Robert Payne, Over 100

By ISRAEL SHENKER

He thinks of himself as lazy and inefficient; and the day slips by as he wanders through bookstores and libraries; and evenings he spends with friends; and half the night he dozes and dreams and paces and looks out the window; and all he has managed to do in 66 years is write 110 books.

It is usually about 1 A.M. before Robert Payne sits down at the card table that bears the marks of 30 years’ abuse—chunks fallen away, its surface discolored and legs enfeebled. His portable manual type-writer sits encumbered by open books piled atop the table, as well as by a detritus of pens and paper and cigarettes and packets of chewing gum and Life Savers and a magnifying glass to help with fading sight. During the next five or six hours he may write only half a page. He is working on a biography of Shakespeare, and the duller records of Shakespeare’s life slow his pace. He likes to get four or five pages done each night; occasionally he manages eight or nine.

“Every sentence has its own problems, every word has its own problems,” he said. “It’s a rather tough job. And the toughness lies in trying to put vitality into it, which means one’s own vitality. But I find it very exciting—getting inside people, almost wrestling the life out of them. The idea is to arrange the facts so that your subjects reveal themselves. The test seems to be whether they walk into the room at 5 o’clock in the morning. When you can see them that close it usually goes well. It’s a slightly hallucinatory thing—you find yourself almost talking to them.”

When these ghosts walk, they must tread carefully. This apartment on Central Park West, one of New York’s better Grub Streets, though almost bare of furniture, is deep in alluvial deposits of the past, books that Mr. Payne, who calls himself “a magpie, gathering material about everything for books that will never be written,” has accumulated on daylight excursions.

“This is Shakespeare,” he said, drawing aside a red curtain in his living-writing-dozing-dreaming room, revealing great stacks of books, including Elizabethan folio volumes that are meant to help him soak in the atmosphere of that time. In one corner are huge stacks of books on Oriental art, and Roman history waits his pleasure at a nearby dig; he has written a book on Roman history, he plans one on Oriental art.

About nine shelves bear the weight of the Crusades; Mr. Payne plans a book on the Crusades. A great mass of volumes nearby are bone and sinew of his biography of Leonardo da Vinci, to be published next May. The bedroom is crammed with French books; Blake—the Payne life is still to come—struggles with the French volumes for vital space. Chinese is in a back room; many of his early works are based in China.

He is resigned to the joys of burrowing through the sediment of decades for the half-remembered volume. “You try to carry most of it in your head,” he said. “I can usually remember what side of the page and which page to search for. But the real trouble is searching for the book.”

“I couldn’t put it on index cards,” he added. “I hate the mechanical side of it. Nor could I stand anyone helping me.” And he couldn’t possibly work at the New York Public Library: “Too many old women are snapping open paper bags.”

He was seven years old when he wrote his first book—“Adventures of Sylvia, Queen of Denmark and China.” Then came a fallow period of about 15 years, the initiation of what he now calls “a very scrappy life.” He had started out in England, father English.

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Payne

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mother French, and his father’s work as a naval architect took Mr. Payne to outposts of empire. He traveled through Europe in the 1830s, served briefly as a correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, then went to Singapore and worked there on military camouflage; the theory seemed to be that camouflage was what a writer knew best. After brief service at the British Embassy in wartime China, he settled down to teach English poetry and naval architecture at a Chinese university.

By this time he was a published author. The first work was a translation of Yuri Olesha’s Russian novel; next came a novel about revolution in England, then one about fighting in Inner Mongolia. The pseudonym for the first was Anthony Wolfe, for the second, Robert Young, for the third, Valentin Tikhonov. “E. M. Forster had written a pamphlet entitled ‘Anonymity,’” Mr. Payne explained. “He argued that every book should come out under a different name, to be judged on its own merits. He never practiced it, but it was a rather good argument and I was impressed by it.”

With help from Chinese scholars he prepared translations of Chinese short stories and poetry, and he added short novels of his own. Then came “Forever China,” and reviewers greeted it rhapsodically. By this time the author had emerged from pseudonymity, and in 1947 the critic Orville Prescott declared: “No man alive can write more beautiful prose than Robert Payne.”

In 1942, Mr. Payne married a Chinese woman. “When I left China, I had every intention of going back,” he said, “but the marriage was falling apart, so obviously I didn’t go back. I went back in December 1976, 30 years later.”


