

By Jay A. Fernandez

**THE UGLIEST HOUSE IN THE WORLD**By Peter Ho Davies  
Houghton Mifflin. 230 pp. \$20

YOU'LL OFTEN hear it said that the rest of the world is much more interested in Americans than we are in them. How sad that literature must be lumped in with cinema, theme parks and political systems and labeled "export only." The international lament that American readers just aren't interested strikes a loud chord in Europe particularly. But the world is getting smaller. Consider the jacket copy on some of these books by foreign writers: "Walter Keady grew up on a farm in the west of Ireland . . . served as a Catholic missionary priest in Brazil . . . Recently retired from IBM, he lives . . . in New York's Hudson Valley." "Emer Martin is a twenty-eight-year-old Dubliner. She has lived in Paris, London, and the United States. She currently lives in New Jersey."

Peter Ho Davies is another example of this mishmash of experiences. He was born in Britain to Welsh and Chinese parents and his mixed heritage is evident in his short story collection *The Ugliest House in the World*. He writes with equal authenticity about the Communist Revolution in China, present-day tensions in Wales and ostrich herding in Patagonia, evoking time and place with what appears to be an impressive acuity. (I have never been to Kuala Lumpur, but Davies makes me feel like I have.) His varying themes emerge with humor and gravity, among them the many forms of family betrayal, the survival instinct reawakened by working at a suicide phone line, a reworking of the relationship of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid by way of the Marx Brothers, and "Relief," a story that hinges suspensefully, believe it or not, on the potential consequences of a badly timed fart.

The two centerpiece stories of the collection are "A Union," a flowing novella about a strike at a slate quarry, and "The Ugliest House in the World," a flawless rendering of the unexpectedly far-reaching arms of guilt—ethnic, familial and personal. In this title story, the tragic tale of a boy's death, Davies writes with the graceful minimalism of Raymond Carver, uncovering with powerful understatement the complex emotions provoked by questions of home and family. In "A Union," the fragile interdependence of a husband and wife becomes the eye of a storm, a strained hush amid the strike's escalating impact on the rest of the town. With the couple as his focus, Davies explores the dangers idleness poses to a worker's pride; the moral ambiguities of a good man torn between loyalty to his fellow workers and obligation to his pregnant wife; and how easily Time can cause deep fissures in human relationships with less force than it takes a man to split a piece of slate.

Despite the broad sweep of Davies's range, each story is a microscopic dissection of small people living small lives who find themselves in moral quandaries. With this astounding collection, Peter Ho Davies has left a unique, definitive footprint in the soil of contemporary short fiction. I, for one, can't wait to see where the tracks lead.

**CELIBATES & OTHER LOVERS**By Walter Keady  
MacMurray & Beck. 225 pp. \$20

WELCOME TO Creevagh, the charming Irish town at the center of Walter Keady's debut novel. Well, Creevagh may not be the center of anything, as it sits "forty miles west of the back of beyond," but in Keady's hands this insular, God-fearing town becomes the perfect location for many dramas. In *Celibates & Other Lovers*, Keady chronicles the minor sins and slights and the major reactions and redemptions of the townspeople. In the process he makes the reader feel as if he has just returned to Creevagh after a long absence, and is catching up on all the gossip—the lifeblood of this, or any, small town. Spanning the years 1945 to 1955, *Celibates & Other Lovers* is more like a collection of interconnected stories with recurring characters than a novel. It could have been titled "Four Weddings and Two Funerals." Swirling around these celebrations and solemnities are tales of young love, camaraderie and courting, and the petty betrayals and lifelong consequences of hard-headed pride.

One of the most intriguing characters is devout Phelim, whose fear of the flesh leads him to conclude at age 16 that

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Geoff Nicholson

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"celibacy, protected by a long soutane and a holy countenance, alone could shield him from the fires of lust that barred his way to heaven." Then there is Philpot, whose resigned acknowledgment "of a general principle of theology that if you enjoyed anything it was bound to be evil" frees him to embrace his every urge with lustful irreverence. The sometimes amiable, sometimes exasperating relationship of these two friends is often very funny as each tries to purify or corrupt the other. Phelim's hilarious and doomed efforts to remain chaste after he is accepted to the priesthood and Philpot's reluctant conversions to responsibility create complex moral juxtapositions that give the body of the story its muscle. Their interaction illuminates the greater struggle between earthy pragmatism and heavenly righteousness, and the middle ground that may exist between.

