

This is a story about self-communication and other-communication, from a master communicator. In a strange continuum, it leads from the society within the skin to the society without. It maintains that health is not only a matter of physiology but a matter of attitudes and values. Values are at the heart of society. When values falter, a society is in danger; when *that* heart stops, a society dies. To Norman Cousins,

personal health and social health are one. We can do no better than to give him the toast which he gave to himself in a twilight hour: "Be of good heart to your great heart!" and thank him for sharing this same great heart with us. ■

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Irish Humanism

The Stories of William Trevor

King Penguin, 799 pp. paper, \$8.95

Fools of Fortune

by William Trevor, Viking Press, 239 pp., \$12.95

Reviewed by Bruce Allen

DURING THE LAST fifteen years or so, the Irish writer William Trevor has achieved both high public visibility and genuine literary eminence. His eight novels and five short story collections have received an increasingly good press. Dramatized versions of his stories, as well as of his numerous plays written for radio, television, and stage, have been frequently performed in England, where Trevor now lives, and occasionally in this country.

Reviewing the 1975 volume *Angels at the Ritz and Other Stories*, Graham Greene called it "surely one of the best collections, if not the best collection, since Joyce's *Dubliners*." Trevor's reputation as a major contemporary writer pretty much dates from that tribute.

Trevor's virtues are all the appropriate ones for the short story: a clear-eyed, uncluttered prose style and a wonderful ear for dialogue; virtuoso plotwork and masterly narrative economy; a gift for creating vividly believable characters out of quickly sketched, suggestive essentials; and an ability to portray the thoughts of several characters successively and persuasively. Furthermore, he has a tendency to conclude a story by stepping in—omnisciently, when there isn't a first-person narrator—to make a climactic summary

of the meaning of what we have just experienced. Somehow, this almost always works to perfection. Yet the stories can't be called perfect. They tend toward sentimentality, owing perhaps to Trevor's concentration on the tension between people's "romantic" daydreams and their usually unsatisfying real lives.

The Stories of William Trevor is an omnibus containing everything from his previously published collections. The stories concern the patchwork variety and confusion of life itself. They show families riddled by sexual incompatibility or ruined by divorce.

Adolescent boys agonize, unable to see any difference between romance and sex. Lonely women are victimized and humiliated by the very men from whom they expect perfect happiness. Sons and daughters fail to see that their parents, aging and weakening faster than seems possible, need them; or, overpowered by responsibility and guilt, the children stay at home forever and grow too timid to engage the world outside their families' horizons.

In most of his stories, Trevor focuses instantly on a character's idiosyncrasy or obsession. He's astonishingly adept at depicting the hesitant passions that surface, ever so tentatively, in meek and self-effacing people. Yet this empathy with the downtrodden isn't the only string to his bow; he's fair to his seducers and egotists, too. Nothing human gets short shrift in these stories.

Angels at the Ritz indeed displays Trevor's finest work. Besides the title story's trenchant analysis of suburban wife-swapping, there is a penetrating character study of a "cold," half-human loner in "A Complicated Nature," and a vision of elderly solitude and its consequences in the lovely "Mrs. Acland's Ghosts." To my mind the latter is the most compassionate and comprehending of all Trevor's stories.

The requirements of the novel form, such as lengthy theme development and extensive characterization, may run counter to Trevor's superb skills as a miniaturist. Many of his readers have felt that this writer's novels are overall less vivid and involving than the best of his short fiction. That's the way I feel about his new novel, *Fools of Fortune*.

Its title characters are the Anglo-Irish Quinton family, mill-owners ensconced in an estate called Kilneagh in the rural village of Fermoy, northeast of Cork. The opening chapters, narrated by the Quintons' son William, recall his youth during the years of World War I. Kilneagh is first depicted as an idyllic demiparadise that is scarcely aware of even the violence and bloodshed within Ireland. Then the "rebellion" of 1916 creeps close. The Quintons make known their sympathy for Irish Home Rule; "For this, we were seen



William Trevor.

by many as traitors to our class and to the Anglo-Irish tradition." A workman who has sold information to the British "Black and Tans" is executed, and in an atrocious act of revenge, Kilneagh is virtually burned to the ground and its occupants and retainers murdered or left for dead.

