

on the free world; part three, a mere twenty-six pages, focuses on the independent peace movement in Eastern Europe.

Gradually, example by example, the genuine thesis of the book emerges. For example, under the general subdivision "Canada" and the more particular subdivision "Peace Action — 1970s and 1980s," Roussopoulos asserts that "for the peace lobby to become a genuine peace movement it must become multi-issued." His own concerns are neither national nor single-issued. The same thesis is apparent in his subsequent claim that the American peace movement generally is at the moment unaware that it is fighting the militarization of society.

Later, summarizing the activities of "Trust-Builders," a peace movement working independently of the government of the Soviet Union, Roussopoulos again insinuates the real thesis of his book. "In large part, the fact that all the Trust-Builders have not been arrested is due to the solidarity and internationalism of the non-aligned peace movement."

A second strength to *The Coming of World War Three* is the way in which Roussopoulos incorporates the voices of individuals who have been working with peace-related issues over the last several decades. He quotes Jean Stead, for example, of *The Guardian* (Manchester) assessing the difficulties faced by "Trust-Builders."

*The Soviets still do not understand the*

*Western peace movement. They see it as a movement that can be used to persuade NATO to call off the modernization programme. They are not able to grasp that it is essentially a protest campaign that is joined in strength by the ecological movement. The last thing that the Russians could cope with is a similar free-thinking movement in their own country.*

Making the needful point in the first section of his book, "The Drift and Thrust towards World War Three" (a singularly unfortunate sub-title) that the various arms agreements, since the second world war, have done very little to make a safer world, Roussopoulos quotes Robert Borosage, director of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington:

*The treaties these negotiations produce are architectural wonders, constructed to enable the military to build the weapons it wants.... Arms control agreements have been more effective in disarming public anxiety about nuclear weapons than in reducing the nuclear arsenal.*

Ann Pettitt is quoted from *The Greenham Factor*, evaluating the success of the women's protest at Greenham Common. The women who participated, she writes, experienced

*something of that creative spirit, that power of mimesis, evoked by our distant*

*ancestors when they drew pictures to overcome their fear of the huge powerful animals that surrounded and threatened them — the woolly mammoth, the sabre-toothed tiger. They drew it and danced and in this way they came to believe it could be done.*

By letting these individuals speak for themselves, Roussopoulos grounds his general argument (not enough is being done to prevent global war) in the specific instance, demonstrating that throughout the globe individuals and groups are aware and are working. These voices redeem our sense of urgency, which otherwise evaporates in a plethora of historical detail, and they compensate for Roussopoulos' refusal to come to terms with the pragmatic question — for what purpose this book has been written.

Although the author does not say so in his introduction, *The Coming of World War Three* is in fact a reference book, aimed at activists (and to this end, it ought really to have an index). Roussopoulos' thesis, integrated throughout a comprehensive historical survey, makes three specific points. First that neither 'bloc' power (the United States, the Soviet Union) can be trusted. (One wonders for how many of us this is a novel observation?) Second, a meta-government resistance is the world's best hope; and third, if we don't get it moving, we are doomed. Volume 2 may give us some important suggestions as to how this is to be done — that is, if there is time.

## THE LATE GREAT HUMAN ROAD SHOW

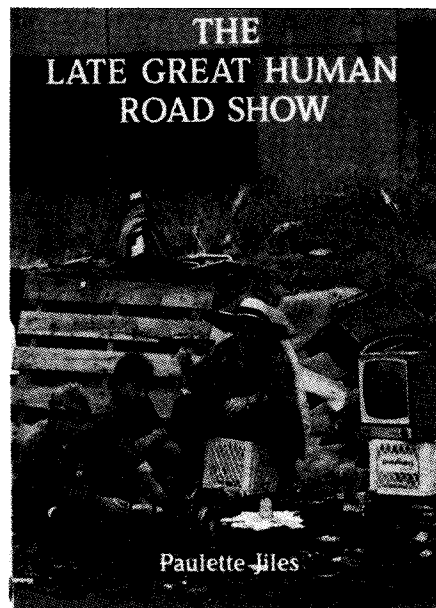
Paulette Jiles. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1986.

## VIGIL

Roberta Morris. Toronto: Williams-Wallace, 1986.

## Eudora Pendergrast

These two novels both portray life after a nuclear disaster, but in very different ways. Jiles' funny, satirical account of the last days is set in a clearly recognizable contemporary Toronto which has been abandoned by all its surviving inhabitants, except for a random few who slept



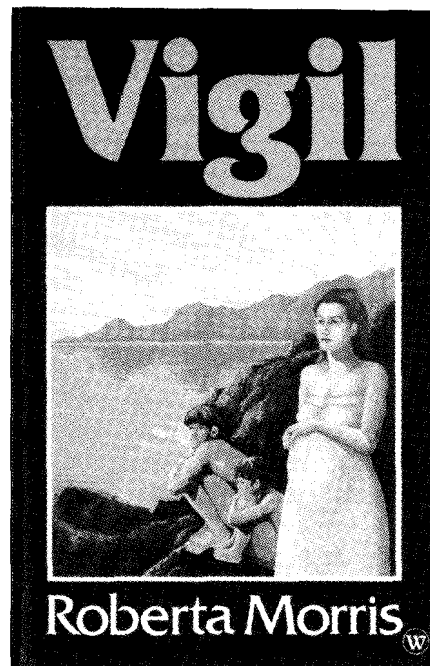
through both the event and the subsequent evacuation. A heavy, poisonous smoke blankets the city; glass panels plummet and shatter on the sidewalks of the financial district; animals rot in a Parliament Street pet shop; booze, clothes, jewellery, all conceivable material possessions are available for consumption, with the exception of fresh food, drinking water, and the gasoline required to fuel an escape.

