

ARIEL BOOK NEWS

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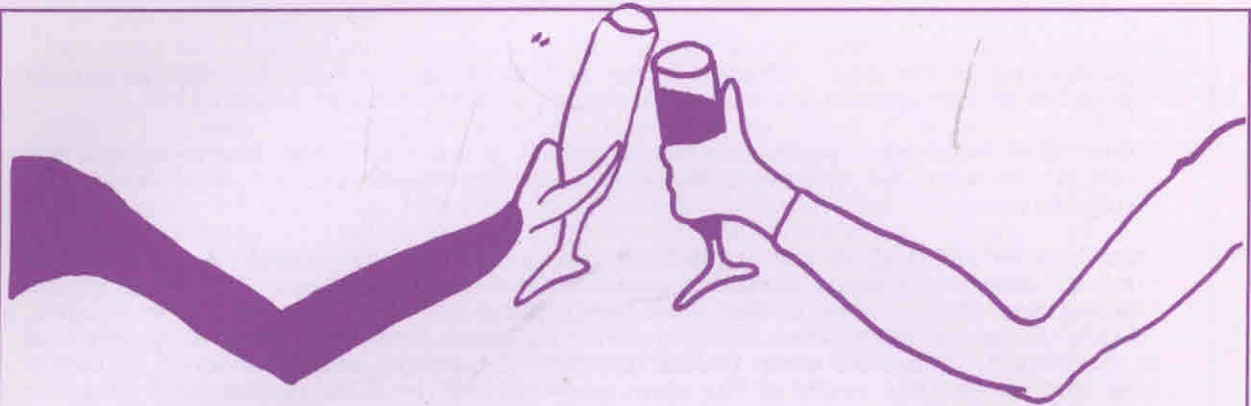
ARIEL BOOK NEWS is a new monthly publication for buyers and browsers of ARIEL bookshop◊

Each month we will carry news of new releases, notes on selected books, a page devoted to art books, a listing of available stock and a feature. In this first issue we discuss *Travels in Hyperreality*, a book of essays by Umberto Eco, author of *The Name of The Rose*.

In the future we will have interviews with authors and special topic issues. Next month we will feature Sydney writers, and future issues will be devoted to travel books and biography. ARIEL BOOK NEWS will carry bookshop news, exhibitions and new developments. For example, the bookshop plans to carry more periodicals such as *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York Review of Books*.

And this month, Ariel Bookshop Gallery carries an exhibition of photographs by Ted Kroiter. We're at 42 Oxford St, Paddington, open 7 days 10am - midnight.

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I met MARTIN JOHNSON to talk about Umberto Eco's *Travels in Hyperreality*.

ARIEL: This book of essays was originally called *Faith in Fakes*. It's now called *Travels in Hyperreality*. That of course is from the essay on Eco's travels in America where he visits wax museums and holograms and imitation European art museums that are "improvements" on the real thing. I wonder if "fakes" suggests a poor imitation of reality, whereas "hyperreality" suggests a heightened or improved version.

MARTIN JOHNSON: I was very interested in the fact there was a change in title. "Faith in Fakes" was a misleading title - the book is not about art fakery. There is a strange link with surrealism. In Greek its not called "surrealismos", its called "Hperrealismos" - hyperrealism. Eco seems to know practically everything else, he may or may not know this. It struck me just how much we are surrounded by the kind of fakery, the kind of better-than-original-because-faked thing that Eco is talking about. In America they've had for years enormously convincing fake presidents - made up and coached, motivated and minded and stuffed full of straw so as to look good on television - wonderfully glossy and superficially convincing imitations of the paradigm of a president. Abraham Lincoln I think could never have looked anywhere near as much like a president as, in their different ways, Kennedy, say, who was a total phoney, and Reagan, who's if anything worse, do. In the case of Nixon, fakery failed, which might have had more to do with his 5 o'clock shadow, than with anything he did.

Presidents are one extreme. Food is another. In countries like ours we are surrounded by beautiful looking fruit and veggies, the colours are marvelous, they're four times the size of real veggies, and they don't taste of anything at all.

There's another extreme: *cuisine minceur*: pretty as a picture: two snow peas and half a radish on a plate, but what is it? Is it food? This is something worrying me increasingly over recent years. Travel to places, not only America either, places that are increasingly superb imitations of exotic destinations, but there isn't really anyone there - all these people seem to be going around being quaint peasants - you expect them to be handed 300 drachma

at the end of the day. Clearly, if this sort of thing has been brought to a high standard of development it must be in America, and Eco obviously delighted in it.

One of the things I really like about him - I mentioned his humour, but his delight in what he observes, his delight in his ideas, the joy he has in life, juggling ideas.

Its very rare, I find, in the Anglo Saxon world among heavy thinkers. You get the same sense with some French people, with Roland Barthes, with some of the historians, Philippe Arriere, they love the juggling act, they love the bright colours. With us, we've never been able to come to terms with that kind of continental intellectual. What we seem to like is either the worthy stodge of the F.R. Leavis variety, or else not really taking ideas seriously, of the Sunday Times or Observer Review variety. We're a little embarrassed by too much seriousness and we're a little embarrassed by too much intellectual play. People like Jorge Louis Borges (who is practically god) he too just enjoys ideas for the fun of it, he too is not perhaps ultimately concerned to find out the meaning of a meaning or the reality of reality, but the ideas dazzle and sparkle. We've hardly got anyone writing in English who does that sort of thing.

