

# Leon Rooke

## IN THE GARDEN

She goes into her bedroom and takes her time selecting a nice scarf from her dresser drawer, something in a fetching complimentary blue—

"Yes, this one I think," and ties the silk loosely about her throat.

"Now I'm so pretty," she remarks aloud, "I am pretty enough to sing sing sing! And why not, while I'm at it, telephone Estelle?"

Estelle's phone—can you believe it?—rings and rings. But Rebecca—following a crow's black flight across the bay (Oh look at him swerve and dive, if only I could fly like that!—is not fooled. Oh, she's home, she thinks. Certainly she's home. Where else could she be but at home!

In one of her moods, possibly.

Mustn't discount her elfish moods.

One of her I-don't-want-to-see-anyone days. Doubtless nursing old grudges by the ton. Got the brush-off from Harold, could be. Oh, the poor little down-trodden bird.

"None of your business," Rebecca tells herself. "Honey, you stay out of this."

She laughs. Estelle is so funny when she's in her moods. No, one can't help laughing.

A fruitcake, that's what Estelle is on her rainy-day days.

"No way out of it," Rebecca says. "I'd better shoot right over."

A swarm of gnats—fruit flies, she supposes (*Genus drosophila*, diptera, transparent of mind and wing, oh go away, gnats!)—hangs in the air just short of Estelle's door, which swarm Rebecca steers straight through, thinking surely they will scatter. But they come right along with her, a net of floating black dots. They swirl about, an inch up, an inch down, untouched, as she swats. "Shoo, shoo!" she says, "oh, scat!" Finally she wades through, knocks on Estelle's bright red door.

All the curtains drawn, house sealed up tight. Estelle, honey, is it as bad as all that?

"Yoo-hoo! It's me!"

She can hear music playing over the stereo—or radio—something classical. Hapschordish, may be. Old Worldish anyway.

Estelle being *grand*.

Grim church music to aid and abet the foul downspin.

"Let me in at once, darling!"

The door opens an inch and no more. The chain remains in place.

"Why have you kept me waiting here for so long?" Rebecca says. "You should do something about this plague of wild gnats."

All she can see of her friend Estelle is one eye in the crack. She appears to have a bandage of some sort half-covering it.

"Go away," whispers Estelle.

"But I've walked miles," replies Rebecca, not worried in the least by such rudeness. Ooo-la-la, that's Estelle. "My feet hurt. It isn't easy in these high heels. I've probably got a blister, if you want to know. Anyway, I've got to talk to you. It's imperative. You are my best friend."

The door quietly closes.

Uncanny. Oh Estelle, why are you treating me this way?

She can hear Estelle's footsteps across the floor, something clattering down

The woman—the one who stands here at her apartment windows in her blue stockings and blue shoes and a blue raincoat that hangs to her heels—the woman up here behind her windows high over the city's wayward slopes (Oh snow, oh hoary winter's drool!) and over the murky green waters (Needs stirring, I'll say) of Fisherman's Bay . . . is thinking: *What next? What to do with myself today that can be half the fun yesterday was?*

"Life calls!" she suddenly trumpets, surprised herself by the sound of her voice and by all the joy that, like a grinning lunatic, has leapt inside her. (I'm chappy as a tick, one might conclude I've been drinkin'.)

She carefully puts down her glass.

"Eleven a.m.," she gloats, "all's well!"

She steps out on her narrow balcony, shivering (Merciless winter, oh sweet-jeus will spring never come?), bending low and dangerously over the railing to peer inside the recessed sliding doors of the apartment below.

Feet, feet, she thinks, that's all I've ever seen. Shine your shoes, Mister-Man-

Down-There.

No feet today, however. The glass needs cleaning and he ought to throw out those two dying ferns.

"I'll call Estelle," she says. "My good friend Estelle."

Do do call Estelle, give the little lady a fine thrill.

But Estelle, it turns out (Dear me, I've split my britches), is not home. (Not in? At this hour? What is that elfin horror trying to prove?)

So Rebecca—woman by the window—goes back to the window and again looks out over the close-rippling water (Ten years in this place and I've yet to see a fisherman there, only boats and more boats, teeny putt-putts, you'd think civilized people would have better things to do)—looks out over the city slopes to the high, snowy mountains beyond (Oh fold upon fold upon fold, tedious and exhausting, but rather exquisite, yes, I do like it, this is such a friendly part of the world).