Works poured forth: on Charlie Chaplin, on Garbo, long novels on India, more on China, “Fathers of the Western Church,” the story of the Eastern Church, travel books and histories of Iran, France and ancient Greece, an account of “The Christian Centuries: From Christ to Dante,” novels on Pasternak and Shakespeare, works on Byzantium and on the history of art. Year after year, publishers’ lists ran heavily to Payne — five, sometimes six books a year.

About 20 years ago, having tried his hand at biographies of a few celebrated people, Mr. Payne became intrigued by the concept of power. The result was a series of books on powerful figures, works on Mao Tsetung, Chiang Kai-shek, Lenin, Stalin, Churchill, Gandhi, as well as on Schweitzer, Gen. George C. Marshall, Malraux, Marx, Dostoyevsky, Christ, the rajahs of Sarawak and Sun Yat-sen. “The only two that did well were Lenin and Hitler, and they were the worst of the lot,” Mr. Payne said. “I think Lenin was worse than Stalin because he started it and bears the responsibility. He certainly was not kinder than Stalin.”

Last year came “The Life and Death of Trotsky,” “Lenin feeds into Stalin feeds into Trotsky,” Mr. Payne said. “Mao feeds into Chiang Kai-shek and into other books about China.”

In his works on the church fathers and on Islam’s leaders, Mr. Payne skimped on theology in favor of human trials; in writing on Marx he shied away from analysis of the economics in favor of anecdotes on the man; “Trotsky” skimmed on dusty dialectics and seized on the rousing life. “Only an old maestro of the potboiler like Robert Payne, author of more than one hundred books, would dare publish a biography of a figure like Trotsky without undertaking a serious discussion of his political ideas,” wrote Irving Howe.

“That leaves me completely cold,” Mr. Payne rejoined. “It’s not a potboiler, so that’s the end of that.”

Mr. Payne had already decided that “Trotsky” would be the last of his books on men of power. “Basically, there was nothing more I could say about dictatorships,” he suggested. “I was trying to find out two things — why people allowed this to happen, and how on earth they survived in a world where obviously people didn’t like being ordered around all the time. There seemed to be some awful lesion in the human heart that allowed it to happen. It was not the answer I expected. And there was very little one could do about it except fight back. The defeated are the people I find most interesting.”

His latest work, just published by Horizon Press, is “The Tortured and the Damned,” a novel based in Bangladesh. “I had 25 rejections,” Mr. Payne said, “and finally I had it printed in India. I think there was a tremendous reluctance by Ameri-
PLAYING IN THE DARK
Whiteness and the Literary
Imagination.
By Toni Morrison.
$14.95.

By Wendy Steiner

TONI MORRISON is both a
great novelist and the closest
thing the country has to a na-
tional writer. The fact that she
speaks as a woman and a black only
enhances her ability to speak as an
American, for the path to a common
voice nowadays runs through the par-
tisan. In her novel "Beloved," for ex-
ample, Ms. Morrison restores to the
collective memory a particular strand
of its emotive past, turning a story of
former slaves into what amounts to a
national epic. Though it is "not a story
to pass on," she offers everyone — not
just those injured — the chance to feel
the pain, the injustice and the need for
healing.

"Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the
Literary Imagination" was first
presented as a series of lectures at
Harvard University. Here, Ms. Morri-
sion invites literary scholars to carry
on her generous task of making the
black experience resonant for all
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Wendy Steiner is the Alan G. Has-
senfeld Professor of English at the
University of Pennsylvania. Her forth-
coming book on contemporary Ameri-
can fiction will be a volume in the
"Cambridge History of American
Literature."

The Last Days of Max Frisch
By Volker Schlöndorf

"Let's hope it'll be a book with a happy ending.
After all, we don't want to add to the
misery of the world." That's more or less
how Max Frisch told me he began writing
his celebrated novel "Homo Faber" 30 years ago, so
completely unaware that the story would turn out as
tragic as it did.

For nearly as long the film rights had been tied
up in various options; they became free again on

Volker Schlöndorf directed the West German
movie "The Tin Drum" (adapted from the novel by
Günter Grass), which won the Academy Award for
the best foreign film of 1979.

