

Raymond Queneau. *We Always Treat Women Too Well*. Trans. Barbara Wright. Foreword Valerie Caton. Intro. John Updike. Foreword Valerie Caton. New York Review Books, 2003. 169 pp. Paper: \$12.95; *Witch Grass*. Trans. and intro. Barbara Wright. New York Review Books, 2003. 313 pp. Paper: \$14.00

If you'd like fries with your philosophy, then *Witch Grass* is an excellent place to go. The delight Queneau (1903-1976) took in transposing Descartes into spoken French leaps off the page, and the result of his efforts is an hilarious novel of ideas and social manners, with metafiction present as well. *Witch Grass* is packed with acute observances of domestic situations, crackling and believable dialogue, intrigues concocted in a chip shop, a mystery surrounding a blue door, evidence of how a caricature can metamorphose into an entity, and discussions about being and non-being. A blurb on the back cover of this edition suggests that Queneau's world could be menacing, but this pays insufficient attention to a saving humour, which was always genial, though never toothless. It is displayed in intricate wordplay, flat or sharp one-liners, repetition of lines and situations, and the formal effects he is perhaps best known for (see *Exercises in Style*, one of his most popular books). Pierre declares that he is observing a man. Asked whether he's a novelist, Pierre replies, "No. Character." In the Queneau world this appears unremarkable. Philosophical concerns are presented on a variety of planes, but with a light touch that neatly transforms them into good-humoured fiction that provokes thought. The weight of the work is never too much on one side or another, and the apparent digressions always lead back to the main body of the novel.

/125/ *We Always Treat Women Too Well*, an altogether different work, employs some of the same devices: repetition, wordplay, offbeat humour. Set in Dublin during the 1916 uprising, this cartoon of Irish rebels—their names lifted freely from Joyce's *Ulysses*—was published in 1947 under a pseudonym, "Sally Mara." It may now find more admirers of its sensibility than it did on its first appearance. Written in protest at the enthusiasm present in France for black humour and gangster novels, the novel is filled with graphic violence and sexual scenes that never attempt to be cathartic or prurient. Because of its content, the status of *We Always Treat Women Too Well* in Queneau's oeuvre has been disputed. Inadvertently, such an argument is continued in this edition by the inclusion of two introductory essays aimed at establishing the novel's importance. Updike is subtly patronizing; Caton gives away the plot completely. A full enjoyment of the novel's antics and purposes is best achieved by reading the text without benefit of these commentators. Wright's notes here, as in *Witch Grass*, prove sufficient introduction, and she is as respectful in these as she is in her excellent translations.