

childhood romp under “curls of leaf / And dusty light,” whereas the blank verse of “The Locomotive Song” records “hear[ing] the tremulous sound flower / and widen in moonshine” as the night train passes. The adult poems layer that innocence with loss. Despite the merry rhythm of “At the Glass Doors,” the “blazing” autumn moon has gone to “milkglass in the trees.” In the somber couplets of “Living in a Dead Friend’s House,” Claire grows from fearing ghosts to longing to “see a face at panes.”

Claire is an unresolved tale in images, and some of its loveliest poems fragment the book’s scheme. Among others, “Ellen Cameron White,” a haunting free verse narrative about the death of a woman’s fiancé, and “Arrowhead,” energetic couplets comparing a man’s farm to the sea, thrum with significance that never breaks the collection’s surface.

Nonetheless, there is much to admire in *Claire*—strong versification, sharp and interesting images, and a feminine voice whose negotiation of being human will invite readers to return to her songs again and again.



Early From the Dance.

David Payne.

Plume Books, 2003.

400 pages, \$14 (paperback).

Reviewed by Karen Trimbath

Fiction writers can have a hard time letting go of their stories after they are published; this reluctance to move on seems perfectly natural, for writers spend hours immersed in shaping an amorphous draft into something more elegant. Once they’ve reexamined the bound copy, though, their inner critics resurface. Given the chance, many writers seek perfection, no matter how elusive. In some instances, they come close to it. John Fowles was so bothered by the flaws (and there were many) of his 1965 version of *The Magus* that he went on to revise this tale of a surreal mind game played on a Greek island. His revisions resulted in a more masterful version twelve years later.

North Carolina native David Payne is another such author. Payne ended up revising his evocative novel of friendship and betrayal, *Early from the Dance*, which was originally published in 1989. In his preface to the Plume edition, he notes that he wanted to revisit this story to remove “paste [gems] and to leave as many pearls as possible.” By “paste,” he means excessive words and redundancies that prevented readers from fully entering his fictional world. A good rule of thumb for writers is that

revisions are called for when the mechanics are noticed more than the performance.

Payne’s work has certainly paid off, for *Early from the Dance* is a compelling read about Adam Jenrette, a self-described “prodigal son returned,” and the sassy Jane McCrae. Its pacing, taut language, and intensity are all marks of a storyteller fascinated by the mysteries of the human heart. He also conveys a strong sense of place through his details of rural and coastal North Carolina. Indeed, during a recent trip through this state, I imagined Payne’s characters living somewhere beyond the veil of Southern pines lining the highway. A good novel like this one can seem so real that it shapes how we view the world.

The story follows the conventions of traditional Southern literature (you know, wise black servants, family secrets, alcoholic parents, and colorful personalities with draws to match). For the most part, Payne is comfortable working within these conventions, which isn’t to say that this book is boring by any means. Perhaps working within this genre has allowed Payne the freedom to relax and create a richer narrative within a familiar framework.

Adam, thirty-one, is a well-known artist in New York City. He’s on a downward spiral fueled by too much cocaine and a cynical attitude. One day he gets a phone call and learns that his Aunt Zoe has died. She and other family members own Dixie Bags (a play on Dixie Cups, perhaps), which employs many people in Adam’s rural hometown of Killdeer, North Carolina. Aunt Zoe, a kind, strong woman, had bequeathed to Adam her mansion, which is badly in need of restoration.

So after some soul searching, he flies home for her funeral, during which we’re introduced to characters who once played important roles in his life. There’s Uncle Max, who once bopped Adam’s father on the head for writing a thinly fictionalized account about a family scandal. There’s Sadie Kinlaw, whose son Cary had been Adam’s best friend growing up (he committed suicide as a young man). And there’s Jane, Cary’s former girlfriend and recent divorcée. All of them are there to pay their last respects, and their presence elicits strong memories and emotions in Adam.

Sparks fly from the moment Adam and Jane get reacquainted at a cocktail dance. It’s been fourteen years since they’ve last seen each other. Payne switches effectively between their points of view throughout this novel. Adam’s is that of a transplanted Northerner who wants to forget his roots, whereas with Jane’s exudes pure Southern belle. Her realistic, school-of-hard-knocks attitude provides an effective counterbalance to Adam’s dreaminess; it’s clear that she’s come to terms with the past and wishes Adam would too. No wonder the chem-

istry between these two still remains strong.

