

The Sydney Morning Herald

Saturday, February 24, 1990 75

BOOKS

WRITERS AT WORK

A WRITING LIFE
Edited by Giulia Guiffre
Allen & Unwin, 286pp, \$17.95
ISBN 0 0442 1028 2
By CANDIDA BAKER

Michelle Mens Calhorne speaks for professional writers. Drove thirty for travel. In the collection of 15 women and one man (Eric Dark spoke for Eleanor, at her request, since she was sick at the time), Guiffre makes no distinction between various forms of writing, and makes it clear throughout the book that she feels all writing is equally valid.

Guiffre, of course, is drawing a not unnatural parallel — she is a woman writer with a family, and most of those women had, not families, then long-term partners. Writing is often a question of juggling responsibilities, and women are adept at that particular form of insanity.

"I feel you have to work out your priorities," says Elyne Mitchell. "You can't do everything that you want to do in life. I don't think. There's just time for one thing." There are echoes of this statement from many women. It is as if, strong as most of them are or were, there must always be a small residue of guilt towards the neglected task, be it home or work.

a bone, long after the interview has ended it clear she is not willing to answer the question. On other occasions, a fascinating line of discussion is dropped because Guiffre herself wants to move on. Her decision not to edit the transcripts resulted in some stilted jumps and unnecessarily wordy dialogues, but a perhaps compensated for by her bravery in allowing some of her more eccentric questions to stand. In a very interview with Elizabeth Harrower, Guiffre asks: "Do you think you have an exquisite sensibility?" Harrower's response is understandably fierce. "What a question! The novelist needs to have some sensibility, but 'exquisite sensibility' might be altogether too precious."

Guiffre's introductions to her interviews include some extraordinarily managed sentences. I couldn't help thinking that the political and social novelist, Mens Calhorne, might have given a host of laughter at Guiffre's description of her. "One sensed the smooth flesh of her discourse, the social awareness and, quite simply, the undramatic intelligence, worth light, like a cardigan over the shoulders." I wonder what an undramatically intelligent cardigan looks like? Something like one of Barrie Unsworth's cardies perhaps, but in black?

A mere Russian immortal's life

'Whom do ye seek? Zhigovo. Why seek ye the living amongst the dead?'

BORIS PASTERNAK
A Biography
Volume 1, 1890-1928
By Christopher Barnes — CUP, 507pp, \$19. ISBN 0 521 25957 6

BORIS PASTERNAK
A Biography
By Peter Levi — Hutchinson, 310pp, \$45. ISBN 0 09 17388 5 6

POEMS 1955-1959
AND AN ESSAY IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
By Boris Pasternak
Collins Harvill, 212pp, \$16.95
ISBN 0 00 27106 5

BORIS PASTERNAK
The Tragic Years 1930-40
By Eugeny Pasternak
Collins Harvill, 268pp, \$32.95
ISBN 0 00 272045 0

JUDITH ARMSTRONG
vital and lively poet's life of a fellow-writer. Levi is no amateur at the biographical task, having already produced a controversial *Life and Times of William Shakespeare*. He is also, self-consciously, a poet and raconteur, weaving slipping in his own responses to the tale he is telling. This is certainly the book to take on a long train journey, for its pace is sometimes breathlessly episodic, and its twists and turns encounter many like Stephen Spender, that of serious attention is paid to the development and quality of Pasternak's poetry, which is examined in the light of other work, for example that of Rilke, Tsvetaeva, and Akhmatova, but also in the poet's epistolary friendship with men like Stephen Spender, Albert Schweitzer, and Thomas Mann.

Levi, a quirky, vital life. *Zhigovo* (then banned in Russia) in the 1950s, the post-glenn rehabilitation of its author and the bringing out of the first official Russian Zhigovo last year parallel Pasternak's own enterprise. Both of these recent reappearances represent the authorities' desire to undo the effects of suppression. The new spurt of public recognition that a century later, his famous figure has been demonstrated in Pasternak's case by the almost simultaneous publication of no less than three Lives and re-edition of one of his own matches of autobiography accompanied by a selection of poems he saw as "preparatory stages" in *Dr Zhigovo*. Paradoxically, the longest of the biographies is still only a half-life; an account of years from 1929 to 1960 is still to come from Christopher Barnes's word-processor. Pasternak's son Eugeny, with his story of *The Tragic Years 1930-40*, might seem to provide us with the balance, but that is more accident of chronology: in the event, his perception of biography could not be more different from Barnes's. Indeed, it is hard to find much to recommend it, unless the reader is happy to sacrifice narrative thread to piles of quotations. There are so many of these that they cannot help but provide some revealing insights, and there is a sense of having been there that no outsider can reproduce. But the only demonstration of scholarship lies in the useful mini-biographies of sometimes obscure individuals appended to the notes.