Oh, she thinks, what can I have been thinking of  
Of course.

(Temper, temper, oh what a temper she has!)—then the music coming on again, bit louder this time, some kind of silly piano piece, like four birds chirping from a high fence.

Rebecca swatted at the gnats. "Shoo!" she said. "Shoo! Oh, rats! . . ." She walked slowly out to the street, her head down. At the curb she turned and regarded Estelle's house most pensively (Drab, Estelle, very drab. Most shoddy). The house was indeed drab, small and low-slung, like a Crackerjacks box down on its side, and ridiculous with its red door.

Rebecca patted one foot against the pavement. She knotted the scarf tighter against her throat.

Poor Estelle, she thought, how can I cheer her up?

She wondered if any of the other people in their houses along the street were watching her. I certainly should be, she thought. I would *continue the investigation* until I knew precisely what was going on. Who is that woman? I'd ask myself. What can she possibly want? Or, if I were another woman watching me, I'd think: where could she have found that beautiful blue coat!

I'd smoke, that's what I'd do. I'd light up a lovely blue cigarette, oh I'd have a killing-good taste of the weed.

I will anyway.

No, no, children might be watching.

An old man, four houses down, was out in his driveway washing his car. Rebecca studied him. Wouldn't it be pleasant, and a nice thing to do, to go and talk to him?

... I was dropping in on my friend up the street," she said, speaking from a distance of several dozen yards, "but she does not appear to be receiving."

The man, less old than she had presumed, was down on his knees sudging a hubcap; he did not look up.

"Her name is E. Beverly Sims," Rebecca went on drawing closer. "She lives in that flat house with the screwy box hedge by the front porch. I'm sure you must know her well. Estelle is the very outgoing type, and she has a splendid figure. In a nice friendly neighborhood such as this one is everyone must know everyone."

The man, she now observed, stepping up beside him, had a poky face and practically no hair. He was chewing on the nub of a cigar while squinting up at her. She admired his way of sitting on his heels.

"Where I live it is not the least like that. I live in a small but very efficient apartment down by the Bay. A condominium. You wouldn't believe what it cost. I'm way up on the twelfth floor, and can see for miles. Do you know that huge ships pass my window at night? Far out, of course. But I have a large telescope mounted on a nice tripod. I am continuing my investigation of these ships. It's easily the most interesting hobby I ever had."

"I'm washing this car," the man grumbled.

Rebecca realized that the remark was somehow meant to put her in her place.

She laughed.

"I can see that. It must have been extremely dirty."

This comment clearly interested him. He rose up off his haunches, backed up a few paces, lit his cigar, and stared appreciatively at the automobile.

"It was filthy," he said. "My son had let this car go to the dogs." He spat, very close to his feet, and backed up a bit more. "They tell me young boys like nothing better than sharp cars to show off with the girls, but I give this car to my son and he has not yet got behind the wheel once."

"Oh my," said Rebecca. "That is curious behavior indeed."

Soap suds all along the car side were drying in the sun. But the man seemed more interested in the hubcap. He stooped beside it, buffing up the chrome with his sleeve. "Of course, he doesn't have his license yet. I give this car to him for his sixteenth birthday, but he has some months to go." He peered up at Rebecca. "Do you know Harold?"

"Your son? No, I—"

"You wouldn't like him. He is the most stuck-up boy I ever saw. Something of a sissy, too, you want to know the truth. Bet you can't guess why."

"Hormones, I bet," said Rebecca. "I bet his hormones got sent straight up a tree."

"Not hormones," he said. "His mother. His mother has pampered the little rat since the day he was born." He paused, flipping his cigar in the dirt. Then he walked over and ground at it with his heel. "He is out now at Symphony School. Harold. He plays the oboe." He picked up the cigar, examining its mangled leaves between his fingers. "This cigar," he said, "it's real Havana. I got a pal sends them to me from Canada. Real cold up there. I got maybe twenty, twenty-five these rascals left." He spread the tobacco out in his palm and poked at it with a finger. "Real beauties, these cigars. I bet they cost my buddy a mint. But he owes me. He owes me a fortune, tell you the truth. You know why?"

Rebecca batted her eyes. "Why?" she asked. It had struck her that this man was somewhat odd.

