

A literary tendency or two

IT IS salutary sometimes to read short stories that are not first-class, as a reminder of how difficult a medium it is and how unassertively gifted are the writers who master it. Patricia Zelver ends one of the stories in her *A Man of Middle Age* thus: "This story is about my father's jokes. Father joked . . . Mother had her pride. I have Literary Tendencies. I am writing this story. Everyone has his or her way of coping." True enough. Her stories are written with observation but without art or grace.

Ms Zelver writes with seeming distaste for her subjects. There is pain in her voice, but the only one of her stories that transcends ironic reportage is "The Flood," in which an aged woman refuses to leave her loved home and floats off to death on her roof as the house is washed away. Ms Zelver has *Literary Tendencies*, and two published novels to her credit. But on the evidence of this book it is hard to see that she has achieved much more than—one hopes—a "way of coping."

Jacky Gillott's *Intimate Relations* is better, even though the text is peppered with sneezing-point with misprints. As her title implies, all her stories here concern the close relationships between men and women, parents and children, youth and age, using the recurring theme of the chase: it is all a matter of pursuit and evasion, hunter and hunted. The men in "A Member of the Family," in which a young girl is exploited wickedly by an unscrupulous but dazzlingly attractive family, actually pop out at her from behind trees. A twelve-year-old boy in another story, with his emotions about sex and violence hopelessly mixed, has the killer-instinct. Impotent Mr Wouwermans in "The Terms of the Contract," stalking his wife and her lover in St James's Park, is "like the true hunter," whose desire is not to kill or capture but to "enter, observe and understand the strange kingdom of another creature."

FICTION 2

A MAN OF MIDDLE AGE
by Patricia Zelver/Hamish
Hamilton £6.95 pp 219

INTIMATE RELATIONS by
Jacky Gillott/Hodder &
Stoughton £6.95 pp 254

*THE BEST SHORT STORIES
OF JOHN BUCHAN* edited
by David Daniell/Michael
Joseph £7.50 pp 224

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Jacky Gillott also provides a striking gallery of predators: the bullying woman who is married to a much-pitied "saint," whose saintliness stems from the fact that he is made to feel he has let her down; the obsessively tidy group captain who says to the girl he is seducing as she hangs up her clothes "Not that way!", and lays her down on a rubber sheet in case of "mess." The best story is "The Man Who Liked Successful Women"—a character sketch of a sympathetic, sexy, uncompetitive man, the perfect lover and companion. The trouble lies in his good qualities themselves—he has far too much of the woman in him to be quite comfortable with. My only quarrel with Ms Gillott is that she implies in her final and rather alarming story "Ruby Wedding" that families which evidently hate each other really love each other, deep down, and I don't think that is the truth though it would be nice if it were.

"John Buchan wrote over a hundred books, and very many of them are still read, with delight, by a countless host of people around the world," writes David Daniell, with undoubted truth, in his introduction to *The Best Short Stories of John Buchan*. The countless host had

better stick to the novels. If these stories are Buchan's best, then heaven preserve us from the others. The most distinguished is a period romance. "The Company of the Marjoraine," about representatives of the American Revolution seeking out the ageing Bonnie Prince Charlie on the continent to offer him the crown of the newly independent States. They are "too late by forty years," for the prince is a chronic drunk.

Many of the stories are set in Scotland and told in dialect: "It was geyan dark . . . and I keptit weel back frae that wanchancy hole o' a burn." It is hard going for Sassenachs. This particular tale ends: "'But whae kens? It's a queer world.' And the shepherd knocked the ashes out of his pipe." Whae kens, indeed. When the narrator is not a rustic philosopher he is a perfect gentleman. Buchan went in heavily for the traditional dinner-table anecdote. The chaps are relaxing round the mahogany, and one of them bursts into narrative: "It all began—said Martendale—with an old Wesleyan parson of the name of Tubb." Women, needless to say, except as companions for striding through the heather, are scrupulously avoided.

"The Frying-pan and the Fire" turns on the fact that the Duke of Burminster ("Burminster filled his tankard, and a light of reminiscence came into his eye") is mistaken first for the inmate of a lunatic asylum and then for a member of a circus troupe. The fact that the noble lord acquits himself well in both roles is apparently a great joke. Humour was not Buchan's strong suit, though one of his contemporaries was to take these same crippling social and literary conventions and make them immortally funny. When the duke is in the asylum he recognises one of the patients: "Blessed if it wasn't my Aunt Letitia!" One inspired step, and we will be into P. G. Wodehouse country.

STANES 3 AUG 1970