

The Washington Post
February 18, 1990

By Maurice Bennett
February 18, 1990

FUN & GAMES: Short Fictions

By Clarence Major

Holy Cow! Press. 131 pp. \$15.95

"WHERE HAVE all the young men gone?" might be regarded as having been recently transformed from a protest against the ravages of war to a query on the whereabouts of black male writers on the contemporary literary scene. With the publication of *Fun & Games*, Clarence Major reminds us that he, at least, is still here doing what he has done for the past 25 years: producing some of the very best experimental fiction.

For those familiar with Major's dense, poetic, self-reflective narratives, the present volume begins slowly. The collection is divided into five sections with approximately three stories each. The first two sections are written in that social realist style most often associated with black fiction. The first tale, "My Mother and Mitch," offers an adolescent's memory of his mother's odd telephone courtship with an older white man. It moves towards an epiphany that, however important as a stage in maturation, remains commonplace. The narrator realizes that she is human, that "She didn't know everything." "The Exchange," the record of a radically unsuccessful professorial exchange between two English departments on separate coasts reads like little more than an exercise. In themselves, the stories in these groups are pleasant enough, but we do not find in them the thematic and technical complexities that are Major's trademark.

"The Horror!" the first tale of section three, brings us into familiar territory -- with the exception that grammatical and verbal play have been exchanged for a clean, crisp, almost laconic style self-consciously reminiscent of Hemingway and Stein. The focus here is on narrative. We never learn the name of the protagonist, but she is a young black woman taking scuba lessons to please her fiance' while also starring in a horror movie that is more than usually sexy. The plots mirror one another, exchange elements and, finally, merge at the end when the fatherly diving instructor attempts to rape her. The surprise ending (unrevealed here) is powerfully gothic.

Major remains at heart the poet he was at the beginning of his career, importing into his fictions a poetic fascination with the "word" and its power to create realities, whether they be realities of identity, relationship, or phenomena. The artist is the magician of his world. The final three stories are grouped under a general heading, "Mobile Axis: A Triptych," and are vintage.

As the title suggests, the essential metaphor is painting. Form, color, distance assume epistemological and moral values. Two quotations might serve to indicate what Major is concerned with. In "Women in Love," he describes a painter working on a farm landscape: "Here, in the studio, the spirit of the birds gets into her work as she paints the sense of the objects

-- rock, barn, sky, distant farmhouse, hillside, tree -- and what she achieves here (more than out on location) is a synthesis of the things. Being on the spot might limit her imagination." And he concludes the volume with the echo of a work he repeatedly cites, William Carlos Williams's poem "The Red Wheelbarrow": "Even if mending a harness is expressionistic, it is also, at the same time, romantic. Methods and shades and levels of viewing are always present and always take place inside dwellings or inside of experts mending some such thing as a harness." The order that is art depends not upon mimetic accuracy but the power of the unfettered imagination. And for the artist, even the most common details are rich with revelation. HOWEVER MANY awards, and however much critical attention he has received, it is unfortunate that Major is not more popularly acclaimed. Fault has been attributed to the "inaccessibility" of his work, and it is true that he places great demands on the reader's attention and his "cultural literacy" -- the very titles of the tales here are puns on Hemingway, Conrad, Stein and Lawrence. But these demands are no more exorbitant than those we've been taught to admire in the experimental fictions reaching us from Europe and Latin America, and raise the question of the specifically intellectual expectations with which we approach black writers. Fun & Games offers no compromise of Major's own exacting standard and is a fitting addition to a body of work that occupies the forefront of contemporary literature.