

Mystical visions

■ TONY PEAKE'S novel, *Son to the Father*, is a mystical vision of ordinary life. Betrayal is its hidden hinge. A 10-year-old boy, in the care of a surrogate father, unexpectedly lands a part in a film to be made in Spain. Haunted by memories, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War accompanies his son, a teacher, on a visit to that strange and magical land. In both cases the characters assimilate the world by language, pumping it full of pleasures and pain, and are in turn subject to its rebounding life, its affinities and subversions.

In fact the surrogate father and the schoolteacher are one and the same person. Peter, also the narrator, lives in London with the extravagant Jacqui and her son, but his sexuality is ambiguous. No less ambiguous is a long-distance relationship with his own father by whom he feels neglected.

The plot unfolds as soon as Peter resigns from his low-paid teaching job in order to chaperone the boy on location — and it is among the diverse accomplishments of this brilliant and rapturous book that the reader comes not only to understand but also to feel the force of Peake's concern with father-son relationships.

The drama that shapes Peake's

FICTION

SON TO THE FATHER

Tony Peake
Little Brown, £15.99

novel is tragically simple: the betrayed child finds Eden and loses it by his own act of betrayal. Eden is the Casa Nueva, a sumptuous villa in northern Spain where Peter mixes with a vivid cast of film producers, scriptwriters and Hollywood hangers-on, and where, in a sunstruck delirium, he falls in love with the jealous director's male assistant. Their passion is fervent and brief — a few moments, a few pages — and it leaves the novel divided into before and after. Yet a complex and unpredictable ending meditates upon romantic and other kinds of love.

The writing that gives body to the meditation is very fine. Great energy has gone into the description of Peter's return journey with his father to Spain, and there are bits in the second half of the novel which seemed to me gorgeous.

The Glasgow Herald, **HUGH BARNES**
25/11/1995

The Richmond Review

Son to the Father by Tony Peake

Son to the Father is, as the title suggests, a novel about relationships. There is the blood relationship between Peter, a twenty-something teacher marking time at a TEFL college in Camden, and his father Edward, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War and now an embittered ex-revolutionary. It is a relationship characterised by a lack of communication and emotional sterility. At the same time Peter, despite his background and sexual ambiguity, is surprisingly successful and content as surrogate father to Jed, the son of his feckless and sultry flatmate Jacqui.

This is also a book about the making of a film. Jed unexpectedly lands a part in the debut film of a famed opera director, Carlos Tarifa, and it is natural that Peter should go along with Jacqui to chaperone the boy. The fact that the film is to be shot in northern Spain, where Edward spent his war-time years, is used to draw out the hidden aspects of Peter's father's character, and the temptations of Tarifa's villa, a heady mix of glamour, license and opportunity, force Peter into facing the need for choice and commitment in his life.

The early passages of the book capture perfectly what it is to be youngish and struggling in modern-day London. There is a sense of cynicism, offset as often as possible by fragile enthusiasm, of small flats that keep out the city, and there is the occasional night of make-believe that becomes somehow surreal when seen in the dirty light of the morning after. But it is the Spanish section that really hooks the reader. The cast of sharklike producers, beautiful and available flunkies and temperamental scriptwriters, glitters beguilingly around Peter while his inability to bridge the gap between intention and action colours his perception of the motives and feelings of others. Peter, as narrator, cannot give insight into his acquaintances as he lacks the emotional sympathy to do so, but his confusion creates a multi-faceted milieu that is as ambiguous, and thus as fascinating, as he himself.

In *Son to the Father*, Tony Peake has created a complex inner journey towards a sense of self-identity, while at the same time using his hero's inability to realise his own emotional potential to create a sense of tantalising beyondness. In denying the reader the status of favoured observer he takes us closer than usual to the fictional world that has been created. We are forced to follow Peter step by step, never able to look ahead, and so share in his eventual reconciliation with his father and with himself.



BOOK REVIEW Douglas Reid Skinner

The Star & SA Times International, 01/11/1995

Fiction and Memory

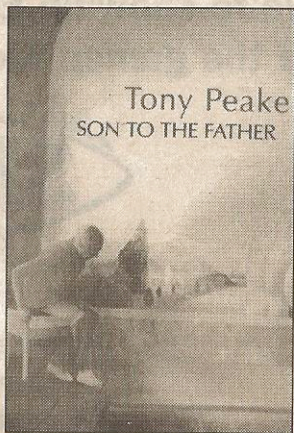
The wonderful thing about fiction is the weaving of threads of destiny and patterns of action. These bear such a seeming verisimilitude to our own lives that we believe them to be true. Yet all too easily do we forget that we ourselves are stories, made up of threads and patterns collected over time. Books, it should be remembered, are a large part of what makes us. "We make fiction," noted Russell Hoban, wryly, in his Introduction to the Household Tales of the Brothers Grimm, "because we are fiction."