"Because I stole his wife. I stole her right out from under his nose. One day there he was, married to the prettiest woman you ever saw, and the next day she wasn't there anymore. She liked me best, you see. I had the real goods but Ralph—old Ralph—well, old Ralph didn't have *nothing* and the next thing he knew he was out in the cold. Yep, between the two of us we really put it to him."

Rebecca considered this. She wasn't sure she liked it.

"Happy?" the man said. "You never saw two people so happy as the wife and me. Regular lovebirds." He shot a hasty look at Rebecca. "Then we had Harold. Beginning of the end."

Rebecca laughed. That phrase had always been one of her favorites.

"You probably know what I mean," he said. "Kids! Look at Job. He had a house full of kids, but what good did they ever do him? Only more misery." Rebecca felt that she had been silent far too long. She thought it only right that she should point out *there was another side*.

"You would not think that," she told him lightly, "if you were in India, or in Greece, or even in Japan. Suppose you were in China and believed as you do? At the minimum, you'd be ostracized, and probably you'd be shot."

"Fine by me," he replied. "If I had to live in those places I'd want to be shot."

Rebecca walked over to the concrete steps leading up to the front door and sat down, crossing her legs prettily. She lit up a cigarette with her gold lighter and closed her eyes, holding her head back, blowing out the first draw of smoke in a long, measured stream.

"Nobody told you to sit there," the man reproached her. "This is private property." He seemed suddenly very angry.

"... But sit there if you want to. What the hell, who ever listens to me?" "I'm sure you've a very strong character," said Rebecca. "I'm sure you must dominate any circle you enter."

He puzzled over this a moment, then, shrugging, dropped down on his ankles again and began scrubbing the rear hubcap, his back to Rebecca. She noticed for the first time the baseball cap stuffed into his pocket. She found this intriguing, a strongly personal touch. She wondered what kind of hat he would have stuffed there had he been born in India. She found it charming, where men put their hats. He looked so round and full, stooped like that, a complete little world, total to the point even of where he put his hat. She smiled. She liked the way he bobbed up and down on his ankles, how his heels lifted up out of his shoes; his little grunts, too, were very charming. She could see an expanse of pink skin and now his underpants—swatch of black polka dots—rode up over his hips. She wondered if he would be interested in hearing what she had read about Babe Ruth—not so long ago that she had forgotten—in *The New Columbia Encyclopedia*. Sixty homers, imagine that. And born of people so rag-tail poor he had to be sent away to a training school, made to sweep floors for his daily bread. A pitcher, too. Eighty-seven wins in five years, now that was true pitching, that was real horseshoes.

She became aware after a while that the man was watching her out of the corners of his eyes.

She took off one shoe and held it above her head, shaking it as if to dislodge pebbles. But secretly she watched him.

He dropped his sponge into the sudsy bucket, spinning on his heels. His jacket was wet up to the elbows. "Harold's brother now," he announced suddenly, "he's another case. Been begging me for a car for years, but I wouldn't give him the time of day, not even if he got down on bended knee."

Rebecca nodded. "He must have done something extremely reprehensible," she said.

The man gave her a blank look, then shook his head. "Not my son," he explained dully. "No, Norman's the wife's son. I keep telling him he ought to go off live with his real father, but he just whines 'Aw, Dad.' Can't even wipe his nose." He picked up his bucket and went around to suds up the grille.

"Estelle is like that, too," Rebecca said.

The man hiked up his pants. He looked off at the closed windows of his house and over at a stunted, leafless tree at the edge of his yard. "That friend of yours," he said gruffly, "... that Estelle, she's moved out, you know. That place is empty now. No, you'll waste your time knocking on that door."

Rebecca decided to let this pass, and the man dropped back down to his bucket. "I wouldn't give ten cents," he grumbled, "to know anybody on this block. Including your long-gone friend."

Rebecca ignored all this. "Beverly was her maiden name," she told him. "She married a man named Sims when she was twenty-eight, and although that union lasted only a short time she and Mr. Sims remain good friends to this day." She smiled mischievously. "Nowadays Estelle has other interests, I understand. She's in love."

"Spit," he said.

"Actually, she's feverish about this particular gentleman, but I have reason to believe the relationship is undergoing its difficult moments."

"Patoony," the man said.

"I'm sure you must have seen him. He drives an orange Toyota."

