

It is difficult to look back on the literature of any year and find a neat consistency in what is, by its nature, diverse and unpredictable. The literary awards stand out, of course, notably the Booker and Whitbread Prizes. The greater media coverage always sends sales soaring and they have become essential features of the literary publishing year. But perhaps it is more interesting and revealing to turn away from the literary establishment to those young authors who made their debut in 1988. There have been some outstanding new writers, many of whom reflect with a sharpness and precision the cultural climate of the late 80s. Cold undercurrents run through their work and their characters appear dispassionate and isolated as they strive to function in a self-motivated world.

Candida McWilliam's *A Case Of Knives* (Bloomsbury Press £12.95), was in fact the winner of the Betty Trask Award for a first romantic novel. But there is little that could be called romantic in this tale. The characters, drift like icebergs through the narrative, speaking a carefully chiselled thesaurian language. For these manipulative men and women, to love is to master, and as each of them tries to create a separate order of their own choice, chaos and disorder inevitably occurs. This beautifully crafted novel confronts the disease of the age, not only Aids (which will surely soon be as integral to modern fiction as tuberculosis was to the novel of the 19th century) but also a dangerous heartlessness and disregard for others. McWilliam is the careful mistress of a terrifying tension, drawing the reader with dread towards the bloody and tangled conclusion.

In contrast, Lucy Ellman's *Sweet Desserts* (Virago £10.95) is packed with emotion and humour, but there is still a sense of loneliness and lack of communication in her protagonists' lives. Two sisters vie for their father's affections and suffer from the high expectations that

are bred into bright middle-class girls. Ellman inserts snapshots of the diets, beauty tips, recipes and sexual problem phone-ins that daily bombard our consciousness. These contribute to the distortion of the self-images of the two women which leads to their severe eating disorders. They gorge themselves to compensate for the emptiness within. Apart from one of the sisters' brief affair, the men in their lives are unamorous and disappointing. Even their father's death, the process of which is painfully and skillfully described, does not bring the sisters together but rather increases the distance between them. Despite the fact that *Sweet Desserts* is at times hilariously funny, you are left with a depressing sense of two women alone and adrift, unable to bridge the gap to help each other.

In *Los Angeles Without A Map* (Seeker and Warburg £18.88), Richard Rayner presents a vision of romance as superficial and unreal as celluloid. He captures perfectly the infatuation that many young people harbour for the cities of the United States and the brash dream of excitement and glamour offered by Hollywood. His hero is a bored and slightly dull Englishman who is swept off his feet by the blonde beauty, Barbara, from LA. He follows her from Athens to the East Coast of the United States where he becomes the spectator of the hopefuls and has-beens of Hollywood. The object of his affections is a one-dimensional character and for him she remains as idealised as an actress on the big screen. In the same way that all the no-hope characters he encounters must have a favourite star to worship so does he idolise the bimbo, Babs.

A book which epitomises the hard, cold world of the late 80s is *Bonfire Of The Vanities* (Cape £12.95) by the veteran American writer Tom Wolfe. People on both sides of the Atlantic rushed to buy the book which captured the essence of a political culture dominated by

Writing In A Cold Climate

At the end of another year in which books sales continued to rise Sophia Radice turns away from the glittering prizes to look at some trends in the new fiction of 1988 and the contributions of two outstanding veterans



Primo Levi: Makes the concerns of the 80s seem transitory and trivial

Wall Street and of a time in which Eurobondsmen saw themselves as 'masters of the universe' - at least until fate came to screw everything up. Wolfe was accused of being a racist, a sexist and a prophet of the Black Monday yuppie fall from grace, but it is difficult to see who comes off worst in his judgement. With his slick, glossy-mag style he slices into everyone whether they are the business gentry, Jewish lawyers, Irish cops, black councillors or English journalists. Casting his judgement of the world, Wolfe paints the 80s as a loveless nihilistic nightmare.

Primo Levi was an author with greater qualifications to make such judgements than any of these contemporary writers whose introverted fiction is concerned with a narrow, self-obsessed present. His posthumous

work, *The Drowned And The Saved* (Sphere, £10.95), delves unflinchingly into the horrors of the Holocaust making the concerns of the 80s seem transitory and trivial. This is not a work of fiction but a coda to his novelistic masterpieces, it was the last work to be completed before his suicide in 1987. His observations span a vast historical terrain and he questions and analyses relentlessly with a calmer and harder voice than ever before. In the chapter 'Letters From Germans' he responds to reactions to his earlier work *If This Is A Man*. The myth that Levi could ever forgive the horrors of Auschwitz is killed forever. This is the last chapter of an outstanding, intelligent and courageous writer which will be remembered as one of the most important books of the year. •