

## CHANNEL 5



BOOKS

# Fiction's Far Horizons

Spring marks a positive explosion of publishing, and with the weather improving who can resist a good read? **Helen Carr** surveys the springtime literary buzz and **Nicci Gerrard** picks the best from the rest



Watching yet another programme last week on the new dawn that led to 1968, my 16-year-old daughter said gloomily: 'The trouble is, nowadays nothing even looks as if it's getting any better.' Politically, her pessimism is hard to counter. No doubt the front half of this *Marxism Today* will bear her out. So I want to hold out a pale glimmer of hope in these back pages. In one area at least, the British are becoming more open-minded: the lists of this year's spring fiction are strikingly cosmopolitan.

Reactionary politics have always fed off traditional British insularity - xenophobia indeed. Paradoxically, while Margaret Thatcher's brutally insensitive bullying of her fellow EC leaders swells the flood of populist jingoism begun by the Falklands, the novels on the bookshop shelves signal a new interest in other literatures and other experience.

I'm not suggesting that every publisher has leapt immediately to the rich internationalism of imprints like Carcanet and Picador, whose imaginative range has been

and still is such a valuable part of British publishing. But there is a definite trend, of which the books I mention here are only a part.

One expects Australian fiction, of course. The bicentennial has unleashed writers along with films, lager and corks. Viking have brought out another novel, **The Newspaper Of Claremont Street** (£10.95), by the still too little known Elizabeth Jolley, whose talents should be more justly appreciated here after *Bookmark's* excellent programme on her wry, witty work. Hamish Hamilton will bring out in April what promises to be the work of a major writer, an Australian Bildungsroman, **Bloodfather** by David Ireland (£12.95). Cape introduce Rod Jones, whose **Julia Paradise** (£9.95) explores the psychic, mesmeric and historical horrors of an Australian doctor in revolutionary China. Pandora's reprints of Australian women's fiction come into their own. This spring they are adding three titles: **An Australian Girl** by Catherine Martin (£6.95), **Uncle Piper Of Piper's Hill** by Tasma (Jessie Couvreur

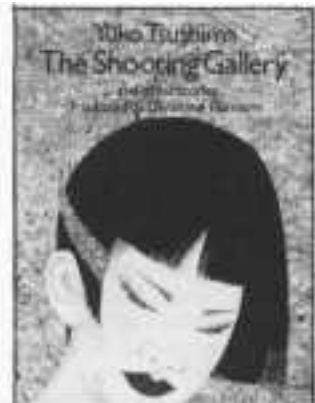
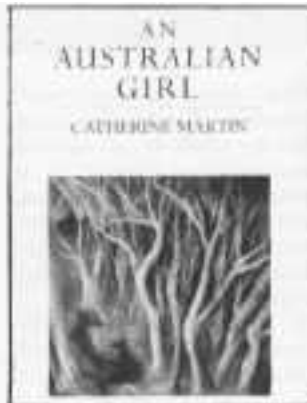
(£5.95) and **Outlaw And Lawmaker** by Rosa Praed (£6.95).

But there are less expected locales. **Half Of Nan Is Women** (Viking, £11.95) is a Chinese novel about political and sexual powerlessness, written by Zhang Xianliang out of his own experience of 20 years as a political prisoner, a book which caused bitter controversy in China when it was published in 1985. Virago publish short stories by another controversial and critical Chinese writer, Zhang Jie, **As Long As Nothing Happens, Nothing Will** (£4.50 pbk) following the success of their publication of her novel *Leaden Wings* last year. The Women's Press have short stories by the Japanese Yuko Tsushima **The Shooting Gallery And Other Stories** (£3.95 pbk). Last year they published her novel *A Child of Fortune* - eight years after it had won the Women's Literature Prize in Japan.

American visitors are always perplexed when their British hosts ask them if they'll visit Europe while they're here. They think that this is Europe. Perhaps we begin more to recognise a

shared inheritance. Picador has brought out the first British translation of a novel by the acclaimed German writer, Uwe Timm's **The Snake Tree**, (£11.95) a powerful study of a post-colonial European meeting the Third World. **Baltasar And Blimunda** (Jonathan Cape, £11.95), by the Portuguese Jose Saramago, has finally been published here.

Carcanet publish two Italian novels, another book by that brilliant re-inventor of the detective story, Leonard Sciascia, **The Council Of Europe** (£10.95), and Aldo Busi's first novel, **Seminar On Youth** (£12.95), a mesmeric, disturbing excursion into the Italian underworld. Chatto & Windus, who significantly enough have launched a new series of translations ('the best of foreign fiction'), give us another of Italy's rich crop of contemporary novelists, Antonio Tabucchi, whose short stories, **Little Misunderstandings Of No Importance**, (£10.95) is the second in their series. The first is a French first novel, **Child Of The Red Land** by Cecile Drouin (£11.95),



which traces its central protagonist from Indo-China to France and represents yet another trend in this year's fiction: not just interest in the non-British but a fascination with relationships between the First and the Third Worlds.

The US novels published here this spring strikingly illustrate this: two by women who have left the Caribbean for the States, working out in fiction their melded heritages, the Guyanese Joan Cambridge's **Clarise Cumberbatch Want To Go Home** (The Women's Press, £3.95 pbk) and the poet Michelle Cliff's brilliant first novel, **No Telephone To Heaven** (Methuen £10.95). Then another extraordinary debut, the Native American writer Michel Dorris' story of three Montana Indian women's lives, **A Yellow Raft In Blue Water** (Hamish Hamilton, £11.95) and Tama Janowitz's post-modern fantasia on the clash of the so-called primitive with the so-called civilised, **A Cannibal In Manhattan** (£10.95). And from Latin America, Miguel Angel Asturias's 1949 masterpiece on the fate of the Mayan Indians, **Men Of Maize** (£12.95) will appear in April as part of Verso's new fiction list.