And while remembering is the engine of self-construction, it is forgetting that is most crucial. (Death rudely interrupts the story, though even then it continues in the mouths and memories of others.) By forgetting most of what happens, we can construct a stable pattern, a story of who we are. Novels are a way of acting out life without consequences, as well as a way of seeing intention and purpose, pattern and destiny, in our worlds.

Tony Peake's second novel, *Son to the Father*, is constructed around such patterns of destiny. Peter is adrift in life, uncertain of direction, unsure what to make of

his past. He teaches English as a second language to foreign students, but it's not a career. He platonically shares a flat in Kilburn with Jaqui – who is also adrift and rather feckless, to boot – and her ten-year-old son Jed, for whom he acts as a surrogate father. His relationship with his own father, once a member of the Communist Party and soldier in the Spanish Civil War's International Brigade, is agonised, full of undigested history and emotion.

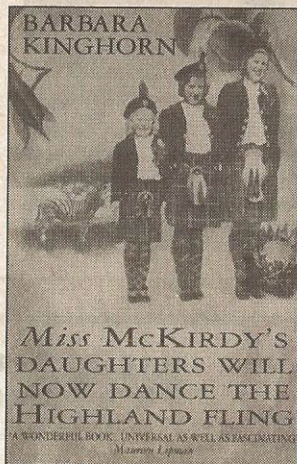
Enter famous opera and would-be film director, Carlos Tarifa, who spots Jed for a film he



is to make. The three close up the flat and fly to Spain for Jed's audition. At first the audition fails and they drift back to London. But Jed ends up with the part, the three return to Carlos's lavish villa, and each becomes involved in playing out threads of apparent destiny hinted at and set up earlier in the story, each in turn discovering a new direction in life.

Son to the Father is a novel of constraint and reflection, a journey of self-discovery and the past explained, of destiny and deeper pattern found. More than one writer has weighed down such a novel with philosophical and metaphysical speculation. Tony Peake sticks to the story. On the way, he touches on many issues and arguments, but rarely labours them. Instead, his novel is loaded with wit, entertaining double meanings and cultural asides.

In her book on writing, *Living by Fiction*, American author Annie Dillard pointed out that "Language scarcely accounts for... the flux and mystery of experience." Barbara Kinghorn, in her irresistibly titled autobiographical *Miss McKirdy's Daughters will now dance the Highland Fling*, struggles mightily to cap-



ture that 'flux and mystery' of her past, and with considerable success.

Miss McKirdy's Daughters breaks down roughly into two parts: her early years as a South African-born child of an immigrant Scottish family living in a Dutch-gabled house in Johannesburg, and her adult years spent variously in Johannesburg and Great Britain. Each is marked by different textures of language and sensibility, Kinghorn striking an accurate stylistic balance between the two points of view.

The altogether strange history of the period constantly shows through, for Barbara Kinghorn's personal past coincides with an extraordinary, troubled, at times catastrophic passage of South African history. The amazing mengelmoes of cultural shards from all over the world that is South Africa jumps out from pages filled with unscripted ironies, rich sub-texts, funny dislocations and a liquorice allsorts of emblems and rituals. Nostalgia and sentimentality are never far away: consider for a moment Orange Grove as an English suburb; the United Party fighting (and losing) an election; institutionalised racism; Brooklax and Zambuk; Union Castle mail ships; tea at John Orr's; Opel Kadetts and drive-in bioscopes; Rhodesia and no TV. Thank heavens most of it is in the past.

It's also filled with moments which are really funny in a quintessentially South African way, such as a village on the Klip River called Henley-on-Klip! Or a black domestic who speaks English with a Yiddish accent: "You vant I should lay the table?"

Adult life for Kinghorn is somewhat of an up-and-down escalator of success and failure,

marriage and divorce, inner demons and family travail. This latter part of the book is less compelling, perhaps, but its candid telling of the actual chaos of personal life (albeit with a dodgy grasp of psychology, amongst other things) provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to the reconstructed memories of childhood. A good read.

