



Being blinded by the sun

Face to the Sun
by Geoffrey Household
Penguin, \$22.95

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

LATIN AMERICA HAS served as the "real-life" setting for many fine works of English-language fiction. Styles of effective representation, like the region itself, vary enormously, from dark to light and all shades between. Novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, and Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise* are more sombre in tone, more ambitious in scope than, say, the playfulness that percolates through O. Henry's *Cabbages and Kings* or the black humor that Graham Greene sustains throughout *Our Man in Havana*.

While writers from Latin America, foremost among whom rank Jorge Amado, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa, have produced memorable, indeed classic tales about their lands and peoples, all too often this literature (even when available in translation) is overlooked or neglected by the English-reading public. Foreign, non-Latin minds, it seems safe to conclude, will continue to play a major role in packaging the south for northern consumption. The question is: can these foreign, non-Latin minds be trusted?

In the case of *Face to the Sun*, the answer is decidedly in the negative, for Geoffrey Household presents us with a lamentable portrayal of political turmoil in an imaginary Latin American country he calls Malpelo, a portrayal suffused with clichés, inhabited by stereotypes, and cast, ultimately, in objectionable disregard of a discerning, interested audience.

Household's plot revolves around the adventures of an Englishman named Edmond Hawkins, a direct descendant "on the wrong side of the blanket" of the "great admiral" of centuries ago. "Splendid," Sir Hector McMurtrie —

"the sort of highly intelligent Scot who adopted the imperturbability of English convention" — declares early on to our worldly hero, "It's time there was another Hawkins to raise hell on the Spanish Main."

The men fly to Malpelo to return a golden icon known as the PUNCHAO del Dia, inadvertently stolen by Hawkins as part of the "swag" snatched by him when he relieves Malpelo's first lady, on a visit to Harrods, of her crocodile handbag. On arrival in Malpelo, Hawkins discovers that both sides engaged in a bloody civil war, the dictator Cayetano Heredia and the insurgent Retadores fighting to overthrow him, consider possession of the PUNCHAO del Dia crucial for the attainment of victory, for the artifact is known to have mystical, supernatural powers.

We follow Hawkins, a latter-day Flashman without the flash that George M. Fraser manages to create in his fictitious rogue, through countless scrapes, imprisonment, torture, rights, wrongs, and (finally) triumph. And, of course, he even wins the love of the beautiful revolutionary, Teresa, who pledges to Hawkins that she can "ride or march forever so long as you are by my side." Honest, folks, that's really what Teresa says and that's how the book ends.

A writer must surely decide, even at the outset of a project, what texture the finished product ideally will have, and thus at what different levels imagination and intellect might be expected to work. Household, in this book, seems unable to choose between thriller and farce, suspense and melodrama, action and atmosphere. Fans of his may worry that a once-fruitful talent has gone to seed, for he just does not deliver. And seldom has Latin America, truly a realm of inspiration and wonder, been so poorly observed, so superficially recorded by one who earns his bread by the pen. □

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Notebook By Larry Scanlan

NOT SO, SAYS Margaret Atwood. CBC-Radio had broadcast an item earlier this week suggesting that the Canadian author had signed a deal with her new American publisher, Doubleday, which would gain her a \$2-million advance on her next two novels.

"It's wrong," she said Thursday from her Toronto home. "It sounds like gossip picked up in a bar." Atwood has written a stiff letter to the CBC demanding a retraction. She does concede that she is close to signing an American rights deal with Doubleday, but for American rights only, and specifics of the deal remain confidential: "I never discuss money. My parents brought me up to believe that money is your own private business." Doubleday in New York was similarly tight-lipped: "The CBC never confirmed it with us. We never release details of contracts with authors," said a Doubleday official. The announcement was embarrassing to both the author and her Canadian publisher, McClelland & Stewart, which remains her Canadian publisher.

Atwood recently switched from Simon & Schuster to Doubleday in the U.S. when her editor Nan Talese moved from the former to the latter publishing house.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE is being touted as the favorite to win the Trillium Book Award, a \$10,000 annual (and bilingual) literary prize offered for the first time this year by the Ontario government's ministry of culture and communications. The award is to be announced Tuesday.

Ondaatje, nominated for *In the Skin of a Lion*, was also nominated for the Governor General's Award and was a contender for the Paris-Hemingway prize. He failed to win the former and no winner was declared in the latter category. But he did win the literary prize offered annually by the City of Toronto.

Four fiction and three non-fiction books are competing for the Trillium Award. They include *Language, School-*

ing and Conflict: The Origins of the French Language Controversy, by Chad Gaffield, published by McGill-Queen's University Press; *False Face*, adolescent fiction by Welwyn Witon Katz; *Behind Closed Doors: How the Rich Won Control of Canada's Tax System ... and Ended Up Richer*, by Linda McQuaig; *First Stage: The Making of the Stratford Festival*, by Tom Patterson and Allan Gould; *L'Oubansawin*, by Daniel Poliquin; and *King Leary*, by Paul Quarrington.

Quarrington's book, based loosely on the life of hockey personality King Clancy, earlier this week won him the Stephen Leacock Award for Humor. He had been nominated two other times for the prize, once for a memorable book called *Home Game*, once for a much less memorable book called *The Life of Hope*.

The Toronto author takes home \$3,500 and a silver medal.

BRONWEN WALLACE has been nominated for the Lowther Memorial Award, which she also won in 1984. The prize, offered through the League of Canadian Poets, honors the best work of poetry published by a woman in the preceding year. Gay Allison, Judith Fitzgerald, Gwendolyn MacEwen and Sharon Thesen are the other contenders. The prize will be announced next Saturday.

LIKE VANCOUVER'S Douglas & McIntyre and a number of other such publishing houses, Fifth House, of Saskatoon, is trying to create a national constituency while retaining its regional base.

The latest part of the plan is *Best Canadian Essays 1988*, a selection to be drawn from magazines and journals nationwide. It will appear next February, with the volume for calendar 1989 to follow in February 1990, and so on. The editor is Douglas Fetherling.

Writers, magazine editors, and readers may send essays for consideration to Box 1508, Kingston K7L 5C7. While submissions can't be acknowledged or returned, those chosen will of course be



Margaret Atwood: A CanLit millionaire? Not so, she says