Jan. 1, 1988, and I was standing on Frisch's doorstep
nine days later. Right away I felt so much at home in
his world that I had no difficulty turning down a
tempting Hollywood offer to direct "Dangerous Liai-
sions" with John Malkovich. I wanted to focus on my
Teutonic inheritance, the 1950s, Existentialism, the
question of guilt. When Frisch's novel came out in
1957 I was in a Paris cafe drinking my first espresso,
weaving jeans and a black turtleneck sweater — one
full generation younger than the author.

Among the first questions I asked Frisch were
what his Swiss engineer Faber was doing in Latin
America and why was the jungle so much more
important than the politics there?

"I wrote that just after my first trip to Mexico
and Guatemala," Frisch answered. "The slimy fer-
tility of the primordial forest, the decaying cadavers
that nourish the zopilotes — the carrion vultures —
the rotting innards teeming with worms and other
life."

His apartment was practically bare except for a
few watercolors and lithographs created by friends.
No baubles or collectibles — apart from a pencil
rubbing of a stone relief from Yucatán that hung
above him on the whitewashed wall. No jungle here,
rather the classic ambiance of the architect that he
once was: even the papers were neatly stacked. The
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George F. Will on Billy Martin/17
'Playing in the Dark'

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and Twain, as they headed out into the wilderness together. Scholars of Gertrude Stein have not ignored the fact that Melancholy, one of the protagonists of "Three Lives," is black, that her name means "black earth" and that as a poor, black, sexually ambivalent woman who served Stein as an unwitting surrogate for exploring love triangles, promiscuity and lesbianism. Evidence for Ms. Morrison's Africanaism, in fact, turns up everywhere in literary criticism, though piecemeal, seldom expressed with the eloquence and fervor of "Playing in the Dark." If no systematic study exists of the role black characters play in forming white identity, one could still see a good part of research in black studies and postcolonialism as working toward just this goal.

Yet the healing power of Toni Morrison's fiction makes one search for a more positive reading of her proposal. She outlines four topics for American Africanist research, three of which are lacerating in their import: how the construction of blackness in America buttresses whites against their fears of enslavement, powerlessness and wrongdoing; how black idiom signals difference; and how and why it is linked with the outrage of modernity; and how it allows whites to explore their own bodies through the surrogacy of a debased Other. She has made the topic somewhat different. It concerns the use of stories of slavery and rejection "as a means of meditation — both safe and risky — on one's own humanity. Such analyses will reveal how the representation and appropriation of that narrative provides opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate and destiny ... ethics, social and universal codes of behavior, and assertions about and definitions of civilization and reason."

Though I would not want to sentimentalize Ms. Morrison's project, in this last topic is a hint of the generosity that marks her fiction. She presents Beloved's problem in "beloved" as not only the cruelty of white slave owners but Beloved's own guilt and lack of self-esteem as well. Despite her crossing the Ohio border to emancipation, Beloved cannot become free until she frees herself, until she realizes that she is "her best thing."

In "Playing in the Dark" Ms. Morrison, in effect, takes the next step of imagining the white Schoolteacher who created her heroine like an animal in that barn. She looks to see how his culture constructed him in literature, and finding the task unmanageable on her own, she suggests it for the critical community at large. Ms. Morrison's Africanaism is meant to teach a black writer about white motivation. It should also teach whites about how they have constructed not only black but white identity, and how they have contemplated their own humanity by observing the dehumanization of others.

For one who has been dehumanized, now or in the history past, this quest into the mind of the oppressor must be supremely painful. But how much more painful and important is it for those who have forged their own identity out of others' degradation to confront this fact and start again? If "Playing in the Dark" is my chosen research project she pretends, it is also not a mere denunciation of white culture. Instead, it is a self-help project meant both to map out new critical territory and to rearrange the territory within.

'Jazz'

Continued from page 1

body sees him do it, Alice, her aunt and guardian, decides not "to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops." Come the fateful day Violet takes a butcher's knife to Dorcas's face in the funeral parlor, is intercepted and later lets loose her pet birds into the snow, rather in the manner of the eccentric Miss Frite in Dickens's "Bleak House". This, however, is not Victorian England, but Harlem in the 1920's, Harlem still relatively innocent, when crimes at least were crimes of passion and pity in some currency, Harlem permeated with the thrum of music, Harlem to which those black people who had run from want and violence came to find their stronger, riskier selves. In Ms. Morrison's robust language we see the slums, the curbstones, Egyptian beads, Kansas fried chicken, doors ajar to speakeasies, an invitation to the low-down hellfire induction of music and sex.

