

BOOKS

Black Dogs by Ian McEwan

I admit to being somewhat prejudiced about this book from the very start. After all, I saw the author being interviewed on *The Journal* last year, when the hardcover edition was about to be published, and it sounded... interesting—like the kind of book sophisticated, semi-British university professors might read, since their taste for mainstream pulp had been ruined by their training.

So when the trade paperback found its way to our reviewer's desk, I jumped at the chance to read it, review it, and hopefully enjoy it.

I was disappointed.

Make no mistake, *Black Dogs* is an interesting read. But *interesting* does not mean *worthwhile*. Ian McEwan's prose is vivid and poetic, but his sense of story is abysmal. There is no discernable plot to this book; indeed, it reads like nothing so much as a series of powerful images tied together by the thin thread of an old woman who, in her youth, saw a pair of black dogs and was forever emotionally scarred.

That's heavy criticism, especially when one considers the number of acclaims written on the book's covers. I have the gall to disagree with *The New Yorker*? In fairness, the prose is excellent at descriptive tasks. The images bought forth in the book's four chapters (five, counting the preface) are vivid and real, but somehow overworked: The narrator's childhood; the nursing home where his elderly mother-in-law lives; the streets of Berlin the day after the wall fell; the old homestead after years of disuse; and the terrifying encounter with the dogs. All these scenes are detailed too extensively to be anything but the work of anyone but a writer. The only thing that keeps you going page after page is the dull suspense of the dogs. They are dangled in front of your nose as you read, often mentioned but never described until the last chapter of the book. They don't disappoint; they're a wonderfully irredeemable evil force, and the only reason for wading through what is, essentially, five separate short stories starring the same characters. In fact, if you were to skip

to the last chapter and read from there, you'd have a far more enjoyable experience than if you read all the pointless chapters before. That chapter would be an excellent stand-alone horror story.

Black Dogs is available from Vintage Books. At \$13.50 for a mere 174 pages large-typed, it would make an ideal English 101 textbook.

TRENT DRAKE

The Wives of Bath by Susan Swan

The Wives of Bath by Susan Swan is a book beyond comparison. This means that both the good and the bad points of the book are so unique in their scope that it defies description. The book is well-written and definitely finely crafted; however, it is also disturbing and very darkly humorous. The novel deals with the serious issue of transgenderism and allows the readers to form their own opinions.

The novel, which is set in a private school outside Toronto called Bath Ladies College, provides the reader with a heroine of questionable standing in Mouse Bradford. Mouse is accompanied by Alice, her hunchback, who carries with her all of Mouse's sexual musings and often cracks dirty jokes, much to Mouse's dismay. Mouse's best friends and room-mates at the school are Paulie Sykes and Victoria Quinn. Paulie's older brother (or is he?), Lewis, is employed by the school. He comes and goes as he pleases, or so it seems until Paulie takes Mouse into her confidence.

Paulie and Lewis are one and the same, and Mouse soon gets taken in by the idea of being a man. It is necessary for Mouse to pass many tests before she is fully accepted. The tests include shaving her face, urinating standing up, and being whipped by Paulie without breaking down.

As it turns out, Paulie/Lewis is in love with Victoria; however, Victoria's brother suspects Lewis is not a boy. When Victoria's brother demands proof of Lewis's manliness, Paulie/Lewis must obtain the one thing she is missing.

This sparks the pivotal incident of the book, in all its disturbing glory.

Perversity aside, this book is definitely a work of art. While it is rather graphic and in some places quite disgusting, it has to be in order to relate Mouse's experiences. The book does have its funny spots, but for the most part it is a dark and very disturbing work. *The Wives of Bath* is definitely worth reading, if you can stomach all the weird goings-on within the walls of Bath Ladies College.

CA SCHNEIDER

A Tidewater Morning by William Styron

In his most recent book, *A Tidewater Morning*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author William Styron takes us back to his first twenty years. *A Tidewater Morning* is a compilation of three autobiographical short stories, "Love Day", "Shadrach", and "A Tidewater Morning". In each of these stories the narrator recalls a time when he is confronted with the mystery of death. Far from depressing, though, this book is sensitive and sympathetic to the feelings of the young hero. In the first story, the death is that of the Japanese in the Second World War; in the second it is the death of an elderly stranger who became a friend during the final days of his life. In the final story, it is the death of his mother that the narrator must face.

A Tidewater Morning introduces the racial and economic problems of Virginia in the 1930's as a background to Styron's youth, but it is not a heavy book. The first story is in a somewhat different style fitting the different setting. Here the speaker has become an adult and he is speaking from the War, not the Depression. The memories of Virginia within this memory of Japan tie the book together. The stories are simply written and easily remembered. Like the best of all books, I put down *A Tidewater Morning* wishing there was just one more story and feeling like I had met a new friend.

SHANNON YOUNKER