

again. Not to say it's that good a book, either. It's not.

And *The Dying Animal* is even worse, what with the usual themes of young men in their early 20s who are writers, usually in Manhattan, who have father complexes and are out to score some pseudo-intellectual nookie, and are having a hard time because they're REALLY Philip Roth, and he's boring. And more pretentious than Norman Mailer. An example from the current book:

The seat next to the most beautiful girl in the world – and it's empty. So you take it. But now isn't then, and it'll never be calm. It'll never be peaceful. I was worried about her walking around in that blouse. Peel off her jacket, and there is the blouse. Peel off the blouse, and there is perfection. A young man will find her and take her away. And from me, who fired up her senses, who gave her her stature, who was the catalyst to her emancipation and prepared her for him.

Does that make you want to go out and buy and actually READ this thing? "Peel off the blouse, and there is perfection. A young man will find her and take her away."

Well, I would do the honors, pal, did she look like the cover, which is by Modigliani, who is All the Rage in New York these days, and yesterday too, I think, when the publisher wanted to suggest that in the pages of this novel elderly professors will find their way to muted and furtive gratification, one way or another.

But she doesn't. Because Philip Roth couldn't draw a rounded female character to save his ass. All you get is the work of a rich, boring pompadour, for whom contrived artifice passes for emotion – and trite, impotent emotion at that.

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In Company: Robert Creeley's Collaborations.
Amy Cappellazzo & Elizabeth Licata, editors.
University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
108 pages. \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

Robert Creeley, a poet with an innate capacity to seamlessly integrate intelligence in metaphor has throughout his notable career practiced collaboration with visual artists of equal stature. Those fortunate enough to see this recent traveling exhibition experienced firsthand the "locus (Creeley) inhabits and investigates, a way for him to explore the shifting relationship between 'I' and 'he,' the subjective and the objective." This comment from John Yau's essay resonates throughout the other essays in the catalog as well as in the beautifully reproduced images from the show.

The catalog, and the show it represents, documents the stunning and exhilarating power of visual, literary,

and publishing arts to create layers of experience and dialogs between modes of communication. Artists such as Georg Baselitz, Francesco Clemente, Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, R.B. Kitaj, Marisol, Susan Rothenberg, and Elsa Dorfman have joined Creeley in these experiments with form and image. The catalog includes statements from the artists that elucidate Creeley's sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and genius as a poet and collaborator, and appreciator and "reader" of visual language.

The reproductions and documentary photos (including superb early photographs of Creeley by frequent *Oyster Boy* contributor, the poet, publisher, photographer, and essayist Jonathan Williams) offer stimulating looks at the show's lovely, engaging, technically adventurous, and oftentimes tender works. As integral as the conversations are between Creeley's words and the visual works, each stands alone as challenging and compelling works of art: "If I had thought / one moment / to reorganize life / as a particular pattern, / to outwit distance, depth, / felt dark was myself / and looked out to me, I / presumed. It grew by itself." (from *Life & Death*, a collaboration with Francesco Clemente)

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The Love-Artist.

Jane Alison.

Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.
242 pages. \$23.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Larry Johnson

If, like me, you've always wanted to write a novel about Ovid in exile and were not quite satisfied with David Malouf's wonderfully written but rather bleak version in *An Imaginary Life*, then *The Love-Artist* may be for you. True, it's not about Ovid's exile but the events leading up to it, but those are things we've always wanted to know as well, and Jane Alison's first novel portrays a set of unlikely but delicious circumstances that one at times wishes were true. Better that Ovid should be exiled for these events (which do turn out to involve "a poem and an error") than for Augustus' mere hypocritical displeasure with *The Art of Love*.

The novel opens with Ovid's arrest and departure toward exile and the remainder is flashback until the epilogue. Having finished his great work *Metamorphoses*, Rome's most famous and fashionable poet decides to get out of the City for awhile and let the poem's effect settle on critics and emperor alike. He chooses to holiday in a rather unlikely but exciting place: the east coast of the Black Sea, not far from the fabulous land of Colchis, home of the witch Medea. Even the backward natives here have heard of his fame, especially a beautiful young herbalist and spellcaster, Xenia. The two meet amid luscious natural beauty and Xenia, whose one wish

is the same as Ovid's — "To be known. To be remembered. To live forever" — makes the poet her lover and decides to become his Muse through devotion, sex, and magic. Thus she will become immortal along with him.

