed him the papers saying, "This what you want, Smitty, if you want it, it must be right! But I like married life, so I'm gonna be marrying up with Charles when this is final. I done moved, so here is your house, now I'll be going!" He cursed her again but didn't try to hit her, and he told her, "I don't want this house, ain't nothin in it!" She left first, then he did, and the next day she moved all her stuff back in it!

She was true to her word. When the divorce was final, the marriage plans was made. I wondered about all that, so I ask her, "Don't you think you rushin into one marriage after another?" She always takes her time to answer. "No," she said, "I really done learned a lot in these few months when I been working on a job and workin this stuff out with Smitty. I know bout cookin and not havin to cook. I know about a peaceful house when you alone in it, havin your own money or waiting for somebody to bring you some, and sleepin alone, or with a husband! My life ain't never gonna be like it was before, ever again! But I like havin a husband, I want a man of my own!" So the marriage plans went on.

I was just sitting at home sewing and wondering about people when about two days before the little wedding, Della came running and screaming over to my house, tears streaming down, she was what you call hyster...ical! She couldn't say a word, just screaming, "Smitty," so I followed her over to her house. Smitty was hanging from that same rafter he was always going to hang Della from, looked like he had kicked the chair over. Me, I believe it was an accident and that chair fell over. I think he was trying to fix it so Della would catch him in time to stop him and realize she loved him, or he was fixin it for her and the chair fell over. Anyway, he was hanging there dead. I took her home and called Charles, and he took care of everything, like a man. She didn't have to do anything except sign some papers for the insurance. She wanted to put the wedding off, but Charles wouldn't have none of that! And all those arrangements made too!

They got married, and she moved into her new home. It's been a year or so now, and they seem happy and peaceful, and Della is gainin her weight back, up to 200 pounds and just as happy as she can be. Sometimes when she gets to thinking about Smitty,

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 152]

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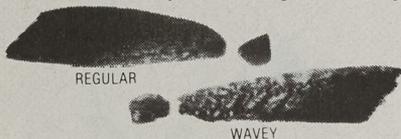
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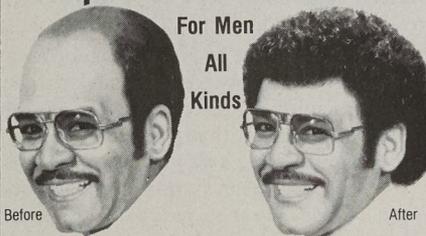
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HE WAS A MAN!

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she says, "I still believe if I had been there, he wouldn't have done that. He would have used me instead, and we'd all be alive today!" I tell her, "Better for that fool to accidentally kill himself like a fool than for you to be a fool and let him kill you!" Sometimes I wonder about Della! ♦

J. California Cooper is a playwright who lives in Oakland, California. This story is from her first published collection of fiction.

PLAYING TO WIN

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doing us wrong, we don't get no breaks, we can't do nothing."

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Arthur R. Flowers's novel, De Mojo Blues, will be published next year by E. P. Dutton. Mr. Flowers is director of the New Renaissance Writers Guild in New York City.

POLICE BRUTALITY

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Most cases of police brutality are rationalized by the police as simply cases of "mistaken identity"—the argument that a certain citizen "looked like the suspect." However, this explanation holds little water when one begins to match up the victims of police violence with the profiles of the alleged "suspects." Clearly, for instance, it is impossible that little 10-year-old Clifford Glover looked like an adult Black male.

Another common explanation for excessive use of force by the police is that they saw the suspect reaching for a weapon, although in the majority of such cases no weapon is ever found—and if one is, witnesses often testify to having seen the police plant it on or near the victim. In a 1981 case in Brooklyn, New York, police chased a car with six teenagers in it for several blocks, guns blasting, allegedly because one of the youths had a shotgun that he had fired earlier at a local disco. When the smoke finally cleared, two of the youths, 24-year-old Ricky Lewis and

18-year-old Kenny Gamble, were dead. According to Gloria Yournet, a witness to the shooting and subsequent beating of the six youths by the police, "The people in the car didn't have no weapons whatsoever. The detective who went through their car didn't find anything. Then all of a sudden he held up a shotgun, but the way he did it was funny, because it didn't come out of the red car [the car the victims were driving]. I know that because before he went into the red car he had the shotgun in his hand."

Ultimately, in the cases where suspects do indeed have weapons, the questions as to whether it was necessary for police officers to use deadly force to apprehend suspects, and why police shooting at Black citizens so often shoot to kill, still remain. In most cases, a bullet in the leg or arm would as effectively stop a fleeing or advancing suspect as a shot to the head or heart. But these options are used infrequently by police officers on minority citizens.