At this the man perked up. He wheeled about, pointing to a spot on the street vaguely in front of Estelle's house. "Orange?" he said. Rebecca took this to mean that he had seen the car in question parked out in front of Estelle's house through nights too numerous to mention.

"They may be good cars," he said gruffly, "but only a traitor would buy one." He smacked a flat, wet hand against the top of his own automobile. "I've seen him," he said. "He wears a hat."

This news tantalized Rebecca. She had never seen Estelle's lover wearing a chapeau of any sort. She stood up now. She had smoked her cigarette and had her visit and was now ready to leave.

"Where you going?" the man asked her.

She smiled, surprised. "Why, I don't know," she said. "I haven't thought about it."

He strode past her to the side of the house, beckoning. "Come inside," he grumbled. "Something to show you. I bought my son a .22 for his birthday. I've got it on a gun rack in the den. I don't suppose you shoot, being a woman—my wife hates it—but what I say is if Harold doesn't go out and shoot something with it the very minute he turns sixteen. I'm going to throw him out of the house." He showed his hands deep into his jacket pockets, scowling back at Rebecca who was lingering. "It beats me," he said, "why women don't like hunting. And fishing. There is not anything more fun than that. Character-building, too. My old man had me out on the marsh with a rifle in my arms before I was two years old. Women! I'll tell you about women. Women have got themselves into this trouble out of their own choosing. They deserve everything they get. Bunch of fools, if you ask me. Silliest thing on two feet. Look at you, for instance. All sky-baby-blue in that silly raincoat and those silly shoes. Well, it's feminine all right but that's all I can say for it."

Rebecca laughed, a low breasty chuckle that brightened her face. She loved insults. She wished he'd say something else—perhaps about her hair or her nice scarf or her blue pocketbook. She wished he'd put on his funny little cap.

"Come on," he ordered. "Want to show you that gun." Rebecca was tempted. Few things pleased her more than seeing how other people lived. She could imagine herself inside browsing through his cupboards,

checking out cereal boxes, opening the refrigerator door to read out the brand names on frozen foods. But she'd been looking at Estelle's house; she was certain she'd seen the front curtain move. "No thank you," she said. "Perhaps another time. I'm often in the neighborhood."

"Buzz off then," he said. "Who asked you? I got better things to do."

The gnats had moved on from Estelle's door. They were now up around the telephone wire where it entered the house, a larger body now, black patch silently lifting and falling, swaying, against the clear blue sky.

"It's me again," Rebecca called, knocking.

The house was silent. Four or five rolled newspapers were on the ground beneath the hedge, soiled and wet, further indication to Rebecca that Estelle's love life had reached the cut-throat stage.

"I've brought you your reading matter!" she shouted, bent at the keyhole, thinking she detected shadowy movement inside.

"I'll huff and I'll puff!" she called. "Stand back!"

Estelle didn't respond.

A tomb.

The back of the house was deserted, too. Curtains were drawn over the windows, and a beautiful spider web had been spun over the upper portion of the door. Crumpled newspaper filled a hole down in the corner of one cracked window. Under the roof line stretched a series of old homies' nests, or dirt-daubers' sturdy quarters. The garbage can was overturned, but empty. A rusty barbecue stand was down on its side in the tall grass. Numerous tin cans and milk cartons lay about; a huge cardboard box had been flattened by the rain.

Rebecca took her time contemplating the debris, seated in a white metal chair out near where a composting fixture once had stood. She smoked, and pitched her head back to catch the sunshine. She would have been happy if only she had a drink to sip on.

Gloves, she thought. Why haven't I bought myself a pair of nice blue gloves? The silence of the place fascinated her. She realized she was genuinely enjoying this.

A large fluffy cat, golden in color, hopped up on the picnic table in the neighboring yard. It took turns idly scrutinizing her and, just as idly, licking its fur. "Gin," said Rebecca. "Gin and tonic, I think."

And she stayed on another ten minutes or so, enjoying the invisible drink. Someone not far away was calling. A woman's fragile, unhurried voice repeating: "Oro! . . . Oro! . . . Come home, Oro."

Very musical, Rebecca thought.

A breeze played gently across her face, further subduing her mood, and she let herself drift along in a sweet, dreamy doze, seeing the world before her as though through a haze in which all things moved in tranquil, harmonic order, pleasant and kind.