Jiles takes us, almost cinematographically, from one isolated reality to another — two yuppie couples measure themselves and each other against shifting, self-centred standards as they plot a return to nature over a candlelit dinner of pillaged canned goods and imported brandy; a band of resourceful orphaned children roam through the streets of Cabbagetown

with their adopted Holstein cow; militant intellectuals holed up in a Riverdale Zoo videotape themselves and their vapid analysis of the destruction around them; an aging, bawdy street singer indulges her love of extravagant clothes and expensive liquor. As the story progresses these small worlds interact in a pageant of indifference, fear, affection and violence.

*Vigil*, on the other hand, is a serious, unabashedly religious allegory of spiritual survival. On a fictional Hawaiian island, a community of survivors fight to keep themselves alive in the instantly primitive conditions created by a nuclear "event." Dr. Bea Williams, a middle-aged doctor with a bent for data collection, methodically records the medical emergencies she is helpless to remedy, the efforts of a group of women to cultivate paddies of taro roots, and the growing absorption of the men in hunting and the reconstruction of machines. The story, like the community, however, ultimately revolves around the pregnancy of Jan Ito. The vigil of the book's title is the one kept through the night after Jan's two sons die from contact with contaminated muck near the taro fields and before her deformed but living child is born the next morning.

Reading these two books together, one cannot help but ask which portrayal of a post-nuclear world is the more truthful. The issue is not scientific accuracy, although in this respect Jiles gives more attention to the environmental and medical realities of a nuclear disaster, particularly the relentless stages of radiation sickness. The fundamental question raised by the juxtaposition of these two short novels is whether it is possible, or



even legitimate, to see the potential for spiritual survival, as Morris does, or whether political and moral honesty demands a chronicle of the inevitable annihilation of physical, cultural and spiritual life such as that provided with satirical humour by Jiles.

On one hand, one feels that at some fundamental level Morris simply does not accept nuclear reality. Her allegory certainly appears to deny what Jonathan Schell describes in *The Fate of the Earth* as an "absolute and eternal darkness; a darkness in which no nation, no society, no ideology, no civilization will remain; in which never again will a child be born; in which never again will human beings appear on earth, and there will be no one to remember that they ever did."

In contrast, Jiles' novel, albeit as black comedy, does capture this awful finality.

Roxana, the middle-aged street-singer, is roused from alcohol and indifference by a band of motherless children, including one with an angelic voice. But even as she and her troupe of orphans prepare to sing their way to Florida, we know just as surely as Roxana does that this late great human road show won't go on because all the performers are dying.

On the other hand, it is perhaps only the willful affirmation of life in the face of death which enables us to fight against Schell's "awful darkness," while such a fight is still possible. From this perspective, Morris' novel suggests that the denial of the finality of biological destruction is ironically the key to preserving it, and with it some hope of spiritual continuity.

Although the faith in the human spirit and its will to survive which informs *Vigil* seems resolutely pre-nuclear, the lives of her characters, like those of Jiles, are filled with the fragmented images of contemporary life. The ritualistic game in which Jan and her family and friends recite the gratifications of life before the catastrophe — "frozen pizza, creamsicles, sterile gauze" — exemplifies the absence of meaning which Robert Jay Lifton in *Indefensible Weapons* associates with "extinction by technology," as opposed to extinction by a vengeful god for a spiritual purpose.

Whatever their limitations, both of these novels are attempts to "imagine the real," to use Martin Buber's phrase, to give a time and place to the unthinkable. In that respect they both contribute to the acknowledgment of post-nuclear absurdity which is critical if we are to survive it.

## GONE TO SOLDIERS

Marge Piercy. New York: Summit Books, 1987.

### *Christine St. Peter*

The title of this epic novel conjures up the American anti-war song with its plaintive refrain: "when will they ever learn." But Marge Piercy's answer to that question is a long way from images of peace children planting flowers in soldiers' guns. As always in her work, struggle, even to the extent of armed violence,

emerges as a necessary and energizing activity in a world where the "End of One Set of Troubles Is But the Beginning of Another." With this epigram she closes her ambitious collage of World War II and anticipates, in the story of her most compelling character, a sequel about the post-war Zionist struggle in Palestine. Piercy regrets the brutalization of the capable and the destruction of the innocent but she also loves a battle. With considerable complexity she forces reconsideration of the argument that woman's nature is essentially peaceful and the business of war antithetical to our wishes.

The novel follows the tumultuous war-

time fortunes of eight Americans and two French — soldiers and civilians, women and men — during the period 1939 to 1946. The narrative focuses chapter by chapter on each in turn, with every chapter leaving the character, and the reader, in some desperate strait — facing Gestapo torture in the morning, discovering an unwanted pregnancy, crashing in a plane, landing at Guadalcanal, watching family members being marched off to concentration camp. Despite the chancy pyrotechnics of this narrative form, Piercy's consummate skill as storyteller and her scrupulous care over each of her ten focal characters kept me reading linearly until