For many Black victims of police abuse, the trouble started simply by their being in the "wrong place at the wrong time"—that is, in a white suburb or neighborhood. In 1982 Black Long Island physician Beny Primm found himself spread-eagled and being patted down, or frisked, against his own car in his own driveway, caught up in a search by local police for a robbery suspect. Edward Lawson, 36, an educational and financial consultant in San Diego, was stopped, detained and arrested at least 18 times in five years for the crime of walking through neighborhoods in which local police thought he looked "suspicious." Lawson's long fight against the California Identification Law (Penal Code 647E), which allows police to demand identification from persons they deem "suspicious" looking, took him and his attorney from the Los Angeles American Civil Liberties Union all the way to the United States Supreme Court. In late 1983, the Court declared California's Identification Law unconstitutional, stating that it violated constitutional protections against unreasonable search and seizure.

Finally, there is the official rationale by the police that stopping, searching, questioning and otherwise harassing Black citizens has some vague deterrent effect, that the police are somehow stopping potential criminals before they commit crimes. "One of the reasons a lot of cases have been litigated has been exactly this issue," comments C. Vernon Mason, a Black New York attorney who is running for Manhattan district attorney and has been involved in issues involving police brutality. "This kind of stop-and-search behavior often comes from a racist and culturally ignorant perspective on the part of nonminority police officers," says Mason, pointing out that Edward Lawson's "suspicious" look amounted to his hair being in dreadlocks and his skin being Black.

Such racism is generally without distinction, and often Black police officers themselves are victims of violence from white police

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POLICE BRUTALITY

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officers. Comments John Cousar, a former New York City detective and past president of the Guardians (an organization of Black police officers in New York), who is currently special assistant for Criminal Justice Services for Brooklyn Assemblyman Roger Green: "Essentially the Guardians—and similar organizations around the country—were founded to protect Black police officers from white police officers." Numerous minority police officers, particularly those who are off duty or in plain clothes, have been attacked, arrested, shot and even killed by white officers who either ignored their Black counterparts or did not give them an opportunity to identify themselves as fellow officers.

While it is obvious that not all police officers brutalize minority citizens and that many are in fact positive influences in the communities in which they work, there are enough abusive and brutal officers to have created a major problem in this nation's Black communities, a problem that has touched the lives of many Black families. Some of the objectives of Congressman Conyers's subcommittee hearings are to ascertain just how widespread and systemic the problems of police abuse are and to motivate local officials and citizens to create solutions. At present, the subcommittee has received requests to visit and hold hearings in more than a dozen cities across the United States,

most of them with large Black populations, many of them with histories of racial tension and police violence.

At present, avenues of recourse for victims of police abuse or brutality are few and generally ineffective. Litigation against the offending police officers is often expensive, time-consuming and ultimately fruitless. The number of police officers convicted in assaults against minority citizens is minuscule, especially when compared with the number of offended citizens. Civilian complaint review boards (CCRB), which exist in a number of cities to investigate allegations against police, are notoriously ineffective. New York's CCRB is made up of seven civilian employees of the police department who are appointed by the police commissioner; it is staffed by police officers who volunteer to investigate complaints against other police officers. As Jacques Moreis, president of the Grand Council of Guardians, Inc. (the organization of New York City Housing, Corrections and Transit Police), says, "The Civilian Complaint Review Board is a means by which white officers volunteer to protect their brethren."

Victims of police violence who decide to litigate or otherwise protest their victimization often find themselves unable to persuade witnesses to come to court and testify on their behalf. At least nine people saw police beat 26-year-old Larry Peoples in New York City two years ago; yet despite his offer to drive them to and from court and compensate them for lost wages, at present only

one witness has agreed to testify on his behalf. As one woman told him, "I'm sorry, but I'm punking out."

Clearly, in spite of these depressing and sometimes deadly realities, it is critical that the Black community continue to speak out against cases of police brutality and seek legal and administrative recourse. At best, the offending officer will be punished for his illegal and criminal activities, and at worst such involvement will continue to serve notice to the police departments of this nation that we will not silently tolerate such behavior toward our people, particularly our children. If we do not begin to organize, to discuss these problems with one another, with local elected officials and with police departments, if we continue to "punk out," we will become part of the problem, not the solution. Such an ostrichlike posture is, inevitably, folly. For, to paraphrase a sixties Black revolutionary, "if they come for me in the morning, they will come for my brother at night"—armed and extremely dangerous. ◀

Jill Nelson is the investigative reporter for ESSENCE.

TWO BLACK COPS...

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ness police brutality as a police officer?
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