Son to the Father, Tony Peake (Little, Brown 1995, hardback, £15.99). Tony Peake was born in South Africa in 1951. After graduating from Rhodes University, he moved to London, where he managed the Open Space Theatre. After teaching in Ibiza for a while, he returned to London, where he works as a literary agent and writer.

Miss McKirdy's Daughters will now dance the Highland Fling, Barbara Kinghorn (Black Swan 1995, softcover, £5.99). Barbara Kinghorn was born in South Africa of Scottish parents in the 1940s. In 1975 she moved the UK, working on the West End stage, in television and as a member of the RSC. She is based in London where she runs her own company, Stage by Stage.

BOOKS

Complex themes in unusual tale

SON TO THE FATHER by Tony Peak (Abacus):

MANY complex themes are interwoven in this unusual story set mainly in the mountain villages of northern Spain, where a film on the life of the painter, Murillo, is being produced by a motely assortment of screen personnel directed by former famous Spanish opera director Carlos Tarifa.

The narrator, Peter, is a youngish teacher and surrogate father to Jed, the sprightly 10-year-old son of his flatmate, Jacqui, a former actress. His life takes a new turn when Jacqui talks Carlos into auditioning Jed

for a part in the film and inveigles Peter to accompany them as Jed's teacher.

Jed, whose conduct and ability seems immaculate throughout the story, gets the part and the setting moves to Spain where the *dramatis personae* gather with all their individual and collective quirks.

Among them is a Roman Catholic priest, Father Ricardo, who is to share the educational supervision of Jed.

From the start the atmosphere is permeated by undercurrents of attraction and betrayal, involving both heterosexual and gay entanglements. The dialogue is often basic and coarse with regular interpolation of four-letter words.

A sideplot is the strained relationship between the narrator and his father, an embittered former communist who fought with the International Brigade during the Spanish Civil War. They affect a reconciliation

of sorts after Peter learns of his father's wartime romance in a Spanish village and its ramifications.

While Peter comes to terms with his sexual orientation and Jacqui pursues her life among the theatrical wealthy, Jed, strongly attracted by Father Ricardo's teaching has sights set on the priesthood.

The author's descriptions of the mountain scenery and Spanish life are fascinating and there are some moving moments in the individual encounters.

— ALBERT DU TOIT

Civil war between generations

TONY PEAKE's second novel is in the mainstream of what one might call New Man fiction. The hero is a shy, sensitive man, confused about his sexuality and living under the shadow of an emotionally stunted father. In the course of the story, he both comes to terms with the past and, in the process, finds himself. We have been here before.

If the book stands out from a mountain of similar novels, it is more because of the unusual mix of ingredients than because of any particular brilliance in the writing. Peake has a pleasant, workmanlike style: you can almost hear him speaking

Son to the Father

by Tony Peake

Little, Brown & Co, £15.99

the words as he writes them, which is one of the signs of a good communicator. But there are strict limits to what he can do: when he stretches for a grander idiom than the conversational, he as often as not falls flat on his face.

The story flows nicely: meandering here and there, but never drying up completely. A young teacher shares a flat with a woman of a more flamboyant disposition than his own. She has a 10-year-old son, which offers him a role as a surrogate

father: he is good in the role and grows in confidence with it. But complications are on the horizon. A famous Spanish film director wants to cast the boy in a film. Fame and wealth beckon, not to mention the chance to swan around on location in Spain. The opportunity is too good to miss — but where will it all end?

This catapulting of ordinary people into the wild and wonderful world of the movies offers plenty of scope for irony and, although Peake is not an especially sharp satirist, he has a good eye for human foibles. The shallow seductiveness of the film industry is well rendered, as is the hero's

tentative exploration of the homosexual impulses he has been suppressing.

Probably the strongest element in the book is the hero's relationship with his father, who is not the uptight conservative type one normally comes across in this sort of novel, but an uptight, card-carrying member of the Communist Party! The emotional impasse between the grizzled veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and his impossibly, infuriatingly agnostic son is very well described; and the breaking down of those long-standing barriers brings the story to a moving finale.

