

## Second Childhoods

by Brad Linaweaver

### Dark Verses & Light

by Thomas M. Disch

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 144 pp., \$26.00

### Neighboring Lives

by Thomas M. Disch and

Charles Naylor

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 368 pp., \$13.95

### The M.D.: A Horror Story

by Thomas M. Disch

New York: Alfred A. Knopf; 384 pp., \$22.00



From its beginnings, science fiction (bastard offspring of fantasy) has exerted a vulgar appeal. Some of its proponents have never shied away from this and, if anything, have celebrated the intelligent child's outlook, as witness the career of Ray Bradbury. The majority of science-fiction writers have grown into an awkward adolescence in which conquering the universe provides an uneasy substitute for sexual identity and the avoidance of bankruptcy—a constant theme of Barry Malzberg. But there remain a surly few who refuse to settle for anything less than full maturity, that sterile condition where senility must ultimately replace the sense of wonder. Such apostasy has been the theme of Thomas M. Disch for some time: his goal is not to leave but to reform the genre.

*Dark Verses & Light* is a poetry collection that carries an endorsement by Thomas Fleming, who identifies Disch's writing as "irreverent with a satire that is savage in its restraint." *Neighboring Lives* is a novel about 19th-century writers, intellectuals, and artists back when it meant something to live in Chelsea. *The M.D.* is a horror novel drawing on much fantasy, a little science fiction, and the kitchen sink (or in this case, the scrub basin) to reach the reading audience that really matters: the fans of Stephen King, whose endorsement graces the back cover. Of the three, the most successful happens also to be the most commercial: *The M.D.* Interestingly, it runs afoul of the Disch theory of

maturity as expounded in his 1991 article for the *Atlantic*, "Big Ideas and Dead-End Thrills." In this piece, Disch takes T. S. Eliot's unremarkable discovery of "a pre-adolescent mentality" in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and proceeds to criticize the embarrassingly breathless style of the horror and science-fiction stories that owe so much to youthful influence. The trouble with Disch as a critic is that he sabotages the foundations of his subject. Science fiction, fantasy, and horror are about excess. The weakness Eliot identified in Poe is actually the genre's essence: abandonment to the "wonders of nature and of mechanics and of the supernatural."

In *The M.D.*, Disch is at his best when describing the childhood experiences of his main character and villain, one William Michaels. After Sister Symphorosa torments little Billy for believing in Santa Claus, the unrepentant child is visited by jolly old Santa; the visitor is actually the god Mercury, lending a certain credence to the bigoted nun's outburst against celebrating pagan gods. He gives Billy a caducean symbol of the medical profession, the twin serpents traditionally associated with the ancient god, cobbled together from a twin-pointed stick and a dead sparrow.

As one might expect from a longtime practitioner of the craft of science fiction, Disch takes an engineer's approach to the subject of magic and curses. The

brutal equation of cause and effect means that his magic wand can cure illness as well as inflict it; but the first is paid for by the second. Before the career of the M. D. is over, he has cured AIDS but replaced it with an even worse plague, the airborne ARVIDS. The advantage to him personally is wealth and power. (The world only knows the good he does.) But even as Michaels ascends to his throne, the god Mercury is planning ahead. Even the M. D. is mortal.

The strongest portions of this book are the most elemental and immature, in which the simple thrill of discovery in black magic is conveyed. The best dialogue is between the god and young Billy. These childhood scenes have the same evocative power found in Bradbury; it is as if a gulf separates Disch the critic from Disch the writer. It was the critic who bullied Bradbury in the *New York Times* for not being grown up enough; by contrast, Russell Kirk has praised Bradbury's moral imagination (in *Enemies of the Permanent Things*) in language that equally well describes *The M.D.*

The two sides of Disch twine more closely in *Dark Verses & Light*. Blessedly Disch is not above rhyming and scanning as demonstrated in his lead poem, "The Snake in the Manger: A Christmas Legend," a product of the author's lighter side that is also shown in *The Brave Little Toaster*. Here the idea is that the various animals might have

### Exiles and Fugitives

#### The Letters of Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Allen Tate, and Caroline Gordon

Edited by John M. Dunaway

"Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, and Jacques and Raïssa Maritain were people on whom little, if anything, was ever lost. They wrote to each other not only of art and philosophy but of their common faith and of the pain and joys of their lives. . . . Thus the correspondence, splendidly edited by John Dunaway, develops a small human comedy played out by four of the most gifted people of our time."—Walter Sullivan

"This correspondence of twenty years between two couples who met in Princeton and New York reflects two movements which are still of historical interest today: the Catholic Revival in France of the 1920s and 1930s; and the fugitive-agrarian southern renaissance in America. . . . By collecting these letters, by annotating them, and translating the French letters, John Dunaway has done a great service for those readers interested in the relationship between belief and literature."—Wallace Fowlie

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Louisiana State  University Press  
Baton Rouge 70893

brought the Christ Child, with the snake facing the greatest challenge. The anachronisms are funny, as intended. Of the remaining contents, including a "Masque in Five Tableaux" and a short story, the greatest entertainment comes from a few poems by the redoubtable Joycelyn Shrager, the story's protagonist, in whom Disch sends up an all too common example of the modern poetess whose poetry can only be distinguished from prose by close scrutiny of the white space at the margins. Here again, Disch does not elude the claims of science fiction: the corny images and shallow sentiments are straight from the preoccupations of fandom.