In this and many audacious asides the author conjures up worlds with complete authority. She captures and makes so secret of her anger at the injustices deals to black women who were mothers, serving women and corpse dressers, women who found refuge only in an angry church and an angry God and for whom pregnancy was worse than death. But young Violet and young Joe caught in their youthful heat had no wish for babies, so that "those miscarriages — two in the field, only one in her bed — were more inconvenience than loss."

But loss bites in strange ways. Years later, when doing the rounds with her pins and her curling tongs as a home hairdresser, Violet is sitting on a step and on impulse resolves to flitch a baby from a pram. Her plan is thwarted but the longing remains, and the absence of a baby — or should I say the presence of an absent baby? — was the undertow of this book. Joe in her errant way is also seeking youth, drawn as he is to a girl who, from the earliest age and perhaps in some blind premonition, cultivated the dynamics beneath her skirts. After the murder and the outburst in the funeral parlor, Violet luxuriates in the thralldom of jealousy.

Under the Covers

It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way down underneath tissue. They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they never sailed on. The pearls they let hang on the limb because if they plucked them, they would be gone from there and who else would see that ripeness if they took it away for themselves? How could anybody passing by see them and imagine for themselves what the flavor would be like? Breathing and murmuring under covers both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916 dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm, asking for witnesses in his name's sake, encased them each and every night and muffled their whispering, old-time love. They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore.

From "Jazz".

 picturing them in the Indigo, "the heifer" at the round table, the stem of the glass in one hand and her other hand drumming out the rhythms "on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh." In time, her jealousy abating, Violet insinuates herself into the aunt's house to draw her out in descriptions of the girl — her skin, her hair, her figure, her comehither. She finds herself becoming less innate, even deeming that she might like her. Of course that does not obliterate the hate and the gnawing recognition that she is old (she is over 50) and no man will want her again; all that is left is the talking.

In sharp compassionate vignettes, plucked Continued on next page
‘Jazz’

Continued from preceding page

from different episodes of their lives, the author portrays people who are together simply because they were put down together, people tricked for a whole box that was her brother's, which for a few powerless to change their fate — Joe with a faithless wild woman for a mother, a woman he seeks in caves and rock faces, a woman he calls to and asks if she is alive. 'Just say it, says Joe,' Violet unable to repress the seams of erotic memory, remembering the bed with one leg propped on a dictionary, and Dorcas, foxy, provocative, believing someone her brother's card, which for a few months it was. These are people enthralled then deceived by "the music the world makes." Do I miss something? Yes. I miss the emotional nexus, the moment born of all art that brings us up to the height of knowing that it will run on forever. Between the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns," or when Leopold Bloom, in the throes of a tender letter to his mistress, pauses to address his dead son with: "Love. Hate. These are words Rudy. Soon I am old," or when poor, crazed Anna Karenina, observing the bolts and irons of the oncoming train, asks God to forgive her.

I say this because at one point in the novel when Violet and Alice are ruminating, Alice muses on her own woes, on the treachery done to her by another woman, on the blood punishment she meted out on the husband long since in his grave and, putting the pressing iron down, says, "You don't know what loss is. I have a sense of being told this, I do not feel it; my pity is withheld.

It is as if Ms. Morrison, bedazzled by her own virtuosity — a virtuosity that serves her and us and contemporary fiction very well — hesitates to bring us to the last frontier, to a predicament that is both physical and metaphysical, and which in certain transmission, becomes our very own experience. Such alchemy does not occur here.

What remains are the bold arresting strokes of a poster and not the cold astonishment of a painting.

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Children's Books

OREN BELL

By Barbara Hood Burgess.

181 pp. New York: Delacorte Press. $15. (Ages 10 to 14)

By Karen Leggett

There is nothing fair about a clean slate. Latonya Bell has been working on her school record her whole life, and it's not fair for a new teacher to avoid looking at records so everyone can start the year even. Besides, "was it fair for Dink to have to start working into his medium slot all over again?"

