

in review...

'Looking for Mr. Goodbar'

Liberation fable well-written

By Mary Beth Allen

Judith Rossner's "Looking for Mr. Goodbar" is finally available in paperback, and the publication of this inexpensive edition is a good excuse for yet another review of this book. It was serialized last fall in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, but in spite of that it still deserves a serious examination.

As in most modern novels, the book does not have an easily explainable plot. It would be more exact to say it is about a series of events in the life of the heroine, Theresa Dunn.

During her childhood, Theresa is resentful about her poor health resulting from a bout with polio and jealous of her two sisters' popularity. After graduation, she persuades her parents to let her attend college.

Theresa lands a teaching job and finds her first real moments of contentment with her young students. During her second year of teaching, she takes the plunge and moves out of her parent's house. Her first apartment is below that of her sister Katherine and her lawyer husband Brooks. They try to integrate Terry into their self-consciously with-it lifestyle, which consists of grass, health food, Fire-Island-in-the-summer and open marriage.

But when Theresa becomes involved with a kind, stable man

named James Morrisey whom she has met through one of the teachers at school, her carefully constructed life begins to lose its order. She starts out being irritated by James' decency but eventually grows to love him — or come as close as she can to loving someone. She tells him of her frequent pick-ups and he is hurt but his feelings for her are unchanged. He gives her a month to decide to marry him and refuses to see her until she decides. Depressed and lonely, Theresa decides to reaffirm what she thinks is her freedom and independence, and she makes her last trip to the singles mecca called Mr. Goodbar.

Rossner manages to convey perfectly Terry's attitude towards her bar pick-ups. She feels sexually liberated, not whorish — after all, she is a teacher. She wraps her profession around her like a blanket to protect herself from the contempt of the men she seduces.

And the knowledge that only her one-night lovers can sexually satisfy her gives her strength to resist an emotional commitment to James.

A curious mixture of stark, almost cold, prose and vivid detail characterizes Rossner's style. She writes with detachment, almost as if she were a reporter

covering the events in Terry's life. However, she doesn't achieve total objectivity, and it is hard to tell whether Rossner is sympathetic towards Terry or whether the book is one, long fable — complete with a moral. One could conclude the book is a combination of both. Terry, even before her death, is a victim — a victim of an era and a city where lasting relationships and living friendships are replaced by less bothersome, casual, sexual encounters. In a mobile, high-powered society, sexual gratification becomes an insulation against the vulnerability that emotional commitment invites. To Terry, like most of the people she meets in Mr. Goodbar (which is supposed to be just that — a "good," safe, bar) sexuality becomes an end in itself — and it is an end of no joy and little true eroticism.

"Goodbar" is alternately depressing and entertaining. It is sometimes almost painfully realistic and often sexually graphic. But it is not a sensational thriller; it is a tragic story, although not a tragedy in the literary sense of the word. Rossner's book succeeds, even though it may be up to the individual reader what it succeeds at. "Goodbar" is engrossing and well-written, and worth reading if for no other reason than to try and find out why it is so popular.

'Shardik'

Adams' rabbits beat his bears

By Dan Hays

Richard Adams' first book, "Watership Down," created something of a sensation in both England and America. Consequently, his second book was greeted with a kind of preconceived expectation of more of the same. Many readers were disappointed, for "Shardik" does not in the least resemble "Watership Down."

A persistent misconception has clung to "Shardik" since Simon and Schuster published it in hardback in 1975. The recent paperback reissue has reawakened that misconception in those who have not read the book. "Shardik" is not about a bear. It is certainly true that a bear figures prominently in the story, might even be called a central motivation to character action. But the bear is not a character as such... there is none of the anthropomorphic in his presentation. "Watership Down" was an allegory using humanized rabbits as central characters (humanized in the sense that they spoke, and displayed reason); "Shardik's" characters are human beings... and this is one of the weaknesses

of the novel. Adams' rabbits were more believable, more compelling, more interesting than his human beings were.

"Shardik" is essentially a heroic fantasy. It employs the device of an invented past, with an uncertain setting (complete with a map), and with just enough hints of familiar things to lend the setting credence. Yet ultimately the book fails, both as allegory and as adventure story. It is far too long, and Adams never seems to quite decide what he is writing about.

At first, "Shardik" seems to set out to elaborate on a device Adams used to great success in "Watership Down": the creation of a religion. The inhabitants of Ortelga (one of the more pronounceable of Adams' invented names) encounter a gigantic bear, whom they believe to be the personification of Lord Shardik, the Power of God. The cult of the bear is explored to some depth (though not quite enough to make it really vital)... and then the book turns into an uneasy tale of the betrayal of God, the visitation of punishment, and the horrors of a world

which has lost its sanctity. All of this is too much for a single book. Adams loses the thread about half-way through; the forward thrust of action and meaning simply stops. Things still happen, but we do not perceive any real significance in them.

Adams tries very hard to be mystical, but he never succeeds in infusing the reader with a feeling of awe. *Shardik* remains simply a bear, and the people around him literary puppets. Part of the reason for this is that the entire action of the book, supposedly on a grand scale, takes place in an area which can be covered on foot in three or four days... an area which, nonetheless, contains an amazing geographical variation, an astounding number of peoples who have never encountered each other, and places mysterious to all concerned.

Adams has attempted something very ambitious, and there are stirring passages in the book... particularly his descriptions of nature. But the vision is clouded, and the results unsatisfactory.

'Curtain'

Poirot, Christie finish with style

By Anne Kern

Never mourn the death of a great person; simply rejoice in his accomplishments and relive his greatest moments.

This must have been the sentiment of the late Dame Agatha Christie toward her famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, whom she helped begin and end his career allowing him many achievements in between.

Curtain marks the end of an eventful life for Poirot. Unfortunately for Dame Agatha's devoted readers it also marked the end of her brilliant career.

In this two-in-one volume, Poirot is shown arriving and leaving England. Throughout both stories Poirot, with the help of his ever faithful side-kick Captain Hastings, lets his superb "grey cells" ponder, puzzle and eventually ferret out the murderers who dare to challenge him.

"The Mysterious Affair at Styles" is Poirot's first case and he performs beautifully, though Hastings hardly thinks so. Poirot is a World War I refugee to whom the mistress of Styles Court, the subsequent victim, extends her hospitality.

In "Curtain" Poirot is on the trail of a much more fiendish and prolific murderer. The mysterious "X" (as Poirot dubs the murderer) has already claimed five victims but remains virtually untouchable.

Poirot knows "X" is about to strike again but doesn't know who the victim or the "murderer" will be.

While Poirot may be brilliant, using his "grey cells" for deduction, Hastings is his familiar bungling self using his emotions for his intelligence. Poirot gently chides his friend to give up auburn-haired "les femmes," and keep his eyes and ears open as they "hunt together."

Dame Agatha has once again created the most believable detective team since Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Her writing, though some criticize it as "school girl English," fits her old-fashioned characters well.

What must be remembered when reading a Christie book is that the story is set in post-World War I England (or Europe). A late-20th century American may find language stilted that someone in the Twenties would have recognized as normal.

"Curtain" may be a marvelously written story, but it is sad that no more works like it will follow (though rumor has it that one final book has yet to be published, the last of Miss Jane Marple).

Those of us who knew and loved Dame Agatha and her characters mourn her death as a literary tragedy. But her stories will always be around for us to re-enjoy.