

The whole book is worth reading by all those who are concerned about the present situation in Africa in general, and our country in particular. Living under siege, as the various racial groups are doing in South Africa today, we can never make a significant contribution to a South Africa of the future. We need to liberate ourselves, and in so doing, allow others to achieve their liberation. They are essays written by an articulate and sincere man of Africa and he presents several challenges of great relevance to our situation. The essay on universities is particularly important, not only for those whites who feel called to help the "poor blacks" by going to teach at the government ethnic universities but also because of the great need in this country to answer honestly the question: "What is truth?"

Manyanyi's book is well researched and painstakingly compiled. It is bound to rouse strong feelings especially among those well meaning whites who do a lot of "good work" but without reference to the "poor blacks" they mean to help.

The book is published by Ravan Press 1977 and runs into 106 pages, so one does not need to take the whole week reading it. It is not the sort of book one can describe as spell-binding, because it touches on so many important matters that are thorns in the flesh of race relations, not only in this country but throughout the world where blacks live with whites. □

# THE CELIBACY OF FELIX GREENSPAN

(Lionel Abrahams : Bateleur Press)

Reviewed by Tony Voss

Reading this book evoked in me a variety of responses: curiosity, amusement, anger, frustration, some admiration. Let me try to explain.

The book is described on the title page as "a novel in 18 stories": I don't think this device works. It leads to some narrative repetition and to one or two awkward moments when the author has to remind the reader of what has gone before. Since each story can focus only one relationship, if that's the right word, one doesn't consistently get from the book that sense of varied ongoing life, that sense of the reality of others that we get from some novelists.

But the book does have one theme, even if it doesn't have one plot: and that theme is the growth, or rather the struggle to selfhood of its hero. Felix (nobody ever calls him Mr Greenspan) is the spastic son of middle-class Jewish parents, offspring of the diaspora and the suburbs of Johannesburg. Educated at home and in homes, at special schools and at the University of the Witwatersrand, he struggles for mastery over his disabilities, for knowledge and experience. The personality of Felix Greenspan emerges as a product of achievement rather than organic growth.

This is a romantic book: the picaresque account of a sensibility rather than a character. The determinants of Felix's personality seem to have been born with him: his physical disability, his Jewishness, his South Africanness, yet, particularly in the second half of the book, but effectively from the second story ('Adventure One'), Felix is consciously voracious for experience, his sensibility taking into itself everything that his life has to offer. In my view, partly because of the nature of the subject-matter, the third-person narration was a mistake — it maintains a sense of detachment, Felix is observed throughout rather than identified with. To read constantly about Felix as 'he' when he is the only 'I' in the book is a strain, but presumably the author consciously chose this alternative.

**The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan** is an ironic and metaphorical title, since a lot of the hero's energy and time

goes into the pursuit of love and sex. What we have is a portrait of a singular young man as writer and as lover — in a way that is unusual in South African novels of this kind, there is virtually no concern with the young man as citizen. In this respect the mode of the book is lyrical rather than narrative. As far as I could tell the South Africanness of the hero is only intermittently of material significance. As Felix is emerging from the end of his first consummated love affair:

A girl walked past him . . . A hopeless pang told him that he was re-entering desire, the prison in which he had lain, and certainly would again, an incorrigible fool of a detainee, at the mercy of unreachable girl after girl. (p. 128)

Perhaps that word "detainee" betrays the South African idiom of the book, but it is used here with no consciousness of the irony of its political reference. In the story called 'London', Felix is asked for his signature as a pledge "for a boycott against apartheid". "How can I" he replies "if I'm going back?" The South African setting is most poignantly obtrusive when fear causes Felix to break off his relationship with a black woman ("he had forgotten her name!") with whom he has found "the completest lovemaking, body to body . . . that he had ever experienced."

Each of the two longest stories is concerned with Felix's relationship with one of his teachers. Skipper Ross, supervisor of the Home where Felix is an inmate, preaches the gospel of perfection:

You have to overcome the limitations of your self and supersede your passions. That is the road to perfection.

But in the story called 'Perfection' Felix admits to himself that he cannot live up to Skipper's hopes. Felix's other teacher is Johan de Waal ("wellknown South African author" — a portrait of Bosman?), who is the artist rather than the preacher — the exponent of discipline and accommodation rather than transcendence.

"If the muse flirts with you in Newtown, you must be glad, even if she plays hard to get in Kensington. If she's kind to you in Newtown — Newtown, you know? — then she's interested in you. And if she spurns you in Kensington, that's all right. She wants you to get to know something about her."

But the story "Knowledge" ends with the deaths of both Mr de Waal and Felix's friend and fellow-spastic, Edwin. And from his first knowledge of death and art, Felix moves in the next story, "The Moment", to his first carnal knowledge.

In the last story "Invisible Worm" Felix's relationship with Lucilla, a relationship into which he has put all his patience and devotion, and which may be approaching marriage, is suspended in his realisation that she is "like my sister". In the final moments of the book he has turned to a woman with whom his "literary business" has brought him into correspondence, and who has agreed to let him write to her "with a total openness". **The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan** ends:

On the second of January he wrote to Veronica Steen, 'Thank you for accepting me. Now I'll open to you, my woman, my secret love, my joy . . .'

For Felix Greenspan, writing and sex, if not art and love, have come together.

(But somehow, all the relationships are unsatisfying — figures tend to come and go with no sense that they have a life and individuality independent of their part in the life of Felix Greenspan.)

The book ends in suspense, but looking forward.

For my money, the childhood episodes of the book are the best: although there is some nice wit and humour in the adult episodes too. Perhaps the narrative technique and Mr Abraham's sometimes archaic style suit the world of childhood better. It is difficult to maintain the kind of detachment required to respond to the slightly ingenuous note by the author that the "book is fictional and is not meant to be read as an account of real people or occurrences." In the later stories the autobiographical pressure seems particularly heavy.

In the end Felix maintains his celibacy: it isn't just that he isn't married, but that he has not achieved a relationship of lasting communion. Is it a peculiarly South African phenomenon that so many relationships that look like love turn out to be something else? Felix's black mistress is a client in the end: his spiritual lover may as well be his sister.

Read it. See what you think. □

## a child's guide to politics

by Nigel Gray

Reprinted from Peace News 15 July 1977.

I was out walking  
the other night  
alone in the forest  
and I got such a fright  
I heard a scuffle  
and then a yowl  
and I saw a mouse  
grabbed by an owl  
well my feet took root  
like weeds in the ground  
I should have said something  
but I made no sound  
I just stared at the mouse  
blood wept from its head  
like that runny honey  
that slides off your bread  
I should have done something  
but what could I do  
invite a bite from a bloody great owl  
well I mean  
would you?