

THE UNCULTURED PEARL

SO YOU WANT TO BUY A HOUSE ? by Cyril Pearl (F.W. Cheshire)

As you might guess, this book has nothing to do with buying a house. The subject is dismissed in a couple of lines of dialogue on page 13, leading up to "... don't buy a house, buy a car."

About half the book, however, is written around subjects related to home life, such as gardening, decorating, entertaining. The other half is a wild, wide scatter of Pearls dropped on fairly irrelevant subjects such as wine, food, banks, photography, modern art and hotels.

Readers of the cultured Pearl (e.g. Always Morning, also published by Cheshire, 1960) will recognise nothing here. Fans of the funny-man Cyril (So You Want to be an Australian? Ure Smith, 1959) will know what to expect. But they may be wrong. This is longer, more studied, more farcical and less satirical.

Cyril Pearl's technique of funny writing (probably the most risky art of them all) is, firstly, to start a new paragraph for practically every sentence.

Or for even less.

Almost like this.

That makes a lively vehicle, which carries -

a. Slapstick descriptions:

"... a bewildered Polish wrestler, after wrestling with his phrase-book phrenziedly, went berserk and ran down the street sideways like a Boston crab screaming ..."

b. Irrepressible puns; coming so fast you can miss some of them:

"didjeridoo-it-yourself ..."

"the Greeks had a gnome for it ..."

"tipple-tattle ..."

"Sydney Crammer School ..."

c. Surrealist epigrams:

"Van Gogh is the Marx of painting as Churchill is the Rubens of politics."

"... people who move in the best circles live in the most squares."

Sometimes the first pun sparks off a chain reaction. A nice passage follows the description of a split-level, split-personality house where your Napoleonic id and your Menzies id can be expressed separately:

In the middle of the house, between levels, is a common room where your two ids meet. What sort of meat? That is a very good question. Psychiatrists recommend Ragout de Chevreau (Mixed-up Kid). With Jung beans and Freud potatoes.

It's fun to sit over a bottle of split soda (specially bottled for schizophrenics) and talk to yourselves.

"What do you think of the soup, Bob?"

"It is abundantly clear, Nap."

Sparked along by the often brilliant crackle of such verbal jindiviks (to borrow Cyril Pearl's own hyperbole) the reader runs easily down the pages, perhaps like a Boston crab, bemused

rather than amused until suddenly, at irregular intervals, he is struck by something more solid. It jolts him. He laughs aloud.

Why? What was different? Not just a funnier play with words. On the contrary, traces of non-funny emotions like ire and impatience have entered the writing and the funny words are now directed to caricaturing something real. Laughter seems to break out when the caricature is exaggerated to the extreme point beyond which the likeness would be unrecognisable.

Sometimes Cyril Pearl judges the laughter point beautifully, but in this book it seems to me he overshoots the point too often and loses the reality. One is left with only the funny writing, wondering what, if anything, he is burlesquing.

The best, and most sustained, comedy here comes toward the end when he enlarges Neil Clerehan's joke about the "Sweet Sherry Belt" of suburbia into seven pages of funny and pointed advice on etiquette in dry or sweet sherry society. If I may make one more quotation; this is part of his Tested Chart of Approved Subjects for conversation:

DRY

Behan
Buddhism
Graham Sutherland
Graham, Billy (anti)
Opera
Painting (non-
representational)

SWEET

Beer
Budgerigars
Graham Kennedy
Graham, Billy (pro)
Operations
Painting (brush v. roller)

It is when Cyril Pearl turns closer to the subject of the book's title that I find him less successful, for the point of the parody often escapes me. In all stodginess I must confess that

my first difficulty is that the architect in the opening sequence, "Vertigo Jones", is too remote to be a telling caricature, even in farce.

He eats giant stacks of sandwiches of smoked salmon, caviare and camembert for afternoon-tea, sings old school songs in the office, is apparently a Communist, speaks a sort of jive talk, and quotes Henry Hope Reed Jnr. - a classic-revivalist in New York who is too far out even to be considered seriously by the most conservative American magazines.

All this may make Vertigo a comic character, but he is poor satire, for if his type exists at all it is certainly rare. Probably, like the "FFFF pencil" he is said to be brandishing, there is no such thing. And you don't mean to tell us, Cyril, that you know of no real, more familiar Australian architect type capable of being parodied?

Other butts of jokes are equally unreal. Various crazy house styles are described. One has a roof "half aluminium tiles, half stringy bark." Another is "Contemporary Early Tudor." A housewife suffering a virulent form of house-proudness went through phases of remodelling in "Renaissance Mood", "Elizabethan", "Louis Seize", and "New Orleans sporting-house". None of these descriptions seems very apt, even in farce, because current Australian decoration does not typically run in any such odd period-revival directions. There is none of the fun of recognition here. Doesn't the real madness of Australian suburbia present sufficient targets for satire?

Despite the wealth of entirely local reference when the book darts to other subjects, I found myself wondering at times

whether the chapters on design were written with an eye on the American market, so astray are they from the facts of our life. For instance, much fun is poked at "the glossies" - glossy home magazines. [One is described as "Home Heavenly ... average weight: 4 lbs. 9 oz ..."

This is meant as a caricature of an Australian magazine. But if only one like this did exist, how much richer Australia might be! The truth is that we have no home magazine that could ever, even in a moment of farce, be accused of erring on the side of glossiness or heaviness (in any sense of these words). We have, let's be frank, just two such journals: Home Beautiful (Melbourne, Herald) and House and Garden (Sydney, K.G. Murray). Both are imitations of the American models in name only. Otherwise they offer a drab, unstylish combination of depressing do-it-yourself hints and cynical encouragement of the lowest and broadest excesses of popular taste. By comparison, the American home glossies look to be on the level of Lewis Mumford. Does the sad reality of these popular Australian magazines offer no opportunity for genuine satire?

Once more Cyril Pearl seems to be parodying not a real thing, but just a loose misconception of it.

Again, on the subject of car design: what would you consider fair game for an Australian satirist? The "Australian" specials: Holden, or Chrysler Royal? But Pearl sends up the Cadillac Eldorado Brougham, which one Australian in a million might be able to recognise if ever he saw one; and he refers to the Packard '61. Does he mean Vance? They stopped making Packard cars about four Cyril Pearl books ago.

You might not believe that the author of Swansdown Seat, Wild Men, etc., could be considered guilty of lack of research, but that

seems to be the case. In this historian's holiday he fires on the run, racing along in good-natured intolerance of everything new-fangled with such speed and gusto that he seldom has time to sight the targets accurately. This is the pity. There is so much real philistinism, hypocrisy, pomposity and plain madness in the field suggested by the book's title which is fairly begging to be deflated by the point of the Pearl pen.

Any attitude to the state of our houses that does show through the clowning in these pages tends to be a closed-circuit conservative attitude that for instance, lumps central heating in with tuck-pointing as an example of obsessively fussy home-making (page 45).

It all seems a bit too close for comfort to the mobs' attitude to innovation and the mums' attitude to decoration - in short, the contrary of just about everything which, in other fields, the name Cyril Pearl stands for.

Still, I don't say it wasn't fun while it lasted.
