

Bear Marian Engel. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. Pp. 141.

Nothing I had read by Marian Engel prepared me for this book. Her previous novels, notably Sarah Bastard's Notebooks and The Honeyman Festival, are obviously written by the author of Bear: the introspection of sensitive, educated females is the subject matter of all three. In Bear, however, her prose reaches a level of craftsmanship that makes her other novels appear garrulous by comparison. To paraphrase the story of Bear is to invite ridicule, for few potential readers are apt to take seriously an invitation to read about a love between a bear and a woman. Few recent novels have required the suspension of as much disbelief as this one, but few have been, in return, as rewarding. The narrative possesses the apparent simplicity of a folk-story with disturbing echoes one cannot easily put from mind. The story, in outline, is of a woman, Lou, who comes to an island north of Toronto in the course of her work as an archivist. Her job on the island is to appraise the worth of the estate of a Colonel Cary. Lou discovers, upon arrival, that the estate includes a bear, kept as a sort of pet in a kennel behind the house. She and the bear are the sole occupants of the island for the summer. From this contact, initially distasteful to her, she moves from toleration

to affection and, finally, to love for the animal.

Surrounding this framework is a nimbus of suggestion and meaning. The novel's central theme is certainly that of isolation. Lou is an urban creature who has had an unhappy emotional life up until the time the novel opens. She is intelligent, cosmopolitan and quite out of touch with her intuitive self. Her encounter with the bear instigates emotions in her which are, in turn, wonderful and terrifying. The novel opens quietly and ends in the same way, Lou in the intervening pages having experienced a sort of redemption. Clearly, some of her new emotions shock and frighten her: her former attempts to



manipulate the bear now seem mean and petty. Like D.H. Lawrence in his poem "The Snake," Lou has had a chance with a creature from an unknown world and has acted in a contemptible way. The closing pages of Bear are deeply moving in describing the separation of Lou and the bear. One closes the book with the feeling that, certainly, Lou is a wiser woman for this experience, that she will never again accept her joyless life in the city, and that she has grown emotionally.

Closely related to the theme of isolation in the novel is the emergence of Lou's identity as a sexual being. On one level, Bear is an erotic fantasy. It deals with Blake's question, "What is it women of men require" and the reply, "lineaments of gratified desire." The novel, in treating sexuality in a manner verging on the mythic, tells us more about female sexuality than, say, Erica Jong's much-publicized Fear of Flying which by comparison is crass and sensational. There is not a false note in Bear and, because of the sustained mood of the book, one instinctively feels the truth of the tale.

In discussing Bear, comparisons with Margaret Atwood's Surfacing are tempting. In both is the theme of Canadian wilderness, its effect on visitors and its preservation from encroaching "Americans." Also common to both is the female who goes to the wilderness and, in so doing, becomes attuned to

nature or to what is. (It is worth remarking here that while Atwood's narrator's adjustment to nature comes through an experience of madness, Engel's story is remarkable for its homeliness. There is nothing at all implausible in the story and this ordinariness is one of the most effective features of the telling.) In both Surfacing and Bear a major character is left unnamed: in Surfacing it is the heroine and in Bear the animal. In both cases the power conferred through name-giving is suggested--in Bear this power is made explicit for no contrived name seems to Lou adequate for the animal. Surely, however, the most disquieting element in both books is the implied question of what constitute desirable qualities in males at this point in time and especially at this particular point in Canadian history. It is as if both Atwood and Engel feel they must get to the source of life for an image of a male--man, friend, lover. It was suggested in Surfacing that Joe could potentially become something, that he was in an unformed condition, and that his definition would come from events in the future by means of interaction with a female. In Bear, qualities definable as "masculine" are completely depersonalized. The great strength of the bear is emphasized: with one shocking exception, this strength is kept in reserve, a tantalizingly threatening factor in the creature's power to attract. (One recalls Sylvia Plath's claim that "every woman

loves a Fascist.") The ambivalent feelings the bear arouses in Lou and which eventually subvert her rational self are typical of the experience of "falling" in love. The sensuous relationship between the two is celebrated, yet underlying it all is the great unknown animal quality in both bear and woman. These elements all hint at what might be called "masculinity," or a combination of qualities to which something basic in the heroine responds.

Many aspects of this book recall other, specifically Canadian, writing. It is hardly gratuitous, for example, that the main item of value in the Cary estate should be a first edition of John Richardson's historical romance Wacousta, a melodramatic account of settlers and Indians. Throughout Bear are instances of the counterpointing of fact and fiction, reality and romance in order to explore the question of the Canadian wilderness--what is it? The backdrop of Charles G.D. Roberts' animal stories? The colourful forest peopled with the treacherous Indians of Wacousta? The place where one becomes "bushed"? The habitat of Frye's "garrison mentality"? This emphasis on a highly ambiguous wilderness brings into relief what it means, in turn, to be human and what, particularly, it means to be female. Canadian literature is well stocked with wilderness women. From the Strickland sisters to the heroines of Ethel Wilson's Swamp Angel and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, female Canadian identity has often been defined in terms

of contact with a formidable environment. Bear is, in some ways, a continuation of such writing. But it is also something else, much harder to define, incorporating and transcending this sort of writing. At once concise, lyric and elegaic, it gives to the reader a new awareness of the mystery at the heart of things. Lou's final reverence for the unknowable life of an inarticulate creature is powerfully and beautifully conveyed. And Marian Engel's communication of compassion and tenderness, her ability to make the reader experience the love she so bravely presents--these are the most remarkable features of this extraordinary book.

Janet Baker
Saint Mary's University

L'Euguélonne Louky Bersianik. Montreal: Editions La Presse, 1976. Pp. 399..

Louky Bersianik is a novelist born in Montreal in 1930, educated in Montreal, Paris and Prague. In February 1976, La Presse published L'Euguélonne, a novel dealing with the plight of women in the modern world. This novel is presently being translated into English. It is somewhat unusual to write a review in English of a novel written in French. However, the outstanding literary and intellectual qualities of L'Euguélonne place it among the important works not