

during which he humiliates Brand, locks them in enmity; 15-year-old orphan Lily Viner is the innocent catalyst who influences their fates. The paradox for Lily—and for the reader—is that King is the man who wins her—and our—sympathy; the hard-boiled outlaw is rendered vulnerable by the spirited, courageous teenager, for poignant reasons that gradually come to light. King vows to take care of Lily and to marry the indomitable Mexican widow Serafa, and he's even willing to give up a life of crime to protect them both. Meanwhile, however, he is embroiled in the machinations of another class of robbers—the bankers and real estate men who stand to profit from the railroad and who engage in every kind of chicanery to make sure no one gets in their way. Impetuous, unsophisticated Lily is a wonderful creation; her typically adolescent confusion and her love of reading are endearing characteristics. Plenty of rough and tumble action, a fine evocation of the various ethnic and social classes who settled the West and the punch of an ironic ending add up to irresistible storytelling. (Nov.)

THE ISLAND

David Borofka. MacMurray & Beck,
\$19.50 (218p) ISBN 1-878448-78-1

The title of this gentle though occasionally hackneyed coming-of-age tale refers not to a geographic place but to an eccentric Portland, Ore., household whose insularity acts as midwife to the awakening of 14-year-old Fish Becker. It is 1968, and Fish's parents have sent him to live with family friends, the Lamberts, while they go to Germany for the summer "in lieu of a divorce." At the Lamberts' ramshackle mansion, Fish experiments sexually with a neighbor girl whose breath smells of "whiskey... grape gum, onion and garlic and pepperoni," while the Lamberts' daughter tries to lure him away with more occult concerns, including Ouija boards and open graves. Behind Fish's tale of abandonment and self-realization lies the tangled history of the Beckers and the Lamberts—particularly the rivalry between Messrs. Becker and Lambert, which is finally resolved by their sons. Borofka (*Hints of His Mortality*) pads this slender first novel with such magic-realist touches as circular time, dreams and recurring images (births in transit, train wrecks and submersion in water). The book, because of the paradoxical effect of too much background in too few pages, is thin in places; but at their best, Borofka's vivid, humble word-pictures ("A used Trojan drooped off the edge of the ice-chest like a Dali clock") resonate and linger in the reader's mind. (Nov.)

THE SERPENTINE CAVE

Jill Paton Walsh. St. Martin's, \$20.95
(224p) ISBN 0-312-16999-X

Booker-finalist Walsh's (*Knowledge of Angels*) engaging novel of sensibility winds through the labyrinth of one woman's emotional self-discovery (and a bit of British history) on the way to its rather tidy conclusion. When Marian Easton's artist mother, Stella, dies of a stroke, Marian must settle her affairs. Armed only with some of Stella's paintings and her own fragmented, bitter memories of a nomadic and bohemian childhood, Marian aims to unravel her past and look for the identity of the father she never knew. Her quest leads her to the coastal fishing village and artists' colony of St. Ives, where Stella enjoyed her greatest professional success—and where she inadvertently affected the outcome of the town's historic lifeboat disaster in 1939. Gradually, Marian's discoveries about her eccentric mother fill her with deep regret—and a strong resolve not to repeat her mother's mistakes with her own adult children. Walsh bathes this contemporary tale in dreamy, evocative descriptions of her native Britain, past and present; but, in her attempts to put the true story of 1939 to service as fiction, she sacrifices potentially interesting characters to the exigencies of plotting. (Nov.)

THE BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES 1997

Selected by E. Annie Proulx; Katrina Kenison, series editor. Houghton Mifflin, \$25 (348p) ISBN 0-395-79866-3;
\$13 paper -65-5

Although guest editor Proulx has arranged this year's 21 stories—as if for a high-school textbook—in thematic clusters ("Perceived Social Values," "Rites of Passage," etc.), what really distinguishes the collection is the sly sense of humor to be found in many of its offerings. Richard Bausch's surreal "Nobody in Hollywood" displays a madcap comedy that serves this usually more restrained writer well, while Cynthia Ozick's "Save My Child!" gives a wry glimpse at the cultural misunderstandings between a retired New York lawyer (Ozick's redoubtable Puttermesser) and the materialistic young Russian cousin who comes for a visit and takes over her apartment. Tim Gautreaux's "Little Frogs in a Ditch," in which a shiftless young man plans to sell garden variety pigeons as homing pigeons, also draws a surprising amount of wisdom from its comic premise. But the best pieces here are, perhaps, the darkest: Robert Stone's "Under the Pitons," about an uneasy band of drug smugglers aboard a boat, and T. Coraghessan Boyle's sur-

prisingly bleak and genuinely shocking "Killing Babies," which portrays a recovering crackhead's violent confrontation with anti-abortion protesters. Although not every story here lives up to its author's reputation, Proulx has proved herself an eclectic reader and has followed in the tradition of earlier editors, assembling fine recent work from the most talked-about practitioners of the form. (Nov.)

PRIZE STORIES 1997:

The O. Henry Awards

Edited by Larry Dark. Anchor, \$11
paper (474p) ISBN 0-835-48361-9

It is encouraging that the best of *The Best American Short Stories of 1997* (see review above) don't even make it into the 50 Honorable Mentions of this year's O. Henry Prize. Occasionally overshadowed in the public imagination, the (79-year-old) younger of the two major annual collections—published, for the first time, in fall instead of spring—is at least as good as its older (82-year-old) sibling: clearly, there's more than enough exciting, original short-story-writing to go around. Ranked by three prominent authors (another first) from a pool selected by Dark, the first new editor in 30 years, these 20 stories are an impressively varied, almost uniformly strong bunch. Indeed, many readers will enjoy the luxury of second-guessing judges David Foster Wallace, Louise Erdrich and Thom Jones, as runners-up from literary grandparents John Barth and Alice Munro—and relative newcomers Matthew Klam and Rick Moody—stand up valiantly against prize-winners by Mary Gordon, George Saunders, Carol Shields and Lee K. Albott. In Barth's "On with the Story," a harried, lonely divorcee on an airplane picks up a magazine story that closely describes her plight—then discovers that she's sitting next to the author. In Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman," a middle-aged nurse in a small Canadian town of the 1940s hears the last confession, and must share the guilt of the woman whose husband she secretly loves. In Klam's wonderfully mordant "The Royal Palms," a troubled husband and wife get a sexual jumpstart from the attractive young couple they meet at a Caribbean resort. And in Moody's very moving "Demonology," a man reconstructs the events that led to his sister's sudden death. Of course, it's all in the telling—and other readers will have other favorites. For once, though, none will come away disappointed. (Oct.)

PINK

Gus Van Sant. Doubleday/Talese,
\$21.95 (260p) ISBN 0-385-48828-9

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