Of course, there are British titles too, including a new (and very cosmopolitan) novel by Graham Swift, **Out Of This World** (Viking, £10.95).

But why should the publishing world, even in its most established state, be so at odds with the political climate? Blake Morrison in *The Observer* has already pointed out the paradox of the coincidence of Clause 28 with the publication of three exceptionally fine - and explicit - homosexual novels (Edmund White's **The Beautiful Room Is Empty**, Picador £9.95; Alan Hollinghurst's **The Swimming Pool Library**, £11.95, and **Significant Others**, £10.95, both from Chatto and Windus). Perhaps, like the erstwhile true-blue medical profession and the Conservative backbenchers, deep opposition is arising within the establishment ranks. And that must be cause for hope. •

## Daring To Dream

It is not just that non-British fiction seems more interesting at the moment - it also seems richer, more passionate, more concerned with the stuff of history. These three novels possess 'big souls'; they are an answer to materialism, defiantly idealistic, daring to dream.

The paradox of the title is also the triumph of Skarmeta's attractive novel **Burning Patience** (Methuen, £9.95 hbk), translated from the Spanish by Katherine Silver: passion fires the greyness of painstaking endeavour, optimism lightens the bleak political landscape of Chile, the sweet romance of adolescent love is played out against violence and disillusion.

Young Mario Jimenez is the postman of Isla Negra, a small Chilean fishing village where



almost everyone is illiterate. He only has one real customer - the great Latin American poet Pablo Neruda, worshipped by Mario and Chile's cultural hero. An unlikely but touching friendship grows up between the eager postman who would be a poet and the serene old poet, and Neruda is eventually enlisted in Mario's campaign to win the woman of his Dante-esque dreams, luscious Beatriz.

For a while the novel is sunny, good-humoured and erotic, - Beatriz is won and bears Neruda a godson; Allende names Neruda Chile's ambassador to France, Neruda wins the Nobel Prize for literature, quoting Rimbaud in his acceptance speech: 'Only with burning patience shall we conquer the splendid city that will give light, justice and dignity to all men'; the cast of extraordinary characters fill the novel with the bustle and intimacy of village life. But what we know of



history stalks the novel's happiness and *Burning Patience* moves exuberantly towards its bitter ending.

President Allende is assassinated and, soon after, Neruda dies; Mario's anguish reverberates through the final pages.

On one level, *Burning Patience* is about words and about language as a political force: plagiarised words (Mario woos Beatriz with the fervent verses written by Neruda); the incapacity of words to express clumsy young passion (the more desperately Mario seeks for potent expression, the more it eludes him: sincerity is tongue tied); language as a common inheritance and, for Chileans, one of their few inalienable possessions ('poetry', Skarmeta writes, 'belongs to those who use it not those who write it'). When Allende is murdered and Neruda dies, we are left only with the immortality of his poetry.

The novel is also about power - not just the power of words but the power of ordinary people to survive violence and oppression with courage, integrity and even hope; with 'burning patience'.

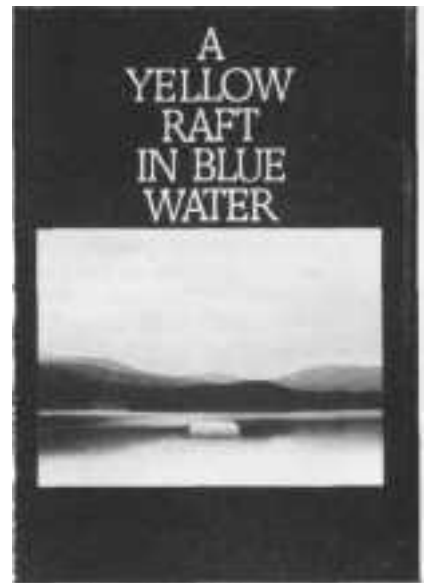
Skarmeta pays tribute to a poet and to poetry in *Burning Patience*; in **No Telephone to Heaven** (Methuen, £10.95 hbk) the Jamaican-American Michelle Cliff uses her poetry to pay tribute to a country. Her first novel is a lyric full of thorns, a love song to Jamaica and an unveiling of what Jamaica is really like - not the Jamaica of tourist brochures and tv commercials. Michelle Cliff grapples with themes of colonialism, race, myth, and political and sexual awakening through the life of light-skinned Clare Savage, who journeys to Jamaica, England and America in search of

identity.

Cliff is concerned with dualities - male and female, rich and poor, black and white - but also with the nebulous twilight areas of experience. Clare is sexually divided, her colour mingles both races, her background mingles colonial and slave ancestry. This might sound schematic - a novel structured around the need to tell Jamaica's history, to show oppression, to point to a way to find wholeness of self.

But Cliff's writing - whether it be Jamaican patois that lilt with the incantatory power of poetry, the simple lines of narrative or the rich meanderings of Clare's own thoughts - fuses authorial intention into a novel of great beauty.

Finally - and too briefly - American writer Michael Dorris' **A Yellow Raft in Blue Water** is an extraordinary and extraordinarily attractive first novel. Written by a man through the voices of three Indian women, moving backwards in chronology towards a



resolution which is set in the past, *Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (Hamish Hamilton, £11.95, hbk) risks foundering on its high endeavours.

But Dorris never wavers. In language of primary colours, he describes fierce and mercurial maternal love, and a child's longing for roots. Mixing surreal episodes with daily realities, he gives the reader a world aglow with unashamed sentiment. It is a novel that, in spite of the hardship and pain that it describes, dares to be happy. Nowadays that is no simple achievement.\*