

<p>ing no form at all. She is 'a friend to young people who have been tricked into trouble.' Her self-appointed tasks are to undo the damage done by the 'muddleheads'—people who will not, or cannot, do things in the 'proper way'—and to 'keep everything equal in the world of human beings and narnauks.' Within the confines of these structured and hierarchical societies, she succeeds very well.</p> <p>It was once said, and has often been quoted, that myths can tell us everything it is important to know about a culture. For the Haida and the Tsimshian, the important things were respect for tribal elders and parents, respect for power and its sources, respect for all living creatures and the folly of false pride. The stories ground and uphold these values.</p> <p>The Haida and Tsimshian passed on power and privilege through matrilineal clans. But matrilineal descent was not matriarchy. Women were respected and could hold the highest offices, but they did not dominate. In the myths, women and men are represented as equals. Both are capable of wisdom and foolishness, pride and self-sacrifice, courage and indiscretion. But in these societies work was sex-linked, status was inherited, slaves were captured from enemy tribes and held as menial workers and status symbols, and marriages were arranged by family elders. Such marriages had to be between people of equal rank and differing clans. The wishes of the couple concerned mattered little.</p> <p>In several of the stories, Mouse Woman has to intervene to avert the disaster caused by a willful young person who seeks to marry an inappropriate partner. 'A people's duty was always to their future'; the carrying on of the clans, the production of children to wear the sacred crests and maintain the prestige of the lineage, was considered to be of greater importance to society than the wishes of individuals.</p> <p>Mouse Woman believes 'nothing muddles a man's head more than ambition,' and the tale 'The Sea Hunters Who Were Swallowed by a Whirlpool' proves her point. The story takes place just after the Flood, when old chiefs and their heirs have drowned and their status is available to those who can prove themselves worthy. In his pride and ambition, a young sea hunter injures a spirit being in the form of a small cod—too small to be considered worthy of retention and care by the arrogant hunter. The fish is a messenger from the killer whale monster. In return for a promise to supply the monster with berries, the youth is given a taboo; 'Never</p>	<p>again will you harm a fish! You will take fish only when they offer themselves to you by floating up to the surface.' He is guaranteed good fortune in sea hunting so long as the taboo is kept. Years of prosperity follow. Gradually, the taboo becomes less strictly adhered to. Eventually, it is disobeyed. Hunter, crew and canoe disappear into a whirlpool. Power is given as a trust; it will be turned against its holder if it is not respected. Taboos are inviolable.</p> <p>The message of duty over desire underlies all the stories. As antithetical to currently popular values of individual fulfillment and to the feminist ideal of a self-selected life as this may be—arranged marriage is an anathema to any feminist—Harris brings us to understand the basis of such standards in a small-scale society. Whether children will be able to discriminate between the needs of such a society and those of their own is another matter. They may also not notice the absence of stories based on the experience of commoners. Perhaps through the selectivity of early anthropologists—themselves upper-class—from whose collections Harris' work is drawn, or perhaps because of the biases of tribal story-tellers, we are given stories largely limited to upper-class experience. We are left with a desire to know whether the cultural imperatives were as important for commoners as they were for the nobility.</p> <p>Yet Mouse Woman herself has no class. As the tiny figure whose advice determines the outcome of each story, Mouse Woman teaches the reader that intelligence, sensitivity to surroundings and foresight are more powerful than brute strength. Native children have long learned much that is of value from her examples; so might ours.</p> <p>At \$10.95, the book seems overpriced for its length. The illustrations add to its value, however. Drawn by Vancouver artist Douglas Tait, they are not simple sketches, but line drawings carefully and delicately crafted. They evidence the respect for the Haida heritage that Harris conveys in the text.</p> <p><i>Life Before Man</i>, by Margaret Atwood, McClelland and Stewart, 1979, pp. 317, cloth \$12.95.</p> <p>Joan Hind-Smith</p> <p>The unpleasant jolt that readers receive when they encounter Margaret Atwood's writing arises, it seems to me, largely from her ruthless extermination of sentimentality. If we are looking for touching</p>	<p>insights into our sufferings or conceptions of the inherent nobility of humankind, we will not find them in Atwood. Instead, we seem to hear the author's mocking laughter always in the background. She is laughing, not only at her characters when they display foolish hopes of goodness and mercy, but also at us, as she picks out our self-deceptions with unerring eye. Who can forget the uncomfortable feeling while reading the final paragraph of her story 'Rape Fantasies,' an interior monologue by a character who clings pitifully to the notion that if only she could have a conversation with a potential rapist, then she could make him see her as a human being?</p> <p>As a smasher of icons Atwood has no peer and, of course, her purpose is to destroy the shells and masks behind which we hide. <i>Life Before Man</i> begins with Elizabeth, one of the three central characters, lying on her bed in a state of shock after learning that her rejected lover has blown his head off. This, the motivating event of the novel, has occurred before the book begins and is responsible for progressive stripping off of protective layers. Elizabeth lying on her back, thinks, 'I live like a peeled snail,' and then, 'I want my shell back, it took me long enough to make.' However, the irony is that naked truth revealed is so extraordinary that no one sees it. Lesje, the other female character, pondering this thinks: 'When the aborigines sighted Captain Cook's ships, they ignored him because they knew such things could not exist. It's the next best thing to being invisible.'</p> <p>Nevertheless, while hard truths may be good for us, there is something repellent about a writer who allows us not one glimpse of grandeur. I suspect that this feeling is shared because it is odd that Atwood has never received a Governor-General's Award for any of her three previous novels—odd, because she is one of the most stimulating and talked about writers in our midst, she has represented us and our literature abroad and she is prolific. Perhaps we are reluctant to bestow our highest award on someone whose perceptions are reductive rather than expansive. Behind the clever satire lurks contempt. When Lesje, pondering the possible destruction of the human race, considers that humans have it coming to them, we suspect that there is more than a little Atwood injected into Lesje. Her women characters are as remorselessly treated as are her men and Atwood's feminism has always consisted of tearing down the pedestals which make it so easy to rele-</p>
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gate us to some ceremonial corner.