The sun dropped down rays thick as a lattice fence, golden and alluring. What splendor, she thought. I could be in someone's enchanted garden.

Afterwards, drawing the blue collar up against her neck, feeling somewhat chilled, she stepped again up to Estelle's rear window. She rapped on the glass, looking for a peephole through the curtains.

"Estelle? Estelle, darling, please open the door."

She heard a quick catch of breath within and could feel Estelle's presence on the other side of the wall.

"It's lovely out here, it truly is. You should come out and talk to me. He hasn't hurt you, has he?" She heard a whisper of footsteps, the creak of floorboards, and beat her knuckles sharply against the window. "Oh don't be unhappy!" she pleaded. "Please let me in. He isn't worth this pining, Estelle . . ."

The floor creaked again.

A cat squawked somewhere in the neighborhood, much as if someone were repeatedly pulling its tail.

Rebecca stiffened; she shivered. She whipped her head around, certain that someone had stolen up and was about to hit her on the head.

No . . .

A very old man with an enormous stomach, wearing a checkered shirt and carrying his shoes in his hands, was out on the steps next door, watching her. He leaned against the door frame, putting on one shoe. Then he leaned the opposite way and put on the other.

"I think she's left that place," he said. "I think she moved out four, five days ago."

Rebecca smiled at him.

The man backed up, slowly withdrawing into the house.

Nearby, someone was singing, or perhaps it was a radio. Rebecca stared a moment at the dusty, faded newspaper stuffed into the window crack. "I've got my troubles too, Estelle," she said. "My phone rings every night. It's that man I told you about. He refuses to let up. Every night I think, 'Well, tonight he's going to threaten me' . . . but he never quite does. He's extremely cunning. What do I do, Estelle?"

When Estelle didn't answer, Rebecca went up on tiptoe and tugged the stiff paper free. Then she went up again on tiptoe, straightening her arm, and poked her hand into the small opening. She worked her hand past the jagged glass and past the curtain edge and thrust her arm deeper into the room. It felt cold, very cold, in there.

Something brushed or cut or struck against her flesh and with a faint cry of pain, of fear, she snatched back her arm. Shards of glass tinkled down, her heel twisted in the uneven dirt, and she stumbled back, holding in her breath; she staggered, banged one knee against dirt, then lost her balance totally and landed gracelessly on one hip.

Dizzily, she got to her feet. Her coat sleeve was torn, scar in the blue fabric scarcely larger than a dime; a straight line of blood was popping up in droplets across the back of her hand. It stung.

"You've cut me, Estelle," she said, her voice calm, amazed.

She had a clear vision of Estelle inside the cold room, pressed against the wall, eyes slitted, knife poised, waiting for her again to poke her arm through.

But she wasn't sure. It could have been the glass. She licked the line clean, hastily pulled free her scarf, and wrapped it around her hand.

"That was uncalled-for, Estelle. That was very mean."

She drew back, watching the window.

"But I forgive you."

At the corner of the house she turned, calling again.

"I know you're not yourself today. I really wish you'd let me help you."

She went once more to the front of the house and sat down on Estelle's stoop, brooding on this turn of events.

No, the fault wasn't Estelle's. The fault was Arnold's.

She unfolded one of the newspapers. The moisture had soaked through and the sheet had to be peeled apart. Displayed across the front page was a photograph of Nureyev leaping, his legs flung wide, bare buttocks to the camera, arrow pointing to where his tights had ripped. DANGER SHOWS TRUE FORM, the caption read. But Rebecca shivered at the black headlines. Shivered, and let her head swoop down against the page. 58 DIE IN BLOODBATH . . . OIL RIG GOES DOWN OFF NEWFOUNDLAND, NO SURVIVORS . . . WARSAW ERUPTS.

Yes, she thought and my mother is dead, my husband has left me, I have no children, hardly any life, and no one knows anything at all—or cares!—about poor Rebecca.

But when her head came up she was ruefully smiling.

Yes, all true, she thought, but we shall continue the investigation.

She tuned, peering through Estelle's keyhole.

"Peace Promised for One Zillion Years!" she shouted. "Happiness Lays

Golden Eggs! . . . Man Steps in Pothole, Breaks Legs!"

She removed the scarf from her hand and closely observed the wound. "Nineteen Stitches Required!" she called. "Noted Plastic Surgeon Called In! . . . Lady

Recovers from Heartless Attack!"

