

## Review articles & reviews / Critiques et comptes rendus

### EXCELLENT ALCHEMY



**Redwork.** Michael Bedard. Lester and Orpen Denys, 1990. 261 pp., \$18.95 cloth, paper. ISBN 0-88619-276-5, 0-88619-278-1.

"Raven's head", "peacock's tail", and "redwork"; these are the three stages in the alchemist's progress toward the philosopher's stone: the black of death and decay, from which the colours of new creation swirl, to bring, if one is patient and vigilant and delicate enough, "perfection out of imperfection, wholeness out of want, to coax gold from lead, to draw life even from the jaws of death" (223). The terms also signify the divisions in Michael Bedard's excellent new novel *Redwork*, and provide a frame-

work for the stages of Cass Parry and Maddy Harrington's relationships, first with each other in opposition to the streetwise world of Sid Spector and the exploitative world of Fischer at the theatre where they work, and second with Mr. Magnus the reputed neighbourhood "witch". There is simply too much that is good here to cover in a review. Some highlights: Cass's ushering job in the local rundown "classics" moviehouse has the odour of experience. Bedard symbolically telescopes the superficial world of "getting and spending" into a manageable compass against which to paint the richer portrait of Cass and Maddy's tentative steps into the deeper world of Mr. Magnus the alchemist.

Bedard's depiction of the over-90 year old Arthur Magnus – whose upper apartment Cass and his mother have rented – is remarkable for its non-sentimental empathy. Magnus has become a recluse; the furniture, clothing, mementoes, memories, and detritus of a long life have settled around him and literally filled his house. He travels on paths through the chaos: from bedroom, to kitchen, to garage where he conducts his "work", and back again. As readers we enter Mr. Magnus's life alongside Cass and Maddy, gradually overcome his suspicion, brush off his embarrassment at the state of his home, and begin the work of relationship, which is also recovery work, bringing him back to life as the chaos is cleared. Bedard acknowledges "his debt to the words and wisdom of the older people whose personal histories appear in the pages of Ronald Blythe's *The view in winter*," and certainly Arthur Magnus has an authentic-

ity that is welcome in a genre which can easily present the elderly as relics to be bypassed, or as stock sympathizers, in league with youth against repressive parents. Bedard breaks the stereotypes and makes us encounter Arthur Magnus, a man, who happens to be very old.

Though ostensibly a young adult novel – Cass and Maddy are about fifteen – the subtlety of Bedard's handling of relationships represents a maturity missing in a great deal of adult fiction, not to speak of the plethora of superficiality aimed at teens. Michael Bedard is worth reading.

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## A FINE BEGINNING

**The survival squad.** Floyd Priddle. Breakwater Books, 1990. 200 pp., \$9.95 paper. ISBN 0-920911-45-5.

One thing is certain: Floyd Priddle, a seventeen-year-old Newfoundland student, has begun his writing career with audacity, tackling a subject – the often vicious survival techniques of a group of teenagers following a nuclear holocaust – which many more-seasoned novelists would shun. When a novel is set in the distant future or is pure fantasy the author has greater leeway in his/her portrayal of the "secondary world" being created. A novel set in the near future (in the real world) must balance the real and the imagined, for the world itself (in terms of ideas and attitudes) will not have changed a great deal. So, given these considerations, how does Priddle fare?

As far as believability is concerned, Priddle is to be commended. The post-holocaust world he creates seems convincing enough, mainly because he concentrates on the efforts of his teenage survivors to stay alive and does not try to describe in minute detail the physical effects of the nuclear devastation. There are, to be sure, some seeming implausibilities – such as the ready-made shelter – but since one has to maintain that "willing suspension of disbelief" for most futuristic novels, one can accept Priddle's imagined world of 1997 as a reasonable facsimile of what the real world might be like following such a catastrophe.

As a storyteller, Priddle also deserves praise. He has a very good ear for teenage conversation (as well he should), knows how to maintain a steady story-telling pace (sustaining reader interest), and provides plenty of challenges for his protagonists (which should keep his teenage readers engaged). This does indeed seem like the kind of novel teenage readers would enjoy. Though, even for them, the following criticisms might cause some concern.

The weakest aspect of this novel is its sheer length. What has taken Priddle two hundred pages to describe could have been more succinctly (and as effec-