

indeed the very subject of the work, has sum and substance and a base need to tell us about her life. After all, why admit to the world at large that one is confused, stumped, baffled by one's own life? It hardly makes for an enlightening, much less a reliable, narrator.

In *The Underpainter*, Jane Urquhart adopts the persona of Austin Fraser, an American painter, and writes his life, a fictional autobiography. And let me not shy away from the obvious: this story is delivered in the first person. This is a bold move given the time in which we read, given the righteous appeal for authentic voices. Yet there is not a phallogocentric thought out of place. And notwithstanding that Austin Fraser is a real prick on a few occasions, *The Underpainter* is page after page of inner white-male thoughts that feel true and real. Indeed, keeping in mind the lyrical and thick poetic prose of *Away*, this novel is more than just a stylistic departure; it is an astounding display of skill. As Urquhart employs multiple settings, themes, characters, and meanings, let me pick just one element to reflect upon. An old and great argument is played out in *The Underpainter*: Can, or should, art be practical? We are reminded equally of Cellini and his fellow artists and craftsmen who debated this very issue, and of every Christmas and Easter gallery-goer who, standing in front of a modernist painting which he finds confusing, utters in defence of his own intelligence: "What's the use of that?" In one lightshaft, *The Underpainter* is about the purpose of art, the collecting of art, and the preserving of art. Austin's friend George decorates

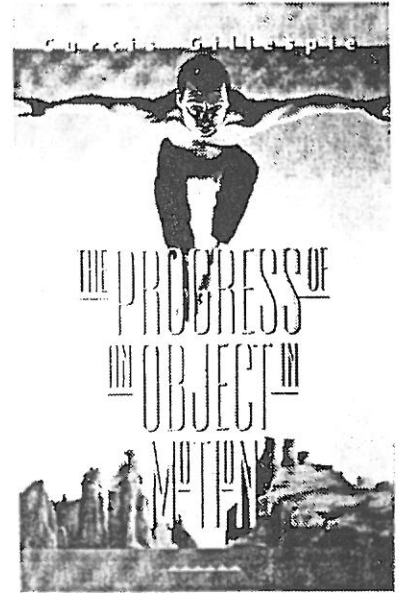
china. Austin dismisses George's art as a hobby.

Austin is concerned with high art. It is all or nothing. Every painting that strives to call itself art must justify its existence in every brush stroke. So they disagree as to art's purpose. After a lifetime of misfortunes, women, and war, George dies, leaving his partially shattered china collection to Austin who then reconstructs, rebuilds, and expands the collection. Austin preserves his friend by preserving his friend's passion. Finally, Austin pieces together that there is more than one way to achieve art. But what both George and Austin fail to see is how their aesthetic passion exists separated, compartmentalized, from their lives. Moreover, their lives suffer and their women are neglected because of their single-minded dedication to their art.

Male voices, male artistic eyes, a man's story. It is almost ironic that Urquhart could be charged with excluding the women from the narrative proper, of making them artist's models, doting servants, sluts, crazies, misanthropes. But, ultimately, it is not ironic at all because a lesser writer would have betrayed her narrator's voice, his point of view; she would have abandoned her bluff in the name of subversion.

Urquhart tells a faithful story of Austin Fraser's life. It's a sometimes sad and lonely life, but ultimately fascinating because it's an account limited by the teller, a life largely unprocessed and unaccounted for by the very man who lives to tell it. This somehow adds a dimension of hurt. Perhaps it's because the mistakes Austin makes in his life are so typical of men this century; but more likely,

it's because the flaws are so obvious, so understood, so often repeated, that a woman appropriating a man's voice can get it dead right.



