

BOOK REVIEWS

by Lysbeth Cohen

A UNIVERSE OF CLOWNS

Serge Liberman, (Phoenix Publications, 271 pp, \$9.95)

With this collection of sixteen short stories Melbourne writer Serge Liberman won the 1981 Alan Marshall Award, the citation for which states "Human relationships are the writer's chief interest, and the interdependent worlds of persons come to life in the stories. The author never forgets that human beings do not exist in a vacuum; some of the best writing is concerned with setting and environment and both these elements are established in vivid prose."

The stories range in length from seven to fifty-four printed pages. The first, the title story, is the longest and deals with an established physician, a cancer specialist, who voluntarily gives up his career as head of his hospital department, his university appointment and his foreseeable professional future to devote himself to a patient dying slowly from lymphoma. His Elizabeth, young enough to be his daughter, trusts him and loves him completely: as her lover he forfeits the respect of his colleagues and faces the lack of understanding of his medical student son. He gives up so much for so short a period of happiness: one questions whether in real life this situation would happen. It could, of course, given the doctor's own loneliness — his wife is in a mental home — and his sense of mission. Certainly, the author makes one think it could.

The other stories range through a great variety of human relationships and of people searching for love, for their own worth and for the values and meanings of life. Many of his characters are survivors of the Holocaust, people who can never forget the past while trying to live in present-day Australia. Some cope. Others do not. Ever-present is the conflict and misunderstandings between that generation and their children, born and reared in this country, who do not want to be constantly reminded of their parents' past persecution experiences. Ron Elisha brought out some of the same problems and situations in his play "In Duty Bound".

In the author's first collection of short stories "On Firmer Shores", which won the 1980 Alan Marshall Award, he wrote principally about the new immigrants from Europe to Melbourne (where the majority of Eastern European Jewish Displaced Persons settled). In this collection he has gone further. Many of these people have prospered, but not all — like the little shoemaker in "Envy's Fire" who fills school exercise books with Yiddish poetry, found after his death by his son, an academic with his own hopes of becoming a successful writer — a moving and devastating story, this one.

Not all the stories are about Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Those that are, and which deal with this never-to-be-forgotten concentration camp background, will explain much to both Jewish and non-Jewish Australians who do not understand fully the lifelong effects of that experience. The general stories, of which there are several, have the same general theme and impact as the Jewish stories. All are very wordy, some paragraphs occupying a full printed page, and with occasional rather irritating proof-reading oversights.

The stories in this collection are philosophical. In "Sustenance Was I To The Needy", where a general practitioner looks into his beliefs and his own lonely life,

he writes "No order, only chaos; no guiding hand; random evolution, blind forces, blind chance; choice that is no choice; predestination with neither origin nor end; only cross-currents of people, events, experiences, thoughts, emotions, beliefs, deeds, colliding in their millions . . ."; and, "Go persuade a world so stuck in the quagmire of thinking in terms of the dichotomy between will and determinism, between choice and design, that a third component exists, that of chance . . ."

In "Friends", where the protagonist as a young adult visits a former school friend in Paris and they discuss their youthful dreams of service to mankind à la Albert Schweitzer, the friend explains "There comes a time when a man makes a reckoning with himself, asserts those values that he deems important and rearranges his priorities. There comes a time, too, when one realises one's ineffectuality in the face of the iniquities that pervade society and must make peace with the regret that not the best-intentioned of men can eliminate them".

In the final story, "The Fortress", a wealthy businessman (former immigrant from concentration camp) in his declining years wants to establish a memorial. He decides on an auditorium at the university, to bear his name. "The building rose before him, clear as marbled certitude, in his imagination. A massive, oval, domed edifice. Brown birch. Sturdy polished resilient timber. Mosaic windows. Murals. A spacious sloping hall in the style of an amphitheatre, cushioned seats, a stage, foyer, cloak rooms, offices. Venue for concerts, stage plays, orations, reviews . . . He saw it stand as his ultimate memorial, in its grandness and permanence telling of a man, a Jew, who, born in remote Lithuania, had endured hell and who, surviving, destitute and naked, had attained to the ease of wealth and who, through this creation had touched the hem of eternity." The architect he chooses, internationally renowned, a scholar and a mystic, designs a building of perfection and supervises every iota of its construction — which produces in the businessman suspicion of his motives. The philosophy of this story revolves around the difference between the powers of creativity and of money to purchase. To tell its ending would be a disservice to both reader and author.

Serge Liberman, twice winner of the Alan Marshall Award, married, with three children, editor of the Melbourne Chronicle, was recently appointed to the editorial committee of a new magazine "Outrider", devoted to the multiculturalism of Australian society. In this book he has made a contribution to the understanding of some sections of this multicultural society.

TROUBLES

Alan Collins, (Kingfisher Books, 195 pp. \$6.95)

This collection of twenty-one short stories was one of five finalists in the 1982 Alan Marshall Award.

Most of these stories deal with Jewish people in Sydney or Melbourne in the 1930s and 1940s, their relationships with each other and with their non-Jewish friends, neighbours and casual acquaintances. The majority of people in the stories are not wealthy, some are definitely impoverished and at the end of their tether.

Some of the stories are concerned with Australian anti-semitism, real or perceived, and are directed against the attitudes of Australian Jews to the refugees from Hitler whose differences of speech, appearance and customs worried some of the settled Jews here as a possible additional source of anti-semitism.