

BULL, MAGPIE AND OUTER

John Tittensor

Serge Liberman: *On Firmer Shores* (Globe, \$9.25).
Garry Disher: *Approaches* (Neptune, \$6.95 and \$3.95).
Chris Wallace-Crabbe: *Splinters* (Rigby, \$9.95).

Behind each of Serge Liberman's stories stand the millions of Jewish dead bequeathed us by the Third Reich, their voices still resonant in the minds and lives of those who survived. "God died in Auschwitz", one character says, reminding us that for him this world can never again be an acceptable, inhabitable place, that the life he has managed to preserve can now be no more than a protracted version of what befell friends and loved ones in the death camps.

Liberman's concerns, as he explores the strange, isolated world of Jewish survivors living in Melbourne suburbia after the war, are of an openly humanist kind, and his belief in the healing power of art and of love freely given is on every page. It is no coincidence that the first-person narrator utilised throughout is often a doctor or a writer: each has his own intimate involvement with the question of death, his own need to report on the investigations his calling imposes. Yet this narrator is for Liberman much more than a mere observer or reporter: he is a necessary intermediary between these people of the old world, uprooted and filled with a pain too raw to communicate, and the callow, uncomprehending inhabitants of the new.

Clearly then, these are stories with large ambitions and Liberman has not lacked the daring the enterprise calls for. In "Plaques", perhaps the best of the collection, this element of conscious risk-taking is beautifully exploited: in the course of a controlled, simple narrative — a successful businessman and philanthropist discovers that the lover he abandoned years before has borne him a retarded son — the author moves on the razor-edge of melodrama, of bathos, then turns away effortlessly from both in the final sentence, leaving the reader with a lesson in ambivalence and irony that makes him laugh even as it jabs at his conscience.

One of the special qualities of this book is its authoritative and for the most part unsentimental establishing of the life and culture of its characters. In "The Kitchen" five families share the same grimy inner-suburban house amid banter, bickering, an attempted suicide and readings of his own poetry by Nussbaum the housepainter. Nussbaum saves enough to buy a house in a

Carlton that for Australians is still a slum, but on the verge of moving in dies after a mildly anti-semitic affray at work. The other residents have seen too many deaths for the pattern of their lives to be much altered by this one, but for the narrator, a child at the time, Nussbaum's memory does not fade; as he grows older and finds himself beginning to write poetry, he realises that Nussbaum has been the trigger for his own creative urge, and that what he is writing is both an epitaph to "that saintly gentle ill-fated man" and an attempt to preserve and pass on his spirit.

This is not the only story in which creativity becomes for the young a way of escape from an environment seen as hostile and philistine, and no Anglo-Australian will be able to read "Two Years in Exile" without being chilled by the totality of the rejection of life and culture here in the forties.

On Firmer Shores is not a flawless book. An occasional loss of control obliges the reader to hear, for example, that "Jagged teeth of shame gnaw at the marrow of my being"; a similar tendency to overstatement and melodrama sometimes mars the dialogue in otherwise convincing stories; and the last half-dozen or so pieces — notably "Tinsel and Dust", in which Dieter and Morry play out German-Jewish conflict in an intolerably trite fashion — could have been omitted to the benefit of the whole.

To welcome Liberman merely as a promising writer would be unfair: in scope, intention and commitment the best of *On Firmer Shores* is so far in advance of most local short fiction as to be hardly related to it. And if the writing — handicapped perhaps by an excessive attachment to the first-person narrator — has not yet achieved the depth, the breadth, the agonised sureness of a classic story like Stanley Elkin's "Criers and Kibitzers, Kibitzers and Criers", there certainly remains the sure indication of better work to come.

Garry Disher's *Approaches* is largely what people from Sydney like to call 'discontinuous narrative'; within the genre its structure shows a certain originality, but beyond this the collection has little to say for itself. Imprecision as epitomised by "They stopped beneath a looming rugged hill, really a small mountain" is its long suit, and the offhand, downbeat tone of much of the writing too often sounds like mere complacency. What is absent from these stories set in Australia, the USA, South Africa is that necessary spark of intellec-