BOOK REVIEW

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Mr. Bedford and the Muses by Gail Godwin. The Viking Press, 1983. 229 pages.

GAIL GODWIN DESCRIBES her first collection of short fiction as "revisionist autobiography—re-interpreting and re-fashioning my own past." Although the novel, *Mr. Bedford,* and the five accompanying short stories are inspired by people from her past and present, Godwin invents what she cannot remember and replaces what happened with what should have happened if life were Art. But then life is not Art as each of Godwin's writer/characters comes to know.

Her name might be Carrie Ames, Janie Lewis, or Amanda Sloane, but the character behind the name is the untested, determined young writer who gathers and sorts the world stuff for future fiction. She sizes up the other characters with telling asides that show she has seen the artistic possibilities in her relationship with them, and she is curious as to how it will play itself out. Even before Carrie Ames, in *Mr. Bedford,* sees her room in Easton's boarding house, she knows she will rent it: "In less than an hour, the Eastons had wound me fast into their net. It was a net composed of obligation, fascination, and intrigue. I liked them, didn't quite trust them, desired their approval, and knew, with the instinct of one who likes to stir life up, that wherever they were would never be dull."

Janie Lewis, from "The Angry Year," is a younger Carrie Ames who has just arrived at the university. She puts herself into a controlled conflict as she dates a "Deke" and tries to win the acceptance of his circle of fraternity and sorority friends, even though, secretly, she knows she doesn't fit in and publicly she attacks their trivial activities in her column in the campus newspaper. In the same bemused asides where she exposes the weaknesses of others, she sees herself clearly and dares the reader to find the same fault in her.

In "A Cultural Exchange," the most sinister of the tales with the inexperienced writer as protagonist, Amanda Sloane, like Carrie, stays with a family as she works overseas. But her host begins to expect her to treat him as if

she were his daughter or his dead wife. Amanda tries to escape the unspoken obligations of politeness that threaten to take over her life, and exerts her independence. But she is not prepared for the severity of his reaction.

Striking the balance between the expectations and demands of others and the needs of the self—the inner life of an artist—is the recurring issue for the women in these three fiction pieces. Godwin seems to think that there is a point, known by instinct, where a dedicated writer must step away from the world to write about it more clearly. While these budding writers struggle to detach themselves from the world in order to work on their novels, the established, successful artists in the other three stories reach out from their isolated retreats and try to reconnect themselves to the world. At first Charles St. John is annoyed when his unlisted phone rings, but he gradually becomes quite attached to the mysterious woman with the same last name and is pleased when one of his phone calls mistakenly goes to her and must be relayed. It is not a voice on the phone, but an unexpected young woman knocking at her door that stirs Constance LeFevre from her ennui and brings her back to the world in "Amanuensis." Jesse, a student at the college, says she is in love with the idea of a novelist's life and wants to absorb some of the atmosphere by doing odd jobs for Constance around the house. Jesse's surprising devotion to her recalls the pleasure of human contact, and Constance begins to come out of herself and live again. Although these stories lack the pleasure of seeing the world through the observant eye of Carrie, there is added complexity of a more mature vision and a refreshing continuity to these lives. We see Charles St. John and Constance LeFevre before their lives are unexpectedly disrupted by the world outside themselves, and some time later we see them again when the previous experience has changed their lives.

Only Rudolf Gerber cannot change, which makes "A Father's Pleasure" the only disappointment in the collection. The concert pianist, Gerber, and the people who touch his life lack the depth of personality that allows growth and change, consequently the story seems to be a sad, but simple commentary on one man's inability to see himself and how he hurts the people around him. Gerber does illustrate the human being who separates himself from the world with his romantic ideals. Out of contact with himself as well as out of conflict with others, he never sees himself reflected in the eyes of others with the self-examination that promotes growth. But in the remainder of the book, Gail Godwin, the master of characters, brings dynamic personalities together in a wonderful, unpredictable fiction that is a pleasure to read.