

# Book Reviews

**Quilt.** Donna E. Smyth. *Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982. Pp. 121.*

The substance of this novel is not plot but texture, the texture of the lives of three women in rural Nova Scotia, which come to an unexpected climax during a single hot summer day. Using the controlling metaphor of the quilt—a traditional female art form—Smyth pieces together the fragments of present activity, past memory, and physical perception that constitute her characters' individual realities, bringing the scraps of their experience into a pattern so as to approximate in words the process by which a quilt simultaneously preserves and transforms remnants from people's lives.

The title and metaphor are not artificially imposed: there is an actual quilt in this narrative. Its pattern is Morning Star, and it sits, half-made, on a frame in Sam Sanford's living room until the morning when she decides it must be finished. By evening the quilt is still incomplete, but two of the characters have reached significant points of culmination. Sam has allowed herself to acknowledge how she helped her terminally ill husband die, and her lethargic boarder, Myrt, has been jolted out of her deadened existence when her brutal husband Ralph transfers his destructive impulses from his wife to himself, blowing his brains out on the beach.

The traditional nature of quilting as a communal women's activity highlights the fact that each of the three major characters represents a traditional female position. Sam, the widow with "a face like a rock", is a tough survivor, determined to remain on the farm bequeathed to her by her husband. Her neighbour Hazel, secure in her long (if occasionally discordant) marriage to Herb, maintains the customs and

attitudes of her mother and grandmother, as represented by her annual ritual of making pickles. And Myrt, the young battered wife with none of the skills or alliances which support the older women, is a victim locked in her victimhood, reinforcing her situation with TV soap operas and country and western ballads.

Although Smyth's orientation is predominantly female, she skillfully enters the minds of several male characters as well, showing how they release their own emotions in their relationships with their women. Penny-pinching Herb's relief when he learns that he won't have to pay for a vet is transformed into a new appreciation of his wife, with whom he had previously been picking a quarrel:

...Hazel had her faults but she was mostly easy to get along with. Course he had his faults too, everybody did, but him and Hazel got along alright and that counted some. Maybe they could manage a camping trip next weekend. When all the beans were done up.

Ralph's refusal to admit to his responsibility for the messiness of his life is vented in his physical violence. After he is stopped for speeding, "...he cursed the cop and his cop family and their family and he cursed Myrt who was the cause of it all and he cursed himself."

As these quotations indicate, one of the features which contributes to the unity of this book is the colloquialism of the language. Smyth's artistry lies in her ability to simultaneously capture the rhythms of common speech ("That chow's some good this year!") and transmit her characters' sensations in metaphors which are both striking and appropriate. Sam, remembering the conversation in which she and her dying husband confessed their unarticulated love for one another, "felt like pieces of her own skin were coming off." Ralph, unable to comprehend why his wife has left him, "couldn't understand,

couldn't grasp it—the thing slipped away from him like a fish you're trying to get off the hook and it keeps flopping slimy slippery around."

Woven into the total picture are threads from the animal world which exists alongside the human one, and contains a similarly complex intertwining of predictable and unpredictable events. Into their routine patterns of breeding, hunting, eating, and dying intrudes an episode of unforeseeable violence when an old tomcat decapitates a litter of kittens (which he probably fathered) and when Herb's chickens, on whom he had been counting for a little extra money, betray him by coming down with some kind of inexplicable ailment.

Yet despite these negative events, this book is less a lament than a celebration, the richness of its descriptions and language an attempt to capture the totality of existence: trees, river, summer and thunderstorm, as well as men, women, work, and endurance. The age, pain, and wisdom of Hazel, Myrt, and Sam are balanced by the youth, joy, and innocence of the children at the swimming hole, of whom we catch brief glimpses between the scenes enacted by the major characters. Like the quilt, which "wasn't finished and wouldn't be finished now till tomorrow or the next day" or some time in the future, life goes on, "dull, simple, amazing, unfathomable", in the words of Alice Munro's *Del Jordan*. The result is a most satisfying book.

Carole Gerson  
Vancouver

**Iris Murdoch: *Work For the Spirit*.** Elizabeth Dipple. *Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. Pp. 356.*

Elizabeth Dipple's analysis of Iris Murdoch's twenty novels, which went to press before the publication of her latest, *The Philosopher's*

*Pupil*, belongs to the tradition of practical criticism and has all the strengths and weaknesses of that approach. Dipple gives lengthy but sometimes out of sequence plot summaries, carefully explains what she thinks each novel is about, traces the development of Murdoch's ideas and her use of the novel form. In addition, Dipple helpfully suggests areas for further study and frequently makes shrewd comments about why many readers have difficulty with Murdoch or are repelled by her. Because of Dipple's thoroughness and literary sensitivity, *Iris Murdoch: Work For the Spirit* deserves to be called the best book to date on Murdoch's fiction.

However, the study, as a work of practical criticism, has two major weaknesses which I believe are linked in interesting ways. Dipple displays a philosophical naiveté towards Murdoch's work and her intentions and she is totally silent on the feminist implications of these novels and of Murdoch's status as a writer.

Dipple openly admits that she is an "evangelist" for Murdoch, who she feels is the best English novelist now writing and one of the best of the twentieth century. Although Dipple is more impressed with the latter half of Murdoch's oeuvre (I am too) and presents good reasons for thinking so, she dutifully traces out Murdoch's progress from beginning to end. Dipple criticizes earlier studies of Murdoch, even the brilliant work of A.S. Byatt, on the grounds that all suffer from excessive allusion-hunting, and falsely claim the writer as a philosophical novelist. Doing so, Dipple feels, limits Murdoch, whereas calling her a religious writer, as Dipple does, does not.

This is a strange distinction. Apparently Murdoch is thoroughly "ideological"—a key word which is never defined in this long book—rather than philosophical. Murdoch's chief subjects are the nature and utter unattainability of the Good, the shoddy unreality in which almost all her bourgeois characters choose to live, and the fail-