The tear in the coat bothered her more. She wondered whether a good seamstress could save the day.

A boy was approaching, yet some distance down the street, slouching, his hands deep into his pockets, small black case tucked up under one arm, his face white as plaster in the sunlight.

Harold.

The man who had been washing the car was no longer in the yard, nor was the car. A woman now stood out in front of the house, arms crossed over her chest. She was looking past Rebecca at the dawdling boy. She wore a print dress, too bold for her thick figure; the hem hung unevenly and the grass cut off her legs. She called wanly to the boy:

"Harold! Harold! He hit me, Harold!"

Harold stopped. Now nearly abreast of Estelle's house, he looked not at his mother but at Rebecca coolly watching from the stoop.

"You don't live there," he said to her. "That place is deserted!"

Rebecca loved this frontal approach. He was sullen, nasty even, but she wanted to reach out and hug him. He was abusive, yes, but it seemed to her that

those who were most insulting were also those who most willingly offered enthusiastic praise.

"What's that under your arm?" she asked him. "Is that an oboe?"

The boy's face clouded. He kicked a shoe against the pavement, standing with his body bent like a quarter moon.

"I wish you'd play for me," Rebecca said. "I haven't heard an oboist play really well in years."

"Who are you?" he growled. "What are you doing in our neighborhood?"

"Harold! He hit me, Harold," called his mother.

The boy put his case on the sidewalk and, crouching, took the instrument from it, polishing the bulbous end on his sleeve.

"I give the pitch to the whole orchestra," he said, standing, glaring at Rebecca.

He blew a strong, high note, which then seemed to falter—but the note came back stronger, more penetrating, thin, only a little plaintive, and it intensified and kept on coming.

"Harold!" called the mother. "He really hit me hard!"

His mother now stood at the edge of her yard, her hands twisting around the narrow trunk of a leafless tree.

The boy scowled at Rebecca. "Sure, I could play," he said. "But I won't. Harold only plays for money."

Rebecca nodded doubtfully, her thoughts drifting, watching the swarm of gnats at the side of the house, hovering a few feet above the scraggly grass.

"You're a very good-looking boy," Rebecca said. "I'll bet you must be every inch of six feet tall."

"He hurt me, Harold!"

The boy came up and sat down on the stoop beside Rebecca.

"I'm very advanced for my age," he told her. "I'm very unusual. In fact, I'm eccentric."

"Well, it is a strange neighborhood," she said.

"Not that strange. The woman who lived here—what was her name?"

"Estelle."

"Estelle was strange. I saw her one night out back of this house, practically naked—in a flowing gown, I mean—down on her knees in front of that chair she's got back there, bowing and bowing, like an Arab. That's strange."

Rebecca smiled. "Not if you know Estelle," she replied softly.

Across the way his mother advanced a few paces, her footsteps weighted, as if deep holes were opening in front of her. When she saw them looking at her she backed up, returning hastily to the tree.

The boy moistened the mouthpiece, allowed his head to settle deep between his shoulders, then played several quick, rather piercing, notes. "Listen to this," he said.

He closed his eyes.

He played.

When the last lingering note faded, Rebecca, only now opening her eyes, clapped enthusiastically. "Oh God," she sighed, genuinely moved. "You're going to be immortal."

The boy stretched out one hand, palm upwards.

"I'm bleeding, Harold!" his mother called.

Rebecca opened her purse. She looked thoughtfully at her bills, then un-snapped her change purse, and dropped two quarters into his hand.

The boy stared glumly at the coins. "What can this buy?" he asked.

"Happiness," Rebecca said. And she smiled in a bewitched way, as if indeed it had.

The boy walked away, pointing with his instrument to the swarm of gnats.

"Those gnats are mating," he said.

At his yard he turned and went on past his mother without a word and entered the house and a few seconds later she left the tree and scooted in after him.

Rebecca leaned back against Estelle's door. "The music was lovely, wasn't it?" she said. "I wonder where such genius comes from."

It seemed to her that from inside the house there came a whispery, half-strangled yes!

Rebecca stayed on, pursuing stray thoughts as they popped into her head. Harold's music, unquestionably very beautiful, had put the Garden of Eden into her mind. A kind of dreamy, springtime garden. Yet now several hundred men, no larger than bees, were erecting a barbed-wire fence around the place.

She laughed. How silly.

