Books in Canada—The Canadian Review of Books, January/February 2004), Vol. 33, No. 1, pp. 7-8.

"A Man Meets a Woman"

Actress in the House
Joseph McElroy
The Overlook Press
432 pages, $40.00 cloth
ISBN: 1585673501

by Jeff Bursey

Certain US novelists regard Joseph McElroy (b. 1930) as a writer on par with DeLillo and Pynchon, but his works are crafted in a style that demands careful reading, which keeps his readership small. His hopes for the possibilities within the novel form are best exemplified in the nearly 1,200-page *Women and Men* (1987), wherein the themes—e.g., those who never meet are connected, daily life doesn't occur in chronological order or in one place—unfortunately are overwhelmed by the relentlessness of his aesthetic pursuit. The stories he wants to tell are almost to the side of how to tell them. However, without such assays, how would the novel progress, and from whom would new writers derive encouragement? Words McElroy wrote in tribute of another novelist can be applied to him: "A difficult act to follow in a market where distinction is difficult for some people to swallow." Safe routes through the midlands can be left to writers like Jonathan Franzen.

Though it deals with preoccupations familiar from *Women and Men*, *Actress in the House* is more readily accessible. Bill Daley, a lawyer in his fifties, meets Becca Lang, a Canadian actress in her twenties, after they speak on the telephone. He introduces himself when her play finishes for the night. They talk about the history of the streets of New York as they walk them, and soon the scene changes to the lawyer's home. Daley is already attracted to her, as their first meeting reveals:

> Daley said he'd been one act too late, he'd started to come back at the intermission. "I came back because I thought you were in trouble. Just a thought I had. I thought you were going to get hurt. I didn't know."
>
> "How bizarre—you came backstage because you thought I was in trouble?" She made a sound. She still didn't know him.
>
> "I was an act too late," he said.
>
> "How dear," she murmured, he could hear her. It didn't sound right. Maybe it did. "And you were looking to come to my assistance backstage?" Becca said, older again for a moment, amiable as a woman can be, identifying him, sounding not quite American. "With a couple of Band-Aids and a Tampax?"
>
> "It was when you got hit."
>
> "You liked it. *Barry* said, but I didn't believe him."
>
> "I should introduce myself," Daley said.
>
> The woman before him blinked. She clapped her hands. "Oh Mr. *Daley*, what're *you* doing here?" What a clap it was, how it came back from all corners

> bringing the whole place with it solid to his ears, encompassing some common old process, walls, pillars, dry goods and storage, some old oil or methyl of wide, wooden stairs, work, tall unwasteful windows, twine, use, but a thought he was having.

That passage contains sweetness and unease. Daley may not be in time to help Becca escape further violence, while the sound of her delighted handclap could be as ominous as thunder. Becca's nature, heightened by artifice, encourages Daley to imagine, or perceive, that she can shift in time and travel across space, but the ramifications of this are unclear. Possessing the gift of 'quick hypothesis,' Daley assesses surroundings and actions to extrapolate what may happen. The complexities of relationships is carefully shown in this short scene. Through multifaceted language describing everyday situations, McElroy illuminates how people build tentative connections amidst echoes from the past and prophetic visions of the future.

It is no small thing for a novelist to capture the thrill and at-sea aspect of the start of a love affair. The dense writing style—fashioning nonlinear works, deploying reveries and seemingly tangential episodes, using spatial dislocations—incorporates material from various fields (geology, engineering, the law, acting), not because McElroy wants to be difficult or to parade knowledge, but because linearity is inaccurate when portraying the multiplicity of a person's daily life. Twisting sentences throw one back several pages to re-check an item or to see who is being spoken about. Unlike Pynchon, who /**8**/ favours systems, or DeLillo, who mines the conspiracy vein, McElroy constantly studies how people process—it's doubtful that word appears by accident in the quotation above—the raw information that, so to speak, constitutes their lives. Consequently, he expects readers to process *Actress in the House* as they read.

Following Becca and Daley, and those involved in their lives, is like tracing the butterfly effect before, during and after. It's a sign of McElroy's skill, as well as an indication of the affection one feels for the main characters, that the genial narrative, which begins by observing an action and its effects on Daley, merges strands of thought so neatly that one feels the voice is almost a second person plural incorporating the reader. The fairness exhibited to every character is one example of the humanity manifestly on display in *Actress in the House*. McElroy again demonstrates that he is a writer whose works require close attention, and that his literary achievement, arrived at through hard work, compels respect, and admiration for not taking an overworn path. Overlook deserves credit for reissuing two of his earlier novels in paperback: *A Smuggler's Bible* from 1966 ($23.95; ISBN 158567351X) and *Lookout Cartridge* ($25.50; ISBN 1585673528) from 1974.