Christopher Barnes's opus, on the other hand, will undoubtedly find its way into every library — public, institutional or private. It is a work vast and minute research. Its author has been working on various subjects for sometimes obscure individuals appended to the notes. *Zhigovo* (then banned in Russia) in the 1950s, the post-glenn rehabilitation of its author and the bringing out of the first official Russian Zhigovo last year parallel Pasternak's own enterprise. Both of these recent reappearances represent the authorities' desire to undo the effects of suppression. The new spurt of public recognition that a century later, his famous figure has been demonstrated in Pasternak's case by the almost simultaneous publication of no less than three Lives and re-edition of one of his own matches of autobiography accompanied by a selection of poems he saw as "preparatory stages" in *Dr Zhigovo*. Paradoxically, the longest of the biographies is still only a half-life; an account of years from 1929 to 1960 is still to come from Christopher Barnes's word-processor. Pasternak's son Eugeny, with his story of *The Tragic Years 1930-40*, might seem to provide us with the balance, but that is more accident of chronology: in the event, his perception of biography could not be more different from Barnes's. Indeed, it is hard to find much to recommend it, unless the reader is happy to sacrifice narrative thread to piles of quotations. There are so many of these that they cannot help but provide some revealing insights, and there is a sense of having been there that no outsider can reproduce. But the only demonstration of scholarship lies in the useful mini-biographies of sometimes obscure individuals appended to the notes.

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The sultan's pleasures unveiled



HAREM
The World Behind The Veil
By Alevy Lytle Crozier
Bloomsbury, 224pp, \$49.95
ISBN 0 7475 0497 0
Reviewed by MARGARET JONES

brought up in a harem: that is, in this small space there is richness enough to satisfy most people. Crozier is clearly fascinated by the opulence and beauty of harem life, at least as it stood on the grand scale, though she is conscientious enough in recording the atrocities routinely committed against the girls and women in harem during her husband's more formal obligations.

BOOKNOTES
White from 60-odd people, prominent artist and photographer and painter of White — that's a project launched earlier this month by Clayton Joyce. Clayton who? Joyce wrote to *The Australian* on February 2 asking readers to send to him, at a Kings Cross PO box, recollections of how they discovered White's work, and its impact on their lives. He noted that White would be 78 on May 28 and added that the book "will be published this year".

A letter from *Booknotes* brought a telephone call from Mr Joyce — a painter and Telecom clerk — who says he would donate any proceeds from the book to the Patrick White Award — the \$25,000 going awarded annually from White's Nobel prizemoney. Joyce has received contributions from Manning Clark and Elizabeth Jolley and writes (March 27), "I've seen visitors Arrived! Mapin (USA), Wai Himmara (NZ), James Fenon (UK) and Caryl Phillips (UK) will be published about the book in *The Australian* on March 13."

FOLLOWING the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week? Just hang about and much of the festival will come to you. As a preview to *White Week* (March 27), overseas visitors Arrived! Mapin (USA), Wai Himmara (NZ), James Fenon (UK) and Caryl Phillips (UK) will be published about the book in *The Australian* on March 13.

ON International Women's Days (March 6), a forum and readings around the marketing and publication of writing for women will be held at the graduation ceremony. Participants include Eva Cox, Fiona Giles, Helen Hodgson, Robyn Masters, Jane Singleton, Lyn Spender and Adele Horin.

A BOOK of tributes to Patrick

years, thousands of women were kept hidden away, guarded by eunuchs, for the pleasure of the sultan of the Ottoman Empire. It took the 20th century, and the rise of Kemal Ataturk, to bring segregation of women to an end, really at all.

This emphasis on one particular area is a limitation of the book, but within this small space there is richness enough to satisfy most people. Crozier is clearly fascinated by the opulence and beauty of harem life, at least as it stood on the grand scale, though she is conscientious enough in recording the atrocities routinely committed against the girls and women in harem during her husband's more formal obligations.

The normal way for centuries of getting rid of unwanted concubines was to stuff the women into sacks, tie the neck of the sack tightly, and throw them into the Bosphorus. This was done by the eunuchs under the supervision of the Chief Black Eunuch, who held a position of immense power, and was, Crozier says, "an extremely wealthy man, greatly feared, and consequently the most bribed official in the whole Ottoman Empire".

A change of sultan usually meant a small massacre in the harem, with the girls who were pregnant the first to go. As it was also the custom for the harem sultan to murder his illegitimate male relatives, nobody wanted too many tears on the women of the harem. Understandably, opium addiction was common. The nights in the harem swelled with key (ultimate fulfillment) induced by opium pills and the drowsy peace of faded senses. The women indulged in drawn-out opium rituals, spending the evenings talking book-ishly or eating opium, the "elixir of

night", dreaming of faraway lands beyond the latticed windows. There are many omissions in Crozier's book. There is only one passing reference (and that in a quote from Flaubert) to the practice of excising the clitoris, so that women who were highly trained in the art of giving pleasure could rarely experience it themselves. Feminists will find the book disappointing, as apart from a few ideas thrown out in a brief concluding chapter, it fails to explore the whole phenomenon of female segregation, which still exists today in Muslim countries, and even manifests itself in the West in the oddities as the exclusion of women from clubs. There is still a massive book to be written on this subject.

Margaret Jones is a former literary editor of the Herald.

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THE ROYAL SYDNEY GOLF CLUB
A HISTORY
Applications are invited from suitably qualified persons interested in writing a history of the Royal Sydney Golf Club for its centenary in 1993. The Club has for some time employed the services of an archivist who has catalogued a great deal of data which would be made available to the writer appointed. It is estimated that the history could take 6 to 12 months and any event the Club is desirous to have the work completed in time to publish and print prior to January 1993. A suitable remuneration will be negotiated with the successful applicant. Applications in writing should be addressed to The Secretary, The Centenary Sub-Committee, The Royal Sydney Golf Club, Kent Road, ROSE BAY, N.S.W. 2029.

GRADUATION DETAILS
I wish to have my name considered for placement on the Electoral Roll of Graduates.
1. SURNAME
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