

## from *Touchstone*, vol. XIX, 1994

**MALCOLM FIFE AND SEVEN STORIES** by Richard Winters. Impatiens, P.O. Box 11897, Philadelphia, PA 19128, 1988. No ISBN. 229 pp., 5X7 cloth-bound

**BRIGHTNESS**, a novella by Richard Winters. Impatiens, P.O. Box 11897, Philadelphia, PA 19128, 1993. No ISBN. 100 pp, 5X7 cloth-bound

I was captivated by the landscape description in the prologue of "Malcolm Fife," but after reading the first sentence of Chapter 1, I thought, "No editor in the world would have let this slip past!" Fortunately for me, I read sentence two--read on, in fact, to the end of this Pennsylvania-based novella which makes up over half the book--and turned eagerly to the seven stories which follow. The last, entitled "Boats," is a faceted gem itself. In retrospect, I concluded that sentence one of Chapter 1 may be the only bobble in the entire collection, even though "quirks" in the text abound. Or maybe I got too caught up in the story to care after that first sentence.

"Boats" is concerned with a protagonist named Ronaldson who applies himself to writing a life of Elizabethan churchman Richard Hooker, and we find this telling statement: "Now he fiercely set himself to his purpose, to freely place one particle of his making forever in the world." And later: "Whether a 'Life' of Hooker written by an unknown man would be wanted or needed did not concern him. He was making his pure particle. This was the best thing he could think of to do."

And this is exactly what Winters has done with his novella *Brightness*. I hurried on to this more recent story, also set in Pennsylvania and incorporating two characters who appear in "Boats." The book's epigraph is by Isaac Walton from "The Life of Mr. Richard Hooker," having to do, among other things, with the efficacy of daily labor.

The protagonist is Isaac (as in Walton) Cave, whose ex-Mennonite uncle Eugene teaches him that life is work, "and that with this work, he should make what he would give to God." But Cave casts about with little purpose finding no work fulfilling. He lives in poverty in one room in the city, concealing from his mother and uncle the extent of his privation. He dreams of owning a house and of having a wife. He eventually settles on proof reading and indexing of medical and scientific books on a contract basis and decides that this work is meaningful and respectable enough to warrant returning to see his mother and uncle, whom, during his odd-job period, he has avoided out of shame.

By skimping over the years, he saves enough, by the age of forty, to buy a crumbling house, leaving behind the cramped room in which he has spent eighteen years of dreaming. He works very hard renovating, spending what meagre resources he can afford. He begins to feel less alienated, more of a solid citizen. He meets a woman who captivates him, and decides to marry her. But his clumsy attempts at courtship are rebuffed, to his utter devastation. He can no longer work, no longer pay his bills, no longer repair his crumbling house. When his uncle dies, he blurts out over the phone to his astonished mother his first concern: What will he inherit? Now his neglected house seems to ask, "Where is your holy life?"

Cave's return from Philadelphia to his uncle's farm, undertaken on foot, is an epic account, with such vivid descriptions of the wet Pennsylvania countryside that one knows every inch of the relatively lengthy foot journey. He arrives, maimed and dirty, to reconcile with his mother, and when he confesses the extent of his poverty, she promises him money enough to settle his debts. When the estate is settled, he returns to his former life and work in the city, permanently crippled from the arduous foot journey, but secure in his subsistent state, where his house assures him, "This is your holy life." It is a life which ends in two years, as he gradually wastes away.

The author is totally comfortable with his language, which during exposition employs quaint word reversals suggesting a timeless old-worldliness, rather than lack of basic language skills. ("Cave tried to see the driver angrily." "...Cave saw that the heads all were baby heads." "While Cave still was bending over the heads..." "Thoughts about what had happened that day through his mind wobbled..." "...he had nothing but his pity for himself to say out of his mouth. It is my savage heart, he tried saying to joke weakly." "On his tortured feet he could not stand long erect..." With these odd turns of phrase, he spins our his story with no effort or awkwardness.

The author has succeeded in "freely placing one particle of his making forever in the world." He has found his holy life, and with his oeuvre he has enriched the reader's. I do not know when I have been so captivated by a work of fiction, quirks and all. And taken together with the earlier volume, I begin to know the author, despite the absense of dust jacket bio. The author is nothing so much as a pure unsullied folk artist: a decent man doing honest labor, living a holy life. And by the way, this fiction is not only primitive art, it's entertainment. High entertainment.

Guida Jackson

Note: An earlier version of HILLBORN was published in 2001 as "Ila"

## Bewitching

Ila.

By Richard Winters  
2001; Impatiens, PO Box  
11897, Philadelphia, PA  
19128. \$20 postpaid.

Mark Rich

A few years ago a pair of self-published books appeared in my mailbox whose utter simplicity of design and presentation compelled me to open them, filled with curiosity, and begin reading – an experience immediately and surprisingly rewarding. Now another work has appeared in my mailbox, equally simple of appearance, equally bewitching in that simplicity, and equally rewarding.

Nothing indicates this book by Richard Winters is a novel. The contents page is labeled "Contents." I picked it up thinking I could read it as a short story collection, in fits and starts, at odd hours, in odd places. The opening piece, entitled "New Bow," I first read in *Leviathan*. It was striking then, and remains so now. To my surprise, the second story in the book involved the same central character. So the collection was thematic? Linked?

A rainy morning's reading while taking a break in a coffee shop became my office-time reading for the balance of the day. It was a novel, and one I was willing to set aside my own day's work for.

*Ila* offers a mosaic of parts made seemingly separate, initially, by that contents page, and through the sequential appearance of different characters who each have their own stories, or chapters. Yet it is a cohesive composition, with beginning, middle, and end. It firmly establishes a ruling milieu and ruling scenery; it provides a series of consistent and interesting scenes and events that lead to their conclusion; it provides emotional reward.

When I first read Winters' fiction, I conceived the notion that his cho-

sen subject was the outcast, the odd man shoved to the edge of society. Winters spoke of people leading lives of enormous quiet, in times that seem to be our own, in places we tend not to see.

Yet Winters looks consistently at people not at society's edges but at its center – people who are deeply imbedded in the soil of our world, who exist in a continuum with the past. These characters are not surface foam flung from the latest breaking wave. They are of the land.

In this short novel, Winters presents a character named Gall who fails in his teen ambition, and who in fact is disgraced in its pursuit. He fails also in his young adult ambition of finding center and stability in family and love.

Yet in his failures he develops the soul that becomes centermost in his later life. He becomes a journey. Each moment in a day is a journey, often a physical one which involves loping strides into the foothills or to the river – loping, at least, until the crippling effects of meeting life's demands gives Gall his handicaps: weakness of back, of hands, of strength.

The fusion of weaknesses into a kind of unusual moral strength: this has appeared before in Winters' fiction.

I am unable to state whether Winters is absolutely naïve in his fiction, or utterly sophisticated. I am at a loss because he writes so transparently, so effortlessly, and so naturally. In the middle of this book you find a scene at a farmer's market in which three friends stand by one another and do little more than exchange pleasantries. Yet the reality of this scene, the palpable importance of it, the very dust-feel and chicken-smell of it, takes the reader far, far beyond the realms of the cheap please-the-writer novel of the typist addicted to his own verbiage.

Winters displays, here as before, an uncanny eye for scenery. His touch remains sure in following scenery's changes in the course of

travel, even the slow changes to be seen on the foot journeys so important to his characters.

He also displays a sure ear for the sound and feel of a conversation, of the small interactions that can make up a day in a life, or the even smaller moments of self-discovery.