Latonya and her twin brother, Oren, along with their cousin Dink Bell, Fred Lightfoot, Whitey, Blue and Wesley Wrigley Fry, are students in Ms. Pugh's (that's Ms. Peeyoo to the children, of course) seventh-grade class at S.S. Elementary School in Detroit. In "Oren Bell," her first novel, Barbara Hough Burgess captures the lives of these youngsters in a rich tapestry that combines bright colors with blacks, whites and shades of gray that seem very black and white when you're only 12.

The result is not the fast-paced adventure story that many young readers generally prefer but a thoughtful study of character, family and community. But it should hold the interest of even the wiggliest reader, because Ms. Burgess captures young people's thoughts and emotions so perfectly, putting them in perspective without cheapening them — a rare talent for author or parent.

The influence of the haunted house next door runs through the story. The house has to be haunted. Look at the long and narrow blood-red windows: "reverse church staiined glass and protected by the Devil," says Latonya. The children perform an elaborate ceremony in front of the house each fall before school starts to protect them from accidents and bad luck; Oren regularly mopes up the ceremony and lives in perpetual fear of both the house and his boisy twin sister. But he knows the house is a real power. "Dear Lord . . . if you would send our family and friends some good luck, I would consider it a sign that the house has got no hold on us. Thank you, Amen. Your friend, Oren Bell."

There is no sympathy for the father who left years ago; there is sympathy for Granddaddy from the haunted house (even though it took "more courage than he actually possessed"), saves his little sister and her puppy from the steep roof of their own house, and gives up his desire to be the man of the house in favor of his mother's husband-to-be because "Jack was the kind who stuck to a family like cement." Jack is also able to advise young Oren that "it was brave and honest to fight organized crime" in the house next door, but "foolishly to take Latonya's ceremony away from her." If there were enough Jacks for all the Gremas of the real world!

"Oren Bell" is a moving and heartwarming novel that can introduce suburban youngsters to struggles of the mind they will understand — and struggles of the body that may be totally foreign to them. Ms. Burgess also gives urban children who can identify more completely with Oren a chance to feel a little less alone in their own battles.
Note the laziness of the Richler/Collins reviews vs. the work put in by Smiley and LeGuin on theirs.

This Writing Life

A DAY AT THE BEACH
Recollections
By Geoffrey Wolff
Knopf, 293 pp., $22

By Mordecai Richler

REAL BOOK-BUYERS, an increasingly rare breed, tend, in their innocence, to curl up with their purchase, beginning at page one and carrying on from there. But jaded old literary hands, sent somebody else's memoirs for review, tend to dip in anywhere for starters in a spirit of show me. I cracked open my bound proof copy of Geoffrey Wolff's A Day at the Beach at the wrong page, page 91:

I'm looking at a bookshelf lined with spiral notebooks, my journals. Writers keep journals; I was an apprentice writer so I kept journals, daybooks, night books.

Oh, I thought, personal prejudices rising. A writer who keeps journals probably also files copies of his personal correspondence and glues his reviews into scrap books. Fortunately I knew better. I had already read and enjoyed a novel by Wolff, Providence, and I am an admirer of his splendid memoir of life with his father, The Duke of Deception, a keeper, this one, to be set beside another writer's take on his own dad, John le Carre's The Perfect Spy.

The initial demand to be made of a writer, it seems to me, is that his voice cannot be confused with that of another, that nobody else is spying out of his window on the world, and Wolff oblige handsomely. His prose is literate, yet enriched by a finely tuned colloquial bounce. He manages to be tender while eschewing sentimentality. His insights into family flow effortlessly through this memoir, never demanding that attention be paid. All this is very impressive indeed, because Wolff certainly had a lot to overcome. As a neophyte writer he took "the self-consciously impenetrable essays in Scrutiny, Encounter, Partisan Review and Kenyon Review" for primary texts, even as some of today's young writers (armed with a crowbar, I hope) might try to crack the prose of Harold Bloom.

Such a false start, led, inevitably, to another mistake, graduating from Princeton with a degree in English. But from there on it was clear sailing. A teaching job at a ludicrous little college in Istanbul that might have been invented by Evelyn Waugh. On arrival at Robert College, its student body all male, the dean...