The book that best serves Disch's vi-

sion of literature is *Neighboring Lives*, published with an endorsement from Anthony Burgess. A rambling account of the *literati* of the Victorian era provides him (and his collaborator Charles Naylor) with an opportunity to practice that most mature of the novelist's arts—gossip! So effective is the author's technique that one becomes absorbed in the personal lives of the Carlyles, John Stuart Mill, Whistler, Rossetti, Swinburne, and even Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll). The only drawback is that this remarkable cast of 19th-century luminaries is *observed* rather than used in any dramatically satisfying manner. The only personage who is portrayed as eccentric and egotistical enough to rise above

the narrative is Thomas Carlyle, whose passions against everything from the piano to books like this one enable the reader to escape the tediously accurate portrayal of his times.

Admittedly, Disch and Naylor did not set out to write a novel of ideas in the manner of Chesterton or Wells. The disappointment is that Disch's experience with science fiction did not creep up on him, providing a central metaphor or point of view by which his natural talents as a satirist could have made this a great novel. If *Neighboring Lives* is any indication, Disch the novelist may finally satisfy Disch the critic in his flight from the "callowness of youth" and "Big Ideas," as he identified the problem in his piece for the *Atlantic*.

## BRIEF MENTIONS

### THE DESERT

by John C. Van Dyke

Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith; 272 pp., \$9.95

That the desert has been time and again the subject of a compelling work of literature—Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, Krutch's *The Desert Year*, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*—is proof both of the infinite subtlety of God the Creator and of the nearly infinite resourcefulness of the genuine literary artist. The word "desert," in fact, has come under attack in recent times as a philistine misnomer, whose most virulent critics are those desert rats who happen as well to be writers. The writer has as his job to make apparent what people ordinarily fail to apprehend, and so it might be thought that, in taking the desert for his subject, he is accepting the highest challenge his craft can offer him. But that is not how it appears to John C. Van Dyke. "And so it is," Van Dyke writes in his "Preface Dedication," "that my book is only an excuse for talking about the beautiful things in this desert world that stretches down the Pacific Coast, and across Arizona and Sonora. The desert has gone a-begging for a word of praise these many years. It never had a sacred poet; in me it has only a lover."

*The Desert* was originally published by Scribner's in 1901. Van Dyke was an asthmatic art historian and critic at Rutgers who, in the summer of 1898 and at the age of 42, mounted an Indian pony and rode away into the Colorado Desert in the company of his small dog. For the next three years, he crossed and recrossed the "wastes" of California, Arizona, and Mexico, including the Salton Sea Basin; it was during these wanderings that he composed this book, "at odd intervals, when I lay against a rock or propped up in the sand." His training as an art critic explains his wonderful appreciation and understanding of the effects of light across the desert spaces, in the mountains and in the canyons, but his understanding of these phenomena is scientific as well as aesthetic, as is his interest in the physical forces that create and shape the landscape (such as moisture and wind erosion) and in the flora and fauna that inhabit it. Ultimately his love for the desert is a spiritual, rather than an intellectual, passion: "The weird solitude, the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love."

Van Dyke was a forerunner of today's environmentalist who lived to see the irrigation of the Imperial Valley: "The desert should never be reclaimed!" he writes. And the final lines of the book are a prophecy, as well as a description: "The glory of the wilderness has gone down with the sun. . . . It is time that we should say goodnight—perhaps a long goodnight—to the desert."

—Chilton Williamson, Jr.

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## Satyr and Satire

by J.O. Tate

The Satyr

by Robert DeMaria

Sag Harbor, New York: Second Chance Press; 176 pp., \$21.95



I think it only right to declare my interest at the outset, for I have known Robert DeMaria for a quarter of a century as a friend and as a colleague at Dowling College. After all these years, I should have learned something from that experience, and just now three pieces of advice come to mind: always accept an offer of homemade lasagna from Professor DeMaria; never raise after he calls during a poker game; and read *The Satyr*, now that you've got a second opportunity.

First published twenty years ago, *The Satyr* is the fourth of DeMaria's 14 novels and stands apart from his other works for its sheer playfulness, its experimental nature, and its brevity. This work denies ordinary reality, focusing on the psychology of the individual—or so it seems, if we are to take at face value the