

Collections

ideal for people with busy lifestyles

LOST LAKE. By Paul Slouka. Picador. 177pp. \$22.

POINT OF DEPARTURE POINT OF RETURN. By Marshall Browne. Arcadia. 138pp. \$19.95.

THE PRINCESS OF CUPS. By Craig Cormick. Mockingbird. 112pp. \$18.
Reviewer: DAVID WOOD.

SHORT stories are like short-distance runners, bursting on to the literary scene and illuminating their subjects briefly, often by implication as much as by what is stated overtly. As a result, good ones are devilishly hard to write.

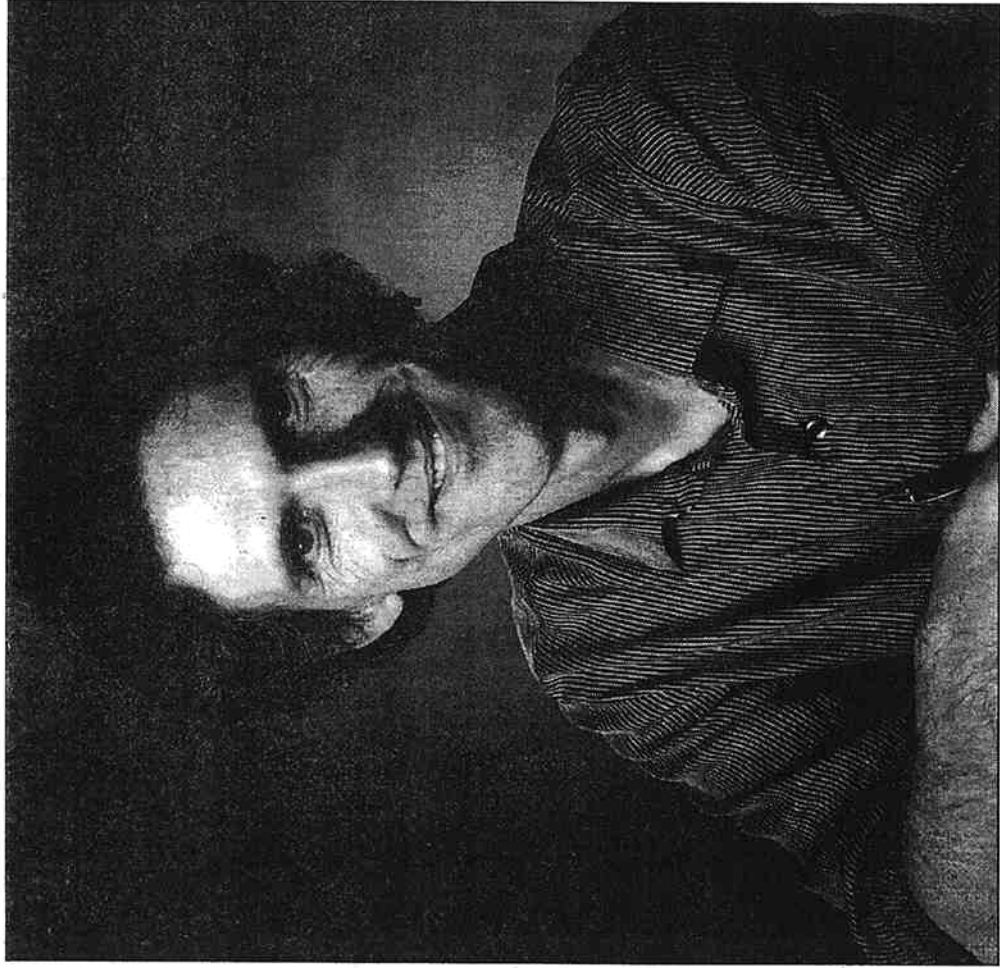
For some reason — perhaps the pace of the lifestyle, which often precludes long attention spans — the Americans have made the form very much their own. American writer Mark Slouka continues an impressive tradition with his collection *Lost Lake*, a meditation consisting of 12 stories set among childhood experiences.

It swings between pantheism and a starker depiction of the horrors implicit in nature that tend to rupture more innocent interpretations, both expressed in highly lyrical if muscular prose.

The first few stories in the book give the impression that the lake is symbolic, perhaps of the Jungian unconscious — or, if one is more daringly interpretive, of the Chinese oracular well in the classical *I Ching* — but this theme is not sustained, and we are taken on a peripheral excursion through Czechoslovakian history, many of the romantic denizens of the lost lake having gravitated to the New World from that country, now spending their holidays relaxing and reflecting on the “golden pond”, if I may borrow that description from the movie of the same name and a somewhat similar theme.

Some of these stories are contemporary morality tales with rather self-conscious endings but it is a position that Slouka seems unable or unwilling to sustain throughout the collection.

Contemporary life, with its pervasive urban cynicism, often does not sit well with Old World mythologically based morality tales, and Slouka edges away from any attempt to unite these stories thematically under an archetypal umbrella. Two extremely funny stories, “The



BENCHMARK: Craig Cormick, whose *The Princess of Cups* will delight with discerning insights.

Lotus Eaters” and “Equinox”, the latter nearly ending in tragedy when a small child is swallowed up by the lake only to be resuscitated by a frenetic mother, seem out of character with the others; but if no thematic unity is intended, it doesn’t really matter.

What the second story emphasises is that death and tragedy are never far away from life and comedy. That’s a contemporary theme that has tended to displace a more holistic universal

Marshall Browne, illustrates that Browne in his own way is just as accomplished a writer as Slouka. Conversely, his collection of 12 stories does not pretend to have any thematic connection. They are eclectically diverse, written by an author who is manifestly an old hand at picking us up by the scruff of the neck and pointing us in the direction of his literary intentions.

These stories are electric with life. They swing along with the rhythm of a freight train through an always interesting countryside.

There is nothing pretentious about Browne, no pantheistic reflections that are not quickly tempered by blood wit and salty common sense.

A few of the stories peter out in saltbush, or contain paragraphs from the nursery rhyme *Around and Around the Mulberry Bush* but, in most cases, Browne hits squarely with the meat of the bat. He is never better than in defective mode, such as in “Film Noir” and “A Light In the Dark”, in which the pace is fast, the prose pile-driving.

Short stories are for busy people. You can maintain a hectic work schedule and still slip a Browne into your days and nights for interludes of cathartic pleasure.

There are 11 stories in *The Princess of Cups*, all eminently enjoyable for their sinewy realism and often reverberant with allegorical undertones — all cleverly executed by a writer who is both dextrous and comfortable with the form.

Craig Cormick can depict character with a few strokes of the pen in a literary form that precludes any real development of them. His style is spare, telling and to the point; there is no profligate verbiage. His honest depiction of day-to-day issues, sad and amusing, is refreshingly sharp.

I particularly enjoyed “Hallway Lovers”, “Leaving Home” and “Twin Falls” for their aphoristic elegance: humour, poignancy and plangent sadness respectively.

If redemptive elegance is the hallmark of the short story, *The Princess of Cups* might have set a personal benchmark for Cormick. This collection of his latest stories will delight with economy of expression and discerning insights.