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Crossing Into Eden

WHERE THE BLUEBIRD SINGS TO THE LEMONADE SPRINGS
By Wallace Stegner
Random House, 240 pp., $21

By Evan S. Connell

WALLACE STEGNER feels a deep affinity with the arid western states, whose dimensions and clarity excite his senses. During the introduction to these 17 essays he rhetorically asks why deserts should be asked to blossom. Deserts have their own ecological systems, "including the creosote-clone clusters that are the oldest living things on earth." This remarkable

Evan S. Connell is the author of "Son of the Morning Star," "Mr. Bridge" and the recent "The Alchemist's Journal."
Where the Bluebird Sings...

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informed Wolff: "What you drink, how much, and when—that is your business. What you teach, your opinions in the classroom—your department. Whether you teach, whether or not you appear at the appointed hour, and at the appointed classroom—my department. Very. My bailiwick. Sexual preferences and energy—your affair. Sexual congress with students—mine... and if I sack you, and believe me I'll have no hesita-
tion to sack you, there's no place beneath this place to which to fall. From this depth, don't try the truth of my edict; welcome to Robert College."

ROM THERE Wolff went on to a flat on Rue Jacob, in Saint-Germain-des-Pres, where I now regret we never ran into each other. He easily might have done, at The Old Navy or The Mabillon or La Cou-

pale. And next it was a stink at The Washington Post as a reporter and then book reviewer, which led, as these things do, to a confrontation with drink, an occupational hazard of the trade. In a thoughtful chapter on alcohol and for a memoir it lends itself to a roll of honor, as it were, of all the American scrubbers who were alcoholics, from Hart Crane through Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Faulkner, to John Cheever, Truman Capote and Raymond Carver. Mind you, the Brits could come up with an equally daunting list, starting with Evelyn Waugh, and the best answer to the problem, quoted by Wolff, is still the one Samuel Johnson gave to a friend who asked the great man why he chose wine for his companion. "To get rid of my-

self, to send myself away," replied Johnson.

This generous memoir was prompted by an uncomfortably close brush with mortality when the author was in his early fifties. An exceptionally good-humored account of survival by irony, is at the heart of A Day at the Beach.

Bound for a holiday on a Carib-

bean island—Sint Maarten, ten minutes flying time from Antigua—with his wife and two teenage sons, Wolff soon found himself signed on to everybody's vacation nightmare. The hotel he had booked turned out to be literally at the end of the air-

port runway. Taking the sun, the family was sprayed with kerosene from the engines of lowering or ascending turbo jets. Their rambou-

lieux neighbors at the hotel were buffet busters from Queens. Sec-

ond-rate restaurants in town were outstandingly expensive. Wolff's traveler's checks were stolen. And then, one day, horning around with his sons in the water, Wolff was felled by a heart attack—a myocardial infarction—and then had to

survive a week in the infirmary at the local hospita-

l. On his return to his home in Rhode Island, Wolff endured open heart surgery, his faulty aortic valve being replaced by an artificial one. "My aorta is carbon and Decon and, it's self-salvaged, and it's he self-salvaged, after the saint of the impossible, patron of hopeless cases."

If I had any problem with A Day at the Beach, it is the concluding chapter. This told the story of how the healer writer and his wife, and then his sons in turn, helped him sail his 30-foot cutter, Blackwing, back from the Bahamas to its home port in Rhode Island. Let me hasten to add that the writing in this section is admirable. Excel-


dent descriptive passages abound. However, an ignorant landlubber like me was laid low by the recurre-

ence of no doubt perfectly accurate technical stuff. Or, put another way, I am prepared to believe there are such things as a "double-reeded mainsail" or a "roller-furling jib," and that "stainless steel cables rove through sheaves to a barbette quadrant" and that you can run halyard through a sheet winch, but I have no idea what it means. On the other hand, this is a small price to pay for a memoir that is also a cele-

bration of a good family life. And, finally, I was grateful for the plea-

ure of Geoffrey Wolff's company, even if it included roller-furling jibs.

Where the Bluebird Sings...

Continued from page 1

campground we ourselves feel a se-

rious urge to go there, blusters and sunburn to damned. "The land fell away at our feet... below us was deep water; spread out before us was an oylite. We were between curves of blue like a clam between the valves of its shell. Nobody said a word." He then informs us that ordi-
narily he would not tell anybody how to get to Eden because such places cannot survive much adver-
tising. However, he does let us know where he went, even provid-
ing the name and post office address of his guide. Unfortunately for those who are about to make plans, Stegner took that trip in 1923.