Although few problems are solved and resolution remains elusive (much like life, come to think of it), Keady's folksy, conspiratorial tone is truly irresistible. He seems to be saying that love is the one true path, no matter how much we try to ignore it, avoid it or do the wrong thing. The behavior of the stubborn yet charming Creevaghians shows how even the finest vibrations of a single heart can send a tremor through an entire town.

**ACID PLAID**New Scottish Writing  
Edited by Harry Ritchie  
Arcade. 245 pp. Paperback, \$13.95

ACID PLAID resembles a drunk stumbling down the avenues of literature: sometimes brooding, sometimes reflective, sometimes with an imagined score to settle and often just plain loud and confrontational. In this uneven collection it is far too easy to tell the established writers from the newer ones.

Some of the stories by such seasoned authors as William Boyd ("Loose Continuity"), Iain Crichton Smith ("The Open University") and Shena Mackay ("Crossing the Border") reflect a struggle for maturity, physical and metaphorical, as well as engaging questions of national identity. But too many of the A.W. ("After [Irvine] Welsh") voices—those riding the coattails of *Trainspotting's* recent literary and cinematic success—tend to shout across the page with megaphones, blaring claims to their own place in Scottish contemporary literature. Even Welsh's story "A Fault on the Line" reads like a self-parody, isolated as it is without the collective fever of *Trainspotting* surrounding it.

One positive aspect of this collection is its contribution to the debate over contemporary ideas about national lan-

guage and identity. As Angus Calder delineates in his essay ("By the Water of Leith I Sat Down and Wept"), much of the new brash tone is evidence of a resurgence in post-"Braveheart" national pride. Reclaiming authentic dialect, as James Kelman and Welsh have done, becomes a form of cultural ammunition. I suggest you read the Calder essay and editor Harry Ritchie's introduction before the fiction and poetry. They provide a helpful framework for understanding the conflicting tendencies of Scots writers "to go on a bit about the glories of Scotland" and to assert that "to survive at all their protagonists have to get clear away from Scotland."

If *Trainspotting* is your only point of reference for Scots fiction, then *Acid Plaid* is a good place to dive in. But if your horizons have already expanded beyond, then skip it. Where Davies and Keady are composing national literature of poise and reflection, "the Scottish Beats" appear just as happy to knock it all down and burn it in one drunken literary bender.

**BLEEDING LONDON**By Geoff Nicholson  
Overlook. 348 pp. \$23.95

LONDON. THE PRESENT. Stuart London has decided that he must walk down every street in the city, even if it kills him. Judy Tanaka is trying to have sex in every borough and postal zone. Mick Wilton would rather be anywhere else, except that he is dutifully and vengefully tracking down the six men who gang-raped his stripper girlfriend and, unfortunately, this is where they live. In *Bleeding London*, Geoff Nicholson's latest wickedly funny and cleverly constructed novel of human obsession, he drags the reader to every corner of London as he works out his love/hate relationship with the city. And with Nicholson as your lunatic tour guide, you've never seen it like this.

The obsessions Nicholson has given his protagonists—and how the three intersect and interact—allow him ample room to dissect every facet of modern London life. For half-Japanese Judy, London is a tantalizing maze full of hidden niches in which to seek out sexual partners and thus forge some kind of identity. For sensible bruiser Mick, it's a maze of another sort: an inscrutable one. Mick is an outsider from Sheffield, so in his eyes London is nothing but a cold, brutal, unlikable blight on England, which suits his mission and mien just fine. For unhappily married Stuart, the "walking diary" he keeps of his travels is a last chance to establish order amid the messy boredom of middle age. His desperate quest becomes a solemn and literal attempt to prove Samuel Johnson's contention that "by seeing London I have seen as much of life as the world can show." In Nicholson's anatomization London becomes a place where history, geography, myth, culture and sex intertwine much as the characters do—randomly, memorably and seemingly inevitably.