To do her justice, she is also willing to smash the icon which she herself threatens to become. I remember a magazine article she wrote about Dennis Lee, remarking that she first met him at a University of Toronto frosh dance when they were both wearing initiation beanies. The visual of Margaret Atwood and Dennis Lee enduring a clammy frosh dance, and the indignity of beanies, boggles the mind.

Her latest novel, *Life Before Man*, is if possible even more chilling in its destruction of cherished myths than were her previous works and it is also far better executed. She has jelled as a novelist with this book and she has captured more expertly than ever the essence of a small space and moment in time. The novel takes place between 1976 and 1978, with integrated flashback material, and it is located at the corner of Bloor Street and University Avenue in Toronto, with movements to such close-by spots as the Bloor Viaduct and the Selby Hotel, but always circling back to the corner which encompasses the Museum, the Planetarium, Murray's Restaurant and looks easily towards Queen's Park where Nate, the male character, jogs.

This pin-pointing of time and place reinforces the rather depressing theme that the failings of man are nothing more than a small dot in the huge cosmos which is represented by the Museum and the Planetarium. The two women characters, in fact, work at the Museum and one of them, Lesje, is an expert on dinosaurs, immersing herself like a child in imaginings of antiquity until she is wrenched into adulthood by the living male, Nate.

The prose is clinically clear but it is not evocative. While we understand that the characters suffer, we do not suffer with them. Descriptions of food do not make us feel surfeited or hungry as do, for instance, Audrey Thomas's lavish lists of eatables. Copulation is described meticulously but we feel no yearnings as we read. And yet it is not a dead book—far from it. The dynamics that make it work lie in this paradox: while the people are infinitesimal in cosmic history, still, they are intensely important.