IN ESSAYS in Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs con-

cern western writing and writers. Just about everything he has to say is worth-while and thoughtful. He might
disagree with something in a book or with some writer's premise, but the common sense, and reasoning and contempt is reserved for av-

aricious land developers, myopic politicians and bureaucrats.

There are reflections on becoming a writer—youthful uncertainty, acknowledged ignorance, the slow understanding that what is worth-

while does not depend on a calcula-
ted formula or method. Still, with his usual equipoise, he admits that whatever method enables a writer to lay bare the mystery within the frames of a story. These literary meditations in-

clude an open letter to the Ken-


tucky novelist, essayist and farmer years, and one can't help wondering if the energy consumed by students might explain why he did not write more. Stegner doesn't think so, but admits to being puzzled. Clark spent a great deal of time editing the memoirs of a forgotten pioneer named Alfred Dote. Why Stegner observes that quite a few American writers who grew up to a barely civilizing frontier have turned from fiction to history: Bernard DeVoto, Paul Horgan, H. L. Davis, A. B. Guthrie. Perhaps, he suggests, after having explored the settlements of their region and the difficulties of growing up, they could find little impetus to fiction either in the past or present.

Walter Clark was a bit of a mys-
tic, which Stegner is not, yet these two shared a common response to that vast territory they called home: "Almost as much as he, but later in my life, I grew to hate the profane western culture, the econ-

omica and psychology of a rage-


cious society. I disliked it as reality and I distanced it and it became my reality and it turned itself into the western myths that are the only myth that I can cope with, the vigilant or sincere justice, and the oversimplified good-guy/bad-guy moralities..." This theme appears, disappearing and appearing, as the western stream subsides into the desert only to emerge closer to the sea.

Walter Stegner has given us a cautionary book, full of grace, full of apprehension, carefully balanced.
Only the Lonely

A CLOSED EYE
By Anita Brookner
Random House. 263 pp. $21

By Jane Smiley

A NITA BROOKNER has been compared to Jane Austen—the unhappy fate of any British woman novelist with a limpid style and an ironic tone—but the comparison does justice to neither writer. When Harriet Lytton in A Closed Eye, Brookner explores social isolation. Her portrait of Harriet Lytton is both compelling and disturbing, not a social comedy but an exploration of a particular mode of feminine existence that seems to be, is intended to be, but is not, harmless.

Brookner focuses steadily on Harriet, ranging her few friends and relations around her. Her parents, in thrill to their own good looks and to the famous name, are consigned to the back room of her mother's shop. When they seem tired of raising her, ready for something new, she marries Freddie Lytton, a man her father's age, in fact an older man. This is more to get out of her parents' way than anything else. Her path in life, as the idle and circumscribed wife of...

Jane Smiley's novel "A Thousand Acres" won this year's National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.

Victorian Secrets

EVER AFTER
By Ursula K. Le Guin
Knopf. 276 pp. $21

By Graham Swift

B RITTISH novelists lately seem obsessed with the Age of Queen Victoria, and with Love. Though I dutifully read A.S. Byatt's Possession, and now Graham Swift's Ever After, I am not sure why storybook lovers of 1990 peer into the ornate looking-glass of 1860 to find their reflection in its age-speckled depths. Love having been long out of fashion in the English novel, perhaps the novelists think it can be revived, like high-buttoned shoes.

Certainly the Victorians are useful as a distant device, an infallible source of irony. They were so serious, nothing about them need be taken seriously. And those beards! And those Collectors Works in Forty Volumes! So our novelists commit passivity, writing fake Victorian literature fearlessly, and in Graham Swift's case, convincingly. The "Notebooks" of his Matthew Pearce are credible minor Victorians. It's a bit hard to believe, though, that they would cause even a minor academic feeding-frenzy, as they do in the book. The loss of faith, that so-very-Victorian conscience of crisis, is exhaustively documented in works of far greater interest than the fragments of Pearce's rather borderline meditations.

Everything in Ever After is a minor key and seems a little smaller than life. The engineer Brunel, the Manhattan Project, an ickthysaurus, a child's death, just-post-war Ursula K. Le Guin's latest book is "Seafood: Chronicles of Katland."