JULIA FLYNN

ential individual and his 'group': Andy Warhol and The Factory. Like Burroughs and Ginsberg, Warhol's influence stretches way beyond the medium for which is is primarily known: painting. And like Burroughs and Ginsberg, Warhol was a gay man part of whose importance lies in his getting homosexuality into the mainstream of culture. *Our* culture is now *their* culture, a neat reversal – as *we* grew up in *their* culture, but transformed it. Alexander tells a familiar story in breathless prose and with full-attention to every muck-raking detail. Not a pretty story. ■

Fear of Intimacy

- **The Book of Man** – Barry Graham (*Serpent's Tail*, £8.99)
- **Son to the Father** – Tony Peake (*Little Brown*, £15.99)
- **Fortunes of War** – Mel Keegan (*GMP*, £7.95)

SET largely in Glasgow, Barry Graham's excellent third novel, **The Book of Man**, is a raw, heartfelt look at the destructive power of obsession and creativity. Narrated by 'Kevin Previn', a post-punk playwright and performance artist, the story focuses on Kevin's life and that of his creative mentor Michael Illingworth – a bisexual heroin addict. Kevin has managed to escape the nightmare of poverty and creative insecurity by moving to London. Michael fares less well and, ten years later, has succumbed to Aids in a Glasgow hospital. Kevin goes back to research a documentary about Michael, whose depressive, angry book, *The Book of Man*, made him famous. However, returning after ten years' absence, Kevin finds that the past he ran from is still as unreconciled as ever. Autobiographical or not, *The Book of Man's* hallmark is its intensity, intimacy and insight. Not a comfortable read, it would be simplistic to say that the theme here is that we can all gain courage and wisdom from adversity – but this book *is* wise, intense, intimate, and highly recommended.

Tony Peake's more gentle novel **Son to the Father** takes a look at parental roles and fear of intimacy. Peter is in a quandary about his sexuality. His flatmate's son, Jed, is cast in a film to be shot near Barcelona, and the three of them – Jacqui, Jed and Peter – set off in a quasi family unit. Needless to say, the glittering world of cinema contains irresistible temptations for each one of them. Despite, or perhaps because of, the exotic setting and the jet-setting overtones, there is a flashy soap opera quality to this novel that you will either love or hate.

Fortunes of War, Mel Keegan's swashbuckling Elizabethan drama, does not pretend to be anything other than a highly-paced adventure. Here we have an English aristocrat falling in love with an Irish/Spanish mercenary and participating in plenty of action, both in bed and on the high seas. With more historical detail than you would expect, *Fortunes of War* is a fine example of this genre.

Sebastian Beaumont

Lesbian sleuths

- **Deadly Reunion** – Jackie Manthorne (*Gynergy Books*, £6.99)
- **Pennies on a Dead Woman's Eyes** – Marcia Muller (*Woman's Press*, £5.99)
- **No Witnesses** – Nancy Sunra (*Rising Tide Press*, £7.99)
- **Crosswords** – Penny Sumner (*Women's Press*, £5.99)
- **Poisoned Hearts** – Elizabeth Wilson (*Virago Crime*, £6.99)
- **Dark Angel** – John Dale (*Serpent's Tail Mask Noir*, £8.99)
- **The Body Farm** – Patricia Cornwell (*Warner Books*, £5.99)
- **The First Scarpetta Collection: Postmortem/Body of Evidence** – Patricia Cornwell (*Little Brown*, £9.99)

THE WORLD OF LESBIAN SLEUTHS gets increasingly crowded; amazing they don't bump into one another. A quick return for Jackie Manthorne's Harriet Hubble, at a high school reunion in her hometown where someone winds up dead. Not a bad plot, but not as atmospheric as Manthorne's first.

Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone is not a lesbian (although there are gay characters), but **Pennies on a Dead Woman's Eyes** has such intense relationships between women that there's a homoerotic ambience. It's a gripping book, taking a good old chestnut – old murder reinvestigated opening a while new can of worms; and beneath everything is a novel about America since 1945. Recommended.

No Witnesses has a lovably foolish detective who falls straight into the traps of an ex-girlfriend suspected of



Son to the Father

by Tony Peake

Abacus £6.99

Mail on Sunday,
27/10/1996

An English schoolboy is cast in a film to be shot in the heat of Spain by the magnetic Carlos Tarifa. Along for the ride as chaperone and teacher come his flirty mother Jacqui and her gently academic lodger Peter, whose now embittered father fought in the Civil War. Throughout a narrative that nicely dictates its own pace, all these engaging characters endure and enjoy mutually helpful rites of passage. In his second novel, Peake is more concerned with the happy fulfilment of his people than with a heavy message. He writes with dry ease on the difficulty of being alive. David Hughes