At least they are important to us, for they are Canadian to a fingernail. Innocents, good people who mean no ill. True, they harm each other constantly, but not on purpose. There is no indication of massive corruption such as one finds in contemporary American fiction (Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold*). Corruption surrounds them, for this is the late Seventies culture, terrifying with pol-

lution, energy shortages, carcinogenic foods, but the people are victims, not willing creators of monstrosities. They struggle as best they can, with bewilderment and helplessness and that, too, seems very Canadian.

As a caught image of its time, *Life Before Man* is like Pandora's box, spewing forth all the evils with which we are familiar: broken marriages, Xenophobia, loneliness, pointlessness. Of course there is also hope, but hope in Atwood's hands is treated skeptically, to say the least. The final paradox of the book is that it is this highly suspect hope which gives the people their vitality and their importance. Having taken away the God in man, Atwood has left us with three characters in search of a miracle.

Single Father's Handbook, by Richard H. Gatley and David Koulak, Doubleday/Anchor Press, 1979, pp. 196, paperback \$6.50.

René Souery

As the Doctor Spock generation comes of age we find ourselves confronting a late twentieth-century phenomenon. Never before have there been such large numbers of single fathers—men faced with the problem (and it is a problem at first) of participating in bringing up their children. In traditional circles men have bowed out of the childrearing process, which they are socialized into regarding as woman's domain. However, after separation even the most chauvinistic male must make amends; he has to learn how to rear his children. In addition to the pain and guilt of separation comes the confusion over seemingly abandoning the children. 'Well, you left the wife but you forgot about the children.' What do I do now? When do I see the kids? How do I care for them? To help sort out this mess Drs. Gatley and Koulak have produced a very readable and sensible handbook for single fathers.

The book is based on their experiences both as single fathers and as psychologists who have helped many single dads deal with these problems. It begins with two basic assumptions: that the mother has custody, and that separated fathers love their kids. The first part of the book deals with the process of becoming a separated father. Gatley and Koulak suggest that 'because the underlying focus is usually on the marital relationship rather than on the family, fathers who cope with problems in the marriage by turning to people and pursuits outside the family seldom realize that in the process of doing so *they*

have already begun to separate themselves from the children as well as from their wives.' This statement is followed by a multitude of advice, which, I might add, resembles a military operation. Separation must be planned in advance so we can get help, let others know, talk to the kids, our parents and friends and even to a lawyer. Most of the authors' advice for this stage focusses on maintaining reasonably good communications between spouses; and if the communication 'stinks,' making it good through a third party. The unfortunate problem is that there is a galaxy between the 'is' and the 'ought.' In most instances the 'is' is war, while the 'ought' is the sensible approach put forward by Gatley and Koulak. In the death throes of a marriage this is a little unrealistic. However, before you throw the book at someone, read on, because starting with the chapter entitled 'Toward a New Way of Being a Father,' the book really becomes useful.

First the father must take stock; does he or doesn't he want to be a dad? In fact separation/divorce gives dad a bonus regarding his children. He is in a position where he must spend time with them. This handbook is a great resource for the fumbler and let's face it, with the little experience most dads have, we fumble.

There is a good discussion on visitation which includes a model schedule, a frank discussion on the dangers of short, irregular visits and a suggestion that rather than a *visit* the children should feel at home with their dad. By spending blocks of time with dad they will discover a different role model as dad ceases to be the stereotypic male. He has to learn to do all the jobs he used to consider woman's work. He has to wash, cook and nurture. There is practical advice in all these areas, and the handbook even contains a mini cookbook. Gatley and Koulak presuppose a father's total ignorance on behalf of children and the home and I am sure they are correct in their assumptions.

From the home we move into the social context of separate fathering. Again the authors give us a useful discussion on dad's relationships with friends, relatives, inlaws and colleagues. Some of the most useful advice concerns understanding the problems the mother must face and the authors offer directions on how to develop some kind of rapport with her. But perhaps the most important role the book can play in the life of the single father is that through it dads can focus on themselves and their children and know that in their own way they will develop that special relationship called fathering.