Whether you like this novel just depends on whether you appreciate Nicholson's brand of skewed storytelling. There's lots of sex, most of it kinky and voyeuristic, vengeful physical and psychological violence, and pitch-black, ash-dry humor. But Nicholson's obsessive obsessiveness—see: *Footsucker*, *Still Life With Volksuagens*, etc.—is both his strength and his weakness. His quirky diatribes on the horrors of modern life can be a bit too cynical, and some characters receive shorter shrift than they deserve. In this case his portrayal of female characters is decidedly unsympathetic.

By the end, though it feels as if Nicholson wants to see all of London burn, he instead chooses the high road of literature. As Stuart's wife remarks about his diary: "What you were doing was creating a new London, inventing a new city, a city of words, something in your own image." This is exactly what Geoff Nicholson has done.

**BREAKFAST IN BABYLON**By Emer Martin  
Mariner. 321 pp. Paperback, \$12

BREAKFAST IN BABYLON is a stained, besotted, dark cloud of a book. Relentlessly bleak, it concerns the travails of a ragtag group of drug-choked beggars shuffling about Europe at the end of the 1980s, for whom "no place ever became familiar, no face ever recognizable in any sort of comforting way."

Isolt, a young Dubliner who finds company in bottles and books, is part of this network of eccentric comrades and filthy squats, and the focus of this destinationless journey. Sharp, with a sassy wit de- —Continued on page 9



# Fiction

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spite her gloom, she takes an existential view of her plight: "Things happen in the undertow of the world that you can never anticipate." In her random travels she becomes inexplicably fascinated and attached to egotistical Christopher, *The Hoodoo Man*. An insecure, older American drug dealer who believes he transmogrifies into a peacock upon each full moon, Christopher is both the weight that holds Isolt down and what eventually snaps her out of her indifference.

The alternately frail and steely

Isolt, "a watcher and a waiter," is the vehicle for Martin's thematic concerns: the struggle for identity among the faceless and invisible; the stresses of gender, typified by Isolt's endurance of Christopher's brutal misogyny; and issues of ethnicity and solidarity in a modern world gone mad. But in this beautiful and corrupt Babylon where "we are all in exile from our very souls here in the chaos," the gift of a simple breakfast might be all it takes to shine a humanistic light into the darkness.

Though the first half of the book's daily cataloguing of life in a "shabby world" is numbing and arbitrary, a funny thing happens halfway through: A real sympathy for some of the characters develops. In particular, we feel Isolt's sad desperation becoming hope as

she learns the Lesson of the Blind Midget: "Don't feel self-satisfied by comparing yourself to the most dismal bastard." We want Isolt to cling to the thoughts of escape that creep into her misery and complacency. We feel her getting stronger. But is it already too late to become anything but a victim and a beggar?

Martin's impressionistic prose is occasionally overblown, at times laughably pretentious. More often, though, it inundates the page with a hallucinatory intensity reminiscent of Henry Miller's visions of dirty joy. The author has invested *Babylon* with the stench of realism, the dingy detail and scatological honesty of life in the margins. Despite the gloom, it's a testament to Martin that for a short while I felt as if I lived among the scavengers. ■

## Daily Book World

*The following books are scheduled to be reviewed this week in Style:*

**THE SERPENTINE CAVE**, by Jill Paton Walsh. A novel about a woman who sets out to recover her mysterious past. Reviewed by Linda Barrett Osborne.

**BLACK PIONEERS**, by John W. Ravage. A history of African-American explorers and settlers. Reviewed by David Nicholson.

**THE SKULL OF CHARLOTTE CORDAY and Other Stories**, by Leslie Dick. Reviewed by Georgia Jones-Davis.

**THE ORDEAL OF INTEGRATION: Progress and Resentment in America's 'Racial' Crisis**, by Orlando Patterson. Reviewed by Daryl Michael Scott.

**THE ILLUSIONIST**, by Dinitia Smith. In this novel a magician with a secret seduces the women of a small upstate New York town. Reviewed by Carolyn See.