A: The range of Eco is remarkable too. He seems to transcend obvious categories of knowledge. In most Australian universities, the interdisciplinary approach is still only a theory, not practice. The other thing about Eco, he ignores the distinctions of highbrow/lowbrow, popular/intellectual and so on...

MJ: I agree. Again, its something that in Australian intellectual circles, such as they are, still seems to be thought of as rather trendy or dangerous, probably emanating from nasty theoretical continental schools, which are at odds with hard-nosed Anglo Saxon empiricism, which in turn seems rich in categorisations. High brows in a country like Australia are allowed to be lowbrow to the extent that the lowbrow side of their nature is quite rigidly marked off. Its Ok, even quite attractive, to have a sneaking fondness for, shall we say, football, meat pies and beer, but to bring to the study of football, meat pies and beer the same values and the same methods that you bring to the study of Wittgenstein, is just not on.

Eco is a kind of following on Roland Barthes. There's Barthes' brilliantly intellectual and also very funny essay on wrestling, for example, in *Mythologies*. There is just beginning to be a few people in Anglo Saxon cultures who are prepared to look at things that way, and they tend to be women so far. Marina Warner has written a marvelous book *Monuments and Maidens*, an allegory of the female form. She goes right back to the beginning of mythology, again with an immense range and a tremendous amount of humour. She looks at the way women are allegorized, de-feminised, emblematised. But I think this kind of work would not be done in England, America and Australia without the work of Eco, Barthes, Foucault (who's not terribly strong on sense of humour).

A: Lets get on to semiotics. I had this book lying around and someone said "Isn't this the guy who invented semiotics?"

MJ: Eco could hardly be said to have invented semiotics. One of the points he makes in *The Name of the Rose* quite early on is that Sherlock Holmes, for example, had been practising practical semiotics all along. William of Baskerville's first bit of detection in *The Name of the Rose* is a quote from several Sherlock Holmes stories...and going back even further you find similar episodes in the *Odyssey*. Reading signs is all that semiotics is (I don't claim to be a scholar of semiotics or anything else).

A: I was interested in Eco's statement on McLuhan, and the building on the investigation of what a message consists of. Face value content is the last thing anyone's talking about.

MJ: I wonder if we would have had McLuhan and Eco if we hadn't had the theory of relativity quantum physics, all those very abstruse developments in science. It seems that there is no such thing as a solid obtainable fact out there. You can measure the mass of a particle but even so, you can't tell where it is.

A: And you can never observe a thing that does not have the quality of being observed.

MJ: You can't even strictly speaking talk of it as being a thing - there's a complex which consists of the "thing", the observer, and the relationship between them. Those discoveries and postulations in science seem to me to be responsible for upsetting the whole intellectual apperception of this century. Joyce in writing, Stravinsky and Schoenberg in music, the Cubists in painting - even if they weren't specifically intellectually concretely aware of precisely what it was that Einstein and Shrodinger and so on were saying in physics, they couldn't help being aware of the intellectual atmosphere, which was as of the early years of this century, an intensely relativistic one, one in which you couldn't describe things, you could only describe relationships, and ever-changing relationships at that. That seems to have filtered down very much to the sort of thinker that McLuhan and Eco are examples of. Presumably from that point of view it is as illicit to describe an ideology as an object, a thing, as it is to describe an electron as a thing...

A: Eco demonstrates that by the way he observes and comments.

MJ: There's always a marvelous sense of the provisional about him which he has in common with Borges. Borges says he really no longer feels the need to know, he just wants to be amazed. I like that. I get less and less sure that I know anything at all, even that we're having this talk! Again I think that links up with Eco's playfulness and sense of humour. I'm sure he must be a fan of Lewis Carroll, who was a perfectly good academic logician if he wanted to be.

A: All that's fun if you're playing with ideas and you enjoy the conceptual level of things - there's the intellectual buzz, but the downside is the anxiety about there being no absolute values?...

MJ: Couldn't agree more. It's only fair to observe that not everyone gets an intellectual buzz out of the provisionality of things...To say that dodecaphonic composers and Cubists were aware of the intellectual atmosphere - that's only true on a rarified level. In our everyday life, our common sense thoughts and the way we actually do A in the firm certainty that B will follow - we act as though this is a world of Newtonian physics and not Einsteinian...The fact is on a practical level we have a Renaissance world view.

A: A lot of these essays date back 20 years - what is dated? A lot of them were written as newspaper columns.

MJ: One of the things that most impresses me about Eco - most ephemera, most newspaper column writing even of the best kind, has no reverberation at all, it doesn't look beyond its immediate subject. Whereas Eco's echoes, if I may be permitted.

A: What did you think when you read the essays that I haven't drawn out of you?

MJ: The central attraction of Eco to me, and it's also the attraction of Borges, and another marvelous Italian, Calvino, is a freedom from ideological rigidities of any kind, a freedom from intellectual and emotional walls that people build up around themselves and between themselves and the world, and from behind which they're all too prone to fire arrows at people. This links with the humour and tolerance and play that to me are absolutely essential right now, precisely at the moment they seem to be less and less in evidence. On the local domestic level, lynch mobs yell "bring back the noose". It's a time when we seem to have forgotten what Cromwell, of all people said (I mentioned this when I reviewed *The Name of the Rose* in *Scripts* a while ago): "I beseech you, think it possible you may be mistaken." It seems to me central to Eco, that possibility. In the provisional universe it is always possible you may be mistaken no matter how passionate your views, and I think we should always bear that in mind. I think Eco stands for a saner, more humane, more tolerant world.

Martin Johnson, poet and novelist, is the author of *The Typewriter Considered as A Betrap* and *Cicada Gambit*.