"A blight has hit the garden," she said.

Men with rifles were up sniping from their towers. Plunk plunk plunk! Bullets stirred up soft puffs of dust in the arid soil.

Off in the corner, darkened, the Tree of Knowledge hunkered down, like a rat gone fat from too much wine and cheese. The bullets went on plunking.

Plunk plunk plunk!

Rebecca giggled. It's absurd, she thought, but what can be done about it?

"Aim over their heads," a voice said. "We don't want to harm anyone."

Rebecca's heart caught. She recognized that voice.

"Well, one or two," God said, "as an example."

Two or three hundred of the small bee people began to fall. They rolled down into the grass, kicked and lay still, or they screamed and went limp, snagged on the wire.

Plunk plunk plunk!

Rebecca leaped up, throwing her hands over her eyes. "Estelle," she said, "I've just had the most awful vision!" She knocked again on Estelle's door, and kicked at it, and put her eye against the keyhole, and for a moment believed she saw another eye looking back—but then decided this was nonsense, since Estelle lacked any such curiosity. No, Estelle, after such a busy day, would be spread out on her bed, damp cloth across her brow, claming headaches, claming troubles, agony too painful to mention.

I too was once like that, Rebecca thought. I believed I didn't have a friend in the world.

Like something shoved over the edge . . . and still falling.

But she had learned, better long ago. People valued her. Friends were ever eager to see her. They let her know without any guile or trickery—without any reservations whatsoever—that their doors were always open.

"Any time, Rebecca. For you we are always home."

She brushed off the seat of her raincoat, fluffed her hair, and started towards the street. "I'm going now!" she called. ". . . Take care of yourself! . . . Enjoyed visiting! . . . See you tomorrow!"

Maybe. Maybe she would see her tomorrow.

At any moment she expected to see Estelle yanking open the door, flinging herself down the path, embracing and pulling her back.

"Chin up, darling! . . . Accept no wooden nickels!"

But the red door remained firmly shut.

She wondered what Harold would be doing. Where Arnold would be in his

orange Toyota.

What next? Who to see?

She'd go home first, laze around a bit. Have a quiet smoke, perhaps a nice gin and tonic. Watch the big, distant ships hulking ever so silently by on Fisherman's Bay. Watch the fog—watch darkness—descend slowly over the water.

Think this matter through.

Think about it tomorrow.

## LEON ROOKE: BIOGRAPHY

- By Nadja Gernalzick, University of Mainz
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### Summary

LEON ROOKE WAS BORN in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina, in 1934 and attended the University of North Carolina in the late 1950s and early 1960s. His Southern background as well as the similarities regarding the themes and techniques of his writing to, for instance, the work of Flannery O'Connor have led critics to count Rooke among the Southern writers of the United States. Yet while Rooke considers O'Connor's and other Southern writers' oeuvres part of his stylistic training (see Rooke in Hancock 1981, 116, 120), he refuses to be identified as a writer in this particular tradition because he does not want to be associated with Southern racial politics: "Then came the sixties. Martin Luther King singing 'We Shall Overcome' and a strong sense of too many in the older order singing 'You Shall Not.' And that did something to my sense of loyalty to the region. It took away some of the ghost's power" (Rooke in Hancock, 120). Thus, having moved from the United States to Victoria, British Columbia, in 1969, Rooke has been more aptly described as "an American who has adopted the Canadian West Coast as his home" (Gadpaille 1988, 111); in 1981 he called himself "now Canadian" (Rooke in Hancock, 146). Rooke has since lived at various places in Canada. Nonetheless, when his writing is appropriated by a national literary tradition, Rooke — as a member of the large group of authors who have emigrated to Canada from all over the world since the 1960s — claims allegiance with an international standard: "The only tradition I dimly perceive is that one where we find the writer attempting to write well and knowing from the start the likelihood of failure. ... And it is a territory without boundaries or borders, which is to say that it can be found anywhere" (Rooke in Hancock, 109). In accord also with recent redefinitions of Canadian identity, Rooke's literary work is therefore considered to have played "a crucial role in anticipating ... a shift away from the nationalist paradigm of representation, based on recognizably Canadian themes and voices, to the current post-nationalist view of Canada as a pluralistic, multicultural and multiracial society" (Gorjup 1999, 269).