The Progress of an Object in Motion

by Curtis Gillespie
Coteau, 1997
209 paper, \$14.95 paper
ISBN 1-55050-119-4

and a body to remember with

by Carmen Rodríguez
Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997
166 pages, \$15.95 paper
ISBN 1-55152-044-3

Reviewed by Steve Hayward

The stories in Curtis Gillespie's collection of short fiction, *The Progress of an Object in Motion* are, mostly, carefully structured narratives that move deliberately toward a climactic close. Like Irwin Shaw, who compared writing short stories to having a series

of affairs (as opposed to writing a novel which, he suggested, is more like a marriage), Gillespie seems to understand the form as involving a minimum amount of foreplay before collapsing in a single, penetrating truth. While this approach is familiar enough, I have to admit that by the time I finished the book, I had come to expect the epiphanic moment that would end the story. But perhaps this is a criticism that might be made about *any* collection of short fiction. (Is there anyone who has *actually* read all *Nine Stories* in a single sitting?)

Many of the stories in the collection are quite strong: “The Meat Locker,” “Angle of Incidence,” and “Outriders” are among the best I’ve recently read. Gillespie has a particular talent for constructing what Kenneth Burke called a “representative anecdote”—a story that is a typical instance of reality, but in being typical, serves to generate a specific depiction of that reality.

“Outriders,” a story about rodeo riders on the wagon circuit, is a good example of the kind of “representative anecdote” that Gillespie constructs with such skill. It tells the story of a wagon crash that horribly kills a number of horses, and the investigation that follows the incident. The narrative unfolds to explore both the ethics of a particular incident and an entire industry. Gillespie is asking important questions about the ethics of rodeo racing, but he is asking these questions in a way that seems very true to the people and way of life that he is interrogating. In examining the moral ambiguities of the closely knit community that has grown up around an industry, Gillespie is asking the very

questions that the members of the community would have to ask themselves. *The Progress of an Object in Motion* is worth looking into for “representative anecdotes” like this: when Gillespie tells a story that enables us to peer into a whole circumstance, he allows a whole world to speak.

Carmen Rodríguez’s very different collection of short fiction, *and a body to remember with*, is a linguistic hybrid that is the product of an exercise that involved her translating these stories, initially written in Spanish, into English, and then back to Spanish again. After the experience of having her work translated by others, Rodríguez began translating her own work. In the process, she discovered that as she did so, the stories themselves were translated—into different stories. She then translated the new versions back into Spanish. (The collection is being published simultaneously in Spanish by Editorial Los Andes in Chile.)

More than simply having to do with the words that these stories are written in, the whole idea of translation is a central thematic concern of *and a body to remember with*. Based on Rodríguez’s life as a political exile in Canada after having escaped from Chile after the military coup of 1973, these stories speak, sometimes with real difficulty, of the struggle to learn a new language and a new way of life. Rodríguez’s prose style takes some getting used to—there are locutions in the book that betray the fact that English is not her native language—but, I think, this awkwardness is one of the pleasures of reading the collection. Language is something that Rodríguez, like many of her characters,

has to paradoxically move through in order to make herself understood. I felt this particularly when reading the many Spanish passages in the book, where there is an unmistakable sense of relief, a bursting into language: another language from another country.

This past Christmas, a friend of mine was leaving Canada to visit her family in Portugal, and said she was excited to be going home. I asked her how she knew where home was—was it Canada, or Portugal, and how did one decide after having lived in Canada for so long? Home, she told me, is Portugal, the place where I *don’t* have to spell my name. Carmen Rodríguez’s *and a body to remember with* allows us a glimpse into the poignancy of such an observation.

Paul’s Case

by Lynn Crosbie

Insomniac Press, 1997

186 pages, \$18.99 paper

ISBN 1-895837-09-X

Reviewed by Bert Archer

Paul’s Case is three quarters of the way towards being the breakthrough book many were hoping it would be for its author, Toronto poet and anthologist Lynn Crosbie. It is probably just a little too much the product of a writer who’s just finished her PhD in literature to be as readily consumed as a breakthrough book must be.

There was an initial mild furor over this very unconventional look at the Bernardo/Homolka case, in which the author admits her mixture