

histiocytes pass through the capillary wall in diapedesis," and in the same tale the doctor recounts that "the grace of Martha, a shapely blonde whose young body was as fragrant as the plains she came from, lent an idyllic atmosphere to the hours I spent at work. My wife for her part provided me with the cosy and undemanding love of the perfect conjugal relationship." Mills and Boon, all is forgiven. I do not know who is to blame—the original doctor who described the tale, Pressburger who summarised, or Spence who translated. In any case, they should all be persuaded from supplying us with more of the same.

The Law of White Spaces. G Pressburger. Translated by P Spence. (Pp 172; £12.99.) London: Granta Books/Penguin, 1992. ISBN 0-14-014221-5.

Unsound and furious

Ian Robertson

It was not until the last two pages of *Strange Malady* by Alison Anthony that the thread of credibility finally snapped. Gail, psychiatric nurse heroine, is newly healed by psychotherapy. She is released from her own hospital, where she has been committed after a nervous breakdown having endured numerous suicides, deaths, and bereavements, not to mention desertion by her husband. Just as she is cheering up, she is pushed into a gorge on a whim by a stranger—a recently demoted insurance salesman irritated by the smile on her face. Our heroine is then eaten by rats in the gully. Gothic, eh?

The first two pages of the book caused my heart to sink just as the last two did. In between, the book consists largely of great chunks of inert narrations by Gail to her therapist, Rose. The middle of the book should therefore have been as awful as its beginning and end, while in fact it was annoyingly gripping. I was annoyed to be gripped by Anthony's terse and witty writing style because the underlying shrillness of the writing, which probably gives the book its energy, is in the end unmasked as mere self indulgent melodrama.

Or is it? Anthony's is as unique a perspective on mental health and its treatment as I have read. Only a good writer could make you smell the bed sores and urine of the back wards yet keep you reading. She catches the atmosphere of nervy incestuousness in a big psychiatric hospital precisely and is good at conveying the anguish wrought by dementia, depression, and schizophrenia on relatives and sufferers alike: psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses would be well advised to read it.

Anthony clearly aspires to more than readable textbooks for colleges of nursing, however. It is not only the underclass of the mentally ill that she explores: she tries, at times successfully, to describe the underclass of the long term unemployed and is a good deal more readable than, for instance, George Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in doing so. But Orwell had judgment, deftness of touch, and, above all, credibility. He may have been angry but he was never hysterical. The same cannot, unfortunately, be said for Alison Anthony.

Two of the heroine's most detested villains are punished by contracting AIDS. These are a London journalist condemned for voyeurism among the northern underclasses and a local boy stockbroker-property de-

veloper convicted of self seeking materialism. Pretty unsound stuff in an author who judges humankind within a very narrow ideological waveband. Such facile devices unfortunately pervade the book. I dislike what happened to Britain in the 'eighties as much as Anthony apparently does, but diatribe has no part to play in a proper novel unless it is part of the dramatic action.

And that is the nub of it—this is not really a novel. The publisher's blurb describes it as "a series of poignant vignettes." I would not argue with that.

Strange Malady. A Anthony. (Pp 279; £9.99.) London: Heinemann, 1992. ISBN 0-434-02324-8.

Meanings beyond medicine

Jonathan Cole

Focusing on flesh, be it dead, desired, or dolphin, the 13 pieces in *Granta's* collection approach the body from cultural and artistic aspects rather than from our more familiar medical one.

The most powerful essays concern torture, that crudest admission of intellectual and moral defeat. Anchee Min's beautifully written piece is set in a female commune in Mao's China. A girl is caught having intercourse in a field. She is made to admit rape, for making love is forbidden. The man is killed while she is "corrected," to be returned physically broken and mentally destroyed as an encouragement to the others. John Conroy describes what the European Court of Human Rights called the "inhuman and degrading treatment" inflicted in our name in the internments of Northern Ireland.

There are three photoessays, one on springtime displays of sexuality on an American beach, another on physical freaks displaced from society and roaming the States in a sideshow. The most powerful photo, however, prefaces Michael Dibdin's "The Pathology Lesson." Dibdin describes the way the dead have become hidden from public gaze since the last century. A worn out and cancerous cadaver is contrasted with the literal waste of a body by a female suicide. The photo shows a feminine woman lying on her back, eyes closed with one arm above her head. She is naked but for the coarse stitches which, in closing her cadaver, trace a Y across her chest.

Abraham Verghese meditates on the pleasure of auscultation and on the ineloquence of medicine when faced with the incurable. Todd McEwen describes how a mother's glaucoma blights a young boy's childhood, making him interpret all in its shadow. For Giorgio Pressburger teeth



Looking for our heroine?

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