"Willie's" narration goes on to describe the relocation of the remaining family in Cork, his own school years, and his distraught mother's drunkenness and progressive madness. It breaks off shortly after we learn of his love for his beautiful English cousin Marianne and his apparent determination to avenge his family at long last. Marianne then tells the story, describing her school experiences, her return to Kilneagh in search of William, and the long dying fall of her life thereafter—awaiting her lover's return from his self-imposed exile and caring for their illegitimate daughter, Imelda. Imelda, who briefly assumes the narration, is a demented visionary afflicted by nightmares in which she sees the destruction of Kilneagh over and over again. The story ends with William and Marianne reunited in old age, "grateful for what they have been allowed, and for the mercy of their daughter's quiet world, in which there is no ugliness."

Fools of Fortune is overplotted and strained, but it contains many wonderful things. Trevor is at his best in such quiet moments as the death of the Quintons' housemaid, Josephine, made memorable by her moving prayer for the peace of the rebellion's victims: "Console them everywhere." He contrives an amusingly Dickensian scene in the office of a solicitor who is obviously modeled on Mr. Jaggers of *Great Expectations*. His dialogue effortlessly encompasses both high drama and low comedy. I was especially taken with some schoolboys' fantasies about a night watchman's supposedly lascivious wife: "She spends four hours in Confession every Tuesday. The priests go mad with excitement."

This makes it all the more disappointing that the story proceeds so slowly. William's thoughts and second thoughts are given such prominence that the drama of the actual events is worse than minimized; it's

practically suppressed. There are two glaring examples. The description of Kilneagh under siege is so elliptical, as seen through the injured Willie's delirious exhaustion, that we don't really understand what has happened till long afterward. Then late in the book we learn that William, still traveling surreptitiously between Fermoy and his adopted home in Italy, has learned some time ago of his mad daughter's existence; we weren't told

at the time, and now the information simply trickles through another of his reveries.

Novels are supposed to dramatize and render major crises in their characters' lives. The great weakness of *Fools of Fortune* is that Trevor too often settles for merely sketching what he should develop. He's fortunate that D.H. Lawrence isn't alive to review this book. ■

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Requiem for a Tough Guy

Dashiell Hammett: A Life

by Diane Johnson, Random House, 319 pp., \$16.95

Reviewed by Anna Shapiro

ALMOST ANYONE whose name has public resonance gets a biography these days. Dashiell Hammett has recently rated two. He is famous as the author of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*, as a man who defied Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the Fifties, and as the mentor and lover of Lillian Hellman. Hellman herself has greatly contributed to the Hammett legend in her memoirs, though Hammett told her when she said she wanted to write his biography, "That'll be a book about a girl named Hellman with an occasional reference to a friend named Hammett." Hellman still wanted a biography, but had some difficulty finding the writer she would trust with her memories and his letters. Diane Johnson seemed the right choice, having written in her fiction and criticism about subjects salient to Hammett's life—crime, politics, literature—and she could, as a screenwriter, claim Hollywood as her territory. But it is Johnson's particular powers of mind that make this biography an excellent book.

Hammett was, of course, right about what his girlfriend would do with his biography. He pointed the way to *Pentimento* and *Scoundrel Time* as he had to the play *The Children's Hour*. (He had urged the untried 29-year-old Hellman to write

a play, suggesting she use a story he'd come across in a "compendium of criminal case histories" about "a Scottish girls' school that had to close because of a lesbian scandal surrounding the owners.") Hellman is a self-dramatist as well as a dramatist. Johnson on the other hand values objectivity and restraint, like Hammett. Both Hammett and Johnson accept the harsher things the world has to offer, though for Hammett this points a moral. His choices in life reveal the same lopsidedness that trivializes his fiction: he acknowledges *only* what is harsh.

Johnson is very good on "men's men"; one of the harsher realities she accepts is the gulf between the sexes. She appreciates Hammett as a man who "liked male society, whether of Pinkerton agents or hospital inmates or men in the army and even prison." Whatever he had of a career was connected to these male domains. Being a Pinkerton agent was the first job the often-drunk high school dropout could stick. From there he went into the Army during World War I, where he served—mostly on his back—fifteen miles from the Hammett home near Baltimore. By then he had the diseases that would dog him throughout his life: venereal disease, which was an easy cure the first times