

publishing record (four books to his zero). They meet, in fact, under circumstances which must have been difficult for his male ego: Michael is a student in her creative writing seminar. But Michael is a Henry Miller fan, a sexual romantic who knows how to make ladies bloom, flower, etc.

Complicating these sexual politics is the fact that Michael is married to Hester, whom he plays off against Rachel with a self-indulgent pretense of tenderness towards both women. Michael occupies the favoured position in this triangle, warmed alternatively on both sides and we wait in vain for the reversal which would have the women take comfort (erotically or otherwise) in one another. It's a fantasy the novel entertains, however — a comic threat hovering somewhere in the background and never put to rest. There are also signs (ominous for Michael) that Hester has gained strength in solitude, a more genuine interest in her own work. Thus, the relationship of Rachel and Hester echoes that of the author and her readers: sisterhood and the pleasures of creative labour are alternatives to absorption in the male, and the Michaels of the world had better watch their step.

The emphasis on setting in *Latakia* makes it also a kind of travel book, and this dimension of the novel works easily with the rest because it shows Rachel in her role as artist-observer. The beauties of Greece are the heroine's consolation prize, both in themselves and because she can write about them. Some of this feels a bit like ostentatious display, I confess. Yet because of the competition with Michael, there is a special poignancy in that display which is perhaps intentional. Their relationship, like the scenery, is grist to the mill: 'And Michael, think on this, dear, you have given me so much material! That comment is barbed, for the lovers in *Latakia* are as narrowly possessive of their material as Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald ever were. In the midst of the most harrowing personal crisis, Rachel can store away potentially usable details of

the scene. The question of which is more important, the experience itself or the possibility of capitalizing upon it in fiction, is close to the heart of the novel. I'm not sure what the answer is, or what Thomas would like the answer to be. But I'm uncomfortable when Michael tells Rachel that her books are 'absolutely self-centred,' when she admits that, and claims 'the point is, I can write about other people, I just don't choose to.' For now, it seems, Rachel (and presumably Audrey Thomas) will remain 'self-centred'; certainly *Latakia* is a novel of that kind, a novel concerned primarily with the support of the self in a troubled time. But Michael is wrong, I believe, in thinking that to be the best kind of strength a novel can have.

All three players verge on caricature; all three are created by Audrey Thomas in full awareness (or so it seems to me) of their roles in an extra-literary farce. These people may be absurd, the author implies — I'm certain she wants us to laugh at them. But the pain of the novel is also real. The problems of Rachel are the problems of Audrey Thomas, and may be ours as well.

Crossings, by Betty Lambert, Pulp Press, 1979, pp. 284, paperback, \$5.95.

Frances Beer

The opening of *Crossings* is not promising: an over-civilized woman ('packing, neatly, like a lady') is headed North ('a shriek of freedom in my head') to a New Life on an Island with her Neanderthal Lover ('Mik's hands were weapons'). Oh, no, you think, Bear Re-Surfacing. In fact, Betty Lambert's novel is much better than that — for one thing she has a great sense of humour — and you have to wonder why she starts here, since it is neither the end nor the beginning of the story of Mik and Victoria.

The setting is the West Coast in what seems to be the early '60s (abortions are back street affairs, diaphragms the progressive form of birth control). Vicky tells the story — she is the writer, a successful playwright — and it has to do with her attempt to find escape, feeling, death, salvation, annihilation and

fulfilment through her affair with the ex-con, Mik. Should you wonder why she wants to find all these things, and in this peculiar, violent way, she goes into some scathing detail about her younger years of marriage with Ben, the would-be artist, full of high and fashionable '60s ideals. (Vietnam, jealousy and children are all bad; self-actualization is good.) 'We should simply pledge ourselves to each other at the top of a mountain,' says Ben. The wedding has cost \$40 and he is put out about this.' He is a phony, a cheapskate, a parasite, a coward. He lies, he exploits, and he *clings*. It is hardly surprising that Vicky wants a change.

But there are other reasons, more subterranean, why she is drawn to Mik. He is raw energy and a great lover, but in him she also sees a killer. 'I'm gonna get you alone,' he says, 'and fuck you to death'; the pattern of their affair is one of increasing violence. After their first round in bed, they 'lie there like two barbarians who have killed each other on the field. . . . Blood was coming down my thighs. . . . I could hardly walk.' Mik brings her a present (shoes with rhinestones in the heels) at which she turns up her nose ('they're vulgar': she likes a good fight, this girl). And so round two: they wreck the house, Mik pulls the phone out of its socket, tears the door off its hinges. He is a bull and she goads him. He goes on a binge, she hunts him down and brings him home. At strip poker he cuts off her pubic hair; 'he laughs, . . . throws my clothes at me like a guard at Auschwitz.'

It's a fight to the finish, but it's not clear whose finish it will be. Mik boasts to Vicky from the start that he can't be hurt: 'I've been destroyed by experts.' But he buys her a ring, takes her to meet his family, wants to marry her, wants to give her a baby. She, who desperately wanted a child with Ben, refuses to have Mik's. She maintains her middle-class literary-intellectual connections (to whom Mik is like 'a trained ape at Buckingham Palace'). She gives her Siamese kittens

clever names like Lolita and Humbert. She has sporadic fits of madness, but her social position and her friends ensure that she will always be looked after. And when she is with them, she denies Mik. He drags her around by the hair, tears the door off its hinges again. But things start to look worse and worse for Mik. He plays Russian roulette and takes an overdose.

Through all this, Vicky visits her therapist, the Nut Lady, and eventually they uncover her trauma. When she was a child her father drowned himself and his lover, Jason. 'Then it comes, in a long howl. "He died. I loved him and he died." It is the first time I have cried.' The Nut Lady argues that if Vicky can get Mik to kill her, this will prove that her father loved her. (If she can destroy Mik, will that prove she loves him?)

Vicky's emotional violence and ambivalence are exhausting. She doesn't want Mik, but she won't let him go. Finally she and her prissy aunt call the police and arrange to have Mik committed. (As far as we can tell he is still in there.)

The sexual politics of *Crossings* are obscure. For an early '60s woman, Vicky is independent and successful, but she's not what we'd call liberated now: though a productive author, she shows little respect for her own work; in her relations with men she is abused — psychologically by Ben, physically by Mik; she has friendships with women, but they are not strong; men and sex, not women and work, are the focus of her energy; she tolerates her living mother, but she adores her dead father. You may shake a feminist finger at her but with the other hand you have to take your hat off to her honesty. She's tough and zany, a real scrapper, and a royal bitch, this Victoria; and her story, alarming as it is, deserves reading because it feels like the truth.

Coast of Many Faces, by Ulli Steltzer and Catherine Kerr, Douglas & McIntyre, 1979, pp. 212, hardcover

Ingrid Klassen

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