Feeling this beneficent power, Ovid returns to Rome with her and starts to write a new poem while the *Metamorphoses* begins to be accepted as a masterpiece by everyone but the "marble man" Augustus. Seeking to influence his aloof sovereign, Ovid finds a new secret patron, the emperor's granddaughter Julia, shortly to be exiled, like her mother, for immorality. As Xenia becomes pregnant with what she prophesies will be twins, Ovid's new poem, under Julia's patronage, is seen to be his lost play *Medea*, with Ovid, Xenia, and her unborn children playing the central roles. Xenia has thus become the obsessed poet's masterpiece, but he is hers as well, each bargaining for eternal life, so what of the play's climax? Will Ovid be able to write the scene where Medea murders her brood if Xenia doesn't commit the same act? And what will happen when the jealous witch-girl discovers the identity of her lover's mysterious patron?

All these questions are answered in the novel's climax and epilogue and, as in the rest of the book, through beautiful, moving language and the requisite scenes of "transformation," rife with thrilling sense imagery.

Ovid is finally, of course, exiled to the dreary town of Tomis, on the west coast of the Black Sea, in a much less hospitable climate. And the fate of Xenia and her children? One must read the novel for this revelation, and afterward he or she will truly, along with the distraught Jason, "testify . . . that there are no gods."

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Serpent.

Nicholas Mosley.

Dalkey Archive Press, 1990.

192 pages. \$19.95 (hardback).

Reviewed by Zoë Francesca

Serpent is the third book in Mosley's "Catastrophe Practice" series. The other four are: *Catastrophe Practice*, *Judith*, *Imago Bird*, and *Hopeful Monsters*. First written in 1981, *Serpent* was revised by the author in 1990. On one level, *Serpent* is a modern retelling of the story of Masada, an ancient fortress where Jews committed mass suicide rather than surrender to the Romans. The plot, however, takes place entirely on an airplane. A screenwriter (Jason) boards a plane bound for Tel Aviv to convince a Hollywood producer (Epstien) that his new screenplay on Masada can never be made into a film. In the back of the plane, the screenwriter's wife (Lilia) and child meet up with a possible terrorist. On the ground, a psychology major turned security guard

and his wife, a physics student turned airport official, do battle with eerie "protesters."

The chapters where we must plow through existential conversation between characters from Jason's screenplay are somewhat tedious compared to the present-day action on the plane. They remind us too heavily of the pedantic goals of the book: a discussion of whether it is better to sacrifice oneself for society or to survive; whether life is a "going concern" or a "calamity," and whether we are all really actors.

What takes this novel to an exciting, experimental level are layers of speech and articulated thought that make up the text. Plato argued, we are told in the book, that ideas are more real than experience because experience depends on ideas. In *Serpent*, ideas about politics, terrorism, and betrayal become real, presumably because they were thought of before they happened. This is what keeps the book's suspense high. We quickly learn that premonitions are bound to materialize into events, and halfway through the book the pace picks up as the airplane and its passengers get out of control.

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Illume.

Andrea Rosenberg.

Eucalyptus Press, 1999.

71 pages. No price (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

Occasionally a first book comes across my desk which surprises by its maturity and creativity. *Illume*, a self-published, handsomely handmade limited edition book-length prose poem, details through a detached, melancholy, and gentle manner an obsessive observation of personal psychological states through symbolic notations of the real:

Some mornings I feel the world's rotation when I wake up. I lie back on my pillow and feel its slow movement under my bed. It's a strange, soothing vertigo that fills me these mornings, the noise of cars and of the street echoing and revolving, muffled and remote, miles away from my open window. When I sit up, the room spins wildly, and then everything settles down to its usual immobility.

Reminiscent of the poetic fictions of Anaïs Nin and Jeanette Winterson, Rosenberg's youthful, self-absorption is "fascinated by change and its exhilaration and disregard for consequence. It is a wild freedom from the future, a violent break with the past. It is active." Her excavations pour vinegar into sweet musings of the heart, troubling the loss of love and friendship, grieving a beloved brother's dying of AIDS, combating personal guilt, celebrating joy and dreams, and confront-