Both of them describe how they met and what's happened to them as adults. We learn of the deep friendship that developed between Adam and Cary years ago. As opposites, they had complemented each other; Adam was the privileged rebel and Cary was the earnest good ol' boy. Then Jane entered the picture. She was beautiful, spirited, and, above all, ambivalent about her feelings for Cary. A love triangle inevitably formed during the summer after their high school graduation. The secret romance between Adam and Jane, once discovered, had destroyed the equilibrium of an old friendship and, it's suggested, Cary's will to live. It was this betrayal that drove Cary to kill himself, Adam believes.

Clearly, Adam's perceived betrayal of his friend and its tragic consequences still color the way he views himself, his love for Jane, and, most of all, where he came from. He can't move on without confronting this tragedy. Letting go involves rediscovering the place that he once called home and investigating the event that pushed him away. So he revisits the parts of town where he'd spent time with Cary, the ones that have remained frozen in his head like stations of the cross. A midnight visit to Cary's place in the woods shows the unexpected effects of time and neglect. "The whole scene was like a visit to a museum—a personal one, dedicated to my youth," he says.

The narrative's first third provides delicious romance and a comforting, if somewhat predictable, suspense. Then comes part two, "The Lost Colony." Here is where the story begins to transcend its genre. Told entirely from Adam's point of view, it's a bewitching account about the power of seduction. We go back in time to that fated summer when Adam and Jane fall in love. Adam recounts how he began working as a lifeguard near the Lost Colony, an elegant seaside resort. Soon he meets owners Cleanth Faison, a charismatic father figure, and Morgan Deal, a former lover who can't bring herself to leave.

Cleanth's power over Adam and Jane is substantial and involves a game that he calls "Life Poker." It's a game that Adam finds irresistible. "I felt myself slipping irrevocably into his unknown world, not unwillingly, though not so much because I wanted to or liked him either, but because the throttle was pressed down there," he recalls.

Strong parallels exist between this section, *The Magus* and, by extension, *The Tempest*, because all are about a hero who enters a mythical place ruled by a magical Prospero figure and his beautiful daughter. The Lost Colony—named after the settlement that vanished soon after its establishment in 1587 on Roanoke Island—is an American version of the island, a private space in which anything can happen.

I won't go into more detail, but suffice it to say that I

found this section quite gripping. Adam's and Jane's motivations are believable, and so are the events that draw them together.

The time comes when the young man must leave this island, usually for the wiser. Sometimes he wins his Miranda, sometimes not. Payne, to his great credit, makes us care about Adam's fate.



Sedition and Alchemy: A Biography of John Cale.

Tim Mitchell.

Peter Owen Publishers, 2003.

238 pages, \$29.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Douglas Russell

As one of the founding members of The Velvet Underground, a successful record producer, and a consistently daring solo artist, John Cale is a musician deserving of real attention. His VU counterpart, Lou Reed, has been the subject of several biographies, so it seems only fair that Cale finally receive the paper treatment.

Cale's is a life not easily distilled, but that isn't the only challenge facing his biographer. First, there's the trouble of maintaining interest in a subject who, though undeniably important to the history of rock, lacks the pop cachet of eminently bio-friendly figures like Kurt Cobain, Elvis—even Lou Reed. And in this case, there was that extra pressure on every biographer who knows his subject might never see another treatment.

Tim Mitchell does a fine job mapping the circuitous route Cale traveled from classical musician to rocker. Aaron Copland, Iannis Xenakis, and La Monte Young all played a personal role in his musical development, and Mitchell skillfully traces how that training influenced Cale's subsequent work. Cale is a musician who travels freely between the high and low, across a normally closed border guarded by the worst kind of culture police. This is the meat of Cale's story, and Mitchell keeps his teeth in it.

But despite its fascinating subject, *Sedition and Alchemy* has a difficult time sustaining the energy necessary to keep readers engaged. The biography presents a wealth of detail about Cale's life, but his personality somehow gets lost in the mix. It's a shame given the seeming ease in which Mitchell profiles the eccentric members of Cale's motley posse (Warhol, Reed, Nico, Eno). Cynics might be quick to identify here the potential for self-censorship whenever biography is produced "in full cooperation" with the subject.

No doubt possessed by free-associative spirit of Sur-