OPEN BOOK

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## NEWS AND INTERVIEWS

*The In Character Interview With Leon Rooke*

Leon Rooke has been called "a national treasure" by the *Globe and Mail* with good reason — his contributions to CanLit over an astounding 50 years of work have been hugely influential. And he's not slowing down anytime soon. His most recent book is *Swinging Through Dixie* (Biblioasis), is a formally interesting combination of two novellas and three short stories. United by place and atmosphere, the pieces have drawn comparisons to the likes of Jose Saramago or Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

We're pleased to welcome Leon to the site today to talk about the men, women, and children who populate the pages of *Swinging Through Dixie*, as part of our ongoing In Character series.

He tells us about how to change one's name in Texas, the value of eavesdropping in public places, and what it is like to relate to the characters in his nearly 350 (!!!) short stories to date.

***Open Book:***

Tell us about the main character in your new book.

***Leon Rooke:***

With two novellas and three short stories in *Swinging Through Dixie* we have lots of main characters. Both novellas, one set in Dixie, the other in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, delineate a vast assortment of local inhabitants. Central to Dixie is a married pair of pool sharks and their young son, who may or may not be — but probably is — the author; *Trading With Mexico* portrays a Zapatista hamlet, with most of the action revolving around a disturbed mother, her perfect daughter, and the daughter's love for a boy found tied to a tree when his village was destroyed by government marauders.

***OB:***

Some writers feel characters take on a "life of their own" during the writing process. Do you agree with this, or is a writer always in control?

***LR:***

I would distrust almost any work of fiction in which the characters did not take on a "life of their own." That the writer, thereby, loses control is a misconception fostered, I suspect, by writers who do not that much enjoy what it is they do.

***OB:***

How do you choose names for your characters?

***LR:***

One of the stories in this book, set in Texas, is called "Sara Mago et al." In Texas, for \$29.95 and postage, one may change one's name. Sara Mago, a waitress in a bleak dining establishment



miles from any place, has done that. Does she love the great Portuguese author Saramago so much? It seems so. It's rare that we think the names our friends have are the wrong names for who they are. Character names should work a bit like that.

**OB:**

What is your approach to crafting dialogue, particularly for your main character? Do you have any tips about writing dialogue for aspiring and emerging writers?

**LR:**

I began writing in my teens, and to learn how people talk I installed myself in public establishments where I could overhear them. And of course I read widely, taking note of how writers did it. A good exercise for beginning writers is to compose page after page of dialogue, scrapping the she said/he said, while at the same time incorporating a narrative — telling a story — in naught but speech. Look upon pure dialogue as yet another way to reveal character and advance the story.

**OB:**

Do you have anything in common with your main character? What parts of yourself do you see in him or her, and what is particularly different?

**LR:**

I've published a batch of novels and nearly 350 short stories, and a good many characters in these works are not people I'd want over for dinner. The majority, however, are fine, loving, highly-motivated people only a teensy bit screwed up. Funny thing is, with *Swinging Through Dixie* — which has a large cast — I feel a strong commonality with practically everyone in the book.

**OB:**

Who are some of the most memorable characters you've come across as a reader?

**LR:**


Peculiarly enough, it's often a book's distinctly minor figure that hangs most powerfully in my memory: someone like the little guy, with scissors, always *snip-snipping* the grass, — Ibrahim, I think, is his name — in Paul Scott's great *Staying On*. Or take a devastating short story of Leonard Michaels, "Manikin," about rape and suicide, which opens with the line "At the university she met a Turk..." and closes with the author ushering in a character, Wanda Chung, by name, who previously did not exist in the story. Or Flem, in Faulkner's novel *The Hamlet*, forced into a secondary role by the brilliant "characterization" of his string of incredibly wild ponies being sold at auction.

**OB:**

What are you working on now?

**LR:**

A long piece, novel or novella, called *Keeper of the Tides*.

 **Leon Rooke** is a novelist, short story writer, playwright, editor, and critic. He was born in rural North Carolina, but has been a resident of Canada for many years. Over the course of his career, Leon Rooke has been writer-in-residence at numerous North American universities, including the University of Victoria, Southwest Minnesota State University, and the University of Toronto. Rooke is also the recipient of numerous awards and honours, including the Canada-Australia Literary Prize (1981), the Governor General's Literary Award for *Shakespeare's Dog* (1985), and the North Carolina Award for Literature (1990).