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Tall Truths

See the Old Lady Decently by B. S. JOHNSON
Hutchinson £3.25

Tank by MICHAEL KUSTOW Cape £3.50

First Love, Last Rites by IAN MCEWAN Cape £2.50

Green, Green My Valley Now by RICHARD LLEWELLYN Joseph £3.25

'Your work has been a continuous dialogue with form?' ventures Christie Malry to B. S. Johnson at the end of *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*. 'If you like,' replies his creator, diffidently. Johnson's experimentalism, besides preventing his wider recognition as one of the funniest writers of his generation, was often in fact rather demure, and rarely the enemy of lucidity. The genial, bearish capering round traditional narrative technique, the tricky layout, slashed pages and unjustified type, do not go very far beyond Sterne - 'that great spunky unflincher', as Johnson called his Master.

See the Old Lady Decently, though, was clearly to be the most technically experimental, as well as the most ambitious in theme, of Johnson's works: it is the first volume of a planned trilogy, which was truncated by the author's suicide (one notes, incidentally, a tinge of desperation to the familiar, humbling narrative voice: 'My mind may be going,' he cries at one point, echoing Lowell in 'Skunk Hour'). There are three interlinked subjects: the life and death (from cancer in 1971) of Johnson's mother; the decay of the mother country and of the Empire, which is dated from Ypres and over-attributed to Haig; and the theme of renewal and regeneration.

The text is a collage of documents, memories and inventions about Emily Johnson; guided-tour sequences about Greater and Broader Britain, in which names and particularities are deliberately omitted 'to give generality, if not universality' (a device which becomes boring); poems, odd thoughts, acronymic insults to Haig and quotes from Neumann's *The Great Mother*. It is all gummed together in this first volume with considerable verbal ingenuity and a friendly, buttonholing humour. But the themes at this stage merely co-exist; whether they would finally cohere is an untested, and now of course unanswerable, question.

Johnson's consistent aim in all his fiction was to tell it how it is. The paradox of fiction obsessed him: 'I am not interested in telling lies in my own novels,' he writes in the introduction to *See the Old Lady Decently*. Yet 'how can you convey truth in a vehicle of fiction? The two terms, truth and fiction, are opposites, and it must logically be impossible.' The only way Johnson can face this conundrum is by continually exposing the mechanics of writing as he goes along: rip out the false lining of the top hat, disembowel the stage rabbit to show that it was real and alive. Hence the cheeky backchat, the references to checking detail

in Pevsner and Escoffier, or in the intrusion into the text of Johnson's daughter bringing him food while he is writing. The trouble is, of course, that such moments of intended authenticity (and even the documents Johnson reproduces) become, in their turn, conceits, and honesty, despite the author's best endeavours, becomes self-defeating. It is the catch 22 of fiction.

Michael Kustow gives a brief nod to Johnson's truth/fiction dilemma in *Tank*, calling his work 'an autobiographical fiction', and his contents 'fictive facts'. But the stance is less combative, and the result mainly a *roman à clef* for ageing trendies. K is the energetic young director of an institute of contemporary arts in London, muscling in on the cultural establishment; he is an 'affable tank' at work, an emotional trampler at home. Real tanks are more effective, though: Hungary, Prague, and the Algerian crisis are motifs which rather simplistically recur; the bravest artistic manifesto is as nothing, you see, when the real armour rolls. Mr Kustow gets useful mileage out of some of the sillier fringe-people (puzzled straights throwing the I Ching to see if they are gay), but his attitude to the lengthily-described events at the institute is rarely detached enough to be ironic, and comes across (perhaps accurately) as nervously embarrassed.

First Love, Last Rites, by contrast, marks the début of a talented and genuinely imaginative writer addicted to the casual violences of life. At the edges of Ian McEwan's stories there are always unspoiled boys feeding glass splinters to the pigeons, roasting budgerigars or hurling rocks at courting couples. The centres are scarcely less macabre: a pus-faced chef shuts a retarded *plongeur* in his gas-oven and turns on the heat; an unsuccessful actress forces her nephew to dress up, the air heavy with undefined sexual menace. Yet the beastliness is never arbitrary, and Mr McEwan's details often grow into strange, powerful images: in the title story, an oppressive tale about adolescent sex in a stewy bed-sit, he assimilates the vagina to the condition of an eel-trap.

In particular, Mr McEwan achieves some fine effects simply by pressing a scene to its logical conclusion: a pubescent boy, agreeing to play Mummies and Daddies with his sister, introduces a new, but inevitable, element into the game, a couple of extras in a sex revue, instructed at rehearsal to simulate, slip over into reality and are thrown out by a disgusted director. The ironies, throughout this impressive collection, are tellingly weighted.

Those who thrilled, 36 years ago, to *How Green Was My Valley* will not want to pass up *Green, Green My Valley Now*. In this, the third sequel, Huw Morgan finally returns from Patagonia to his native mining valley in Wales: for, after all, as the old gaucho ballad has it, 'the scent of my fire is sweeter than the perfume of another man's woman'. Richard Llewellyn is an easy-going yarnster who attempts nothing fancy, wears his heart on the page, and knows well enough when to kill off a beautiful wife with an impressively obscure disease. It is an entirely amiable load of Welsh nuts, and it seems destined to sell by the sackful.