

Lack of Potency

Bernard Gadd (ed.), *New Zealand Now*, Auckland: Longman Paul, 1983, pp. [xiii +] 186, NZ\$6.95, paperback.

Bernard Gadd (Head of Department of English, Hilary College) has collected a number of recent New Zealand short stories (from about 1975 to 1981) as part of what appears to be an on-going publishing programme for secondary schools; at the same time, the anthology is meant to give "a good idea of the range of short stories New Zealanders are currently writing (and translating), excluding only examples of very long stories". There is in principle no good reason why the two aims should not be compatible, and we might as well look at the stories for both their educational value and their intrinsic interest.

I need to be more explicit as to why I think that the two aims may be compatible, and how. I do not mean that stories which appeal to children in secondary schools in New Zealand are necessarily of timeless and universal significance, although I should not wish to underrate the literary taste and discrimination of young readers. But rather, I would suggest that stories which are of intrinsic interest are on the whole also likely to be of educational value anywhere and at any time. The editor's title seems to imply that to him literature embodies something of special importance because it is written at a particular place and time; but we do not read the Bible, or Homer, or Tolstoy because we happen to live in Australia in the twentieth century. The peculiar power of art, as distinct from journalism, for example, is that it transcends the narrow restrictions imposed by place and time rather than allowing itself to be ensnared by them.

Even as a twentieth-century reader with considerable knowledge of New Zealand, I have found most of the stories presented here curiously boring. Most of them do not carry such "inner life" as is undoubtedly manifest in the best New Zealand writing, for example that of Janet Frame or R.A.K. Mason, who are certainly preoccupied with place and time, but react to them with such potency of human feeling and artistic imagination that what they say is likely to prove of enduring interest to readers anywhere who are prepared to make such reasonable efforts of understanding "context" as most good literature requires. The lack of much potency in most of the stories here is the more disturbing because New Zealanders -- particularly but not uniquely through Frank Sargeson -- have rightfully earned themselves a considerable reputation as short story writers. It almost seems as though the linguistic skills are still there (most of the stories in this book are very well written indeed) but that there is little else to "feed" those skills.

It's not as though the stories will do much harm to young readers or others; it's just that they won't do much good either, and, since life is short, it's probably better spent, after all, on the Bible, Homer, or Tolstoy, or -- if we really feel that human nature in New Zealand can only be understood through New Zealand writing -- on "New Zealand *then*", i.e. as portrayed by the older writers I have mentioned. Which is not to say that nothing can be salvaged from the present collection: Keri Hulme's story is remarkable for its inventiveness and strong suggestive power, and stands out so starkly that the blandness of much of the other writing is

accentuated the more painfully. Spiro Zavos (who has left New Zealand) writes an interesting piece about an experience in Japan, and Christopher Bates about one in Cyprus. One is almost inclined to think that, for the writing to assume life, it is necessary for the writer to move, mentally at least, into some region outside New Zealand; but Hulme shows that this is not so, and that the quality of literature depends, not on time or place, but on the calibre of the author's ability to grasp fundamentals of human existence and to give imaginative shape to them.

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