

DELIBES, Miguel. *Smoke on the ground*, tr. by Alfred Johnson. Doubleday, 1972. 143p 79-186031. 5.00

One of Spain's foremost writers today, Miguel Delibes has had 14 books published, both fiction and nonfiction, including best sellers and prize winners, works widely translated into other languages. Like his other books, *Smoke on the ground* reveals its author's interest in children and once more emphasizes his love of animals, plants, and the natural world. This novel follows the daily routine of a small boy's life in a village from one autumn to the next, through winter, spring, and the following harvest. In contrast to the puppet-like characters in his earlier *La mortaja* (CHOICE, Dec. 1971), the picturesque characters of the present novel seem much warmer, more human, capable of more humor, characters more likely to linger in a reader's memory. The story begins and ends with death: first, the loss of Nini's grandparents; at the end, the death of the young man who so fascinated him. Yet it is a gentler pathos than that which so weighs down *La mortaja*. The translation, while lively and colloquial, carrying over the feeling and color of the original, is nonetheless marred by some unacceptable if careless English. The publisher neglects to give the original Spanish title.

CHOICE MAR. '73

Language & Literature

Romance

WB



FUNDACIÓN MIGUEL DELIBES

Miguel Delibes

AMD, 37, 13, 1

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A4 Sunday News & Leader
Springfield, Mo., Dec. 31, 1972

Rec

A Look Behind Irish Warfare

THE
CRIM
by Fr
Fred
croft
pages

THE SAVAGE DAY, by
Jack Higgins; Holt, Rinehart
& Winston, New York, 182
pages, \$5.95.

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Jack Higgins (a pseudonym)
has successfully fictionalized the
present situation in Ireland as

Youth a Match

For Villagers

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SMOKE ON THE GROUND,
by Miguel Delibes; Doubleday
& Co., New York, 143 pages,
\$5.00.

A slim volume but a most touching one, the effort of a writer who has gained high regard in his native Spain and being offered in an English translation now for the first time.

It is a story that centers in a remote village in rural Castile north of Madrid — an unusual part of the world where all of the days are known by the saints they represent, where the seasons are remembered for their rain and snow or their blistering sun. Central figure is a young boy, wise in the ways of the natural world which supports him, and his adventures with the sometimes beneficent, sometimes cruel, sometimes foolish people of the village.

The translation was undertaken by Alfred Johnson, professor of romance languages at Amherst College.

Waco (Tex)

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Tribune Herald



Sunday, Aug. 13, 1972

BOOK REVIEW

'Smoke On The Ground'

A Little Gem

Miguel Delibes. 143 pp. Doubleday. \$5.

By GYNTER QUILL

Amusements Editor

Miguel Delibes, Spanish prize-winning novelist, is a lover of simplicity, of children, nature and the near-primitive existence, or at least the unsophisticated way of life, and he has a monochromatic way of presenting them, too.

"Civilization" is accompanied by penalties that, for some, make it not worth the price. His little gem, "Smoke on the Ground," of a value out of proportion to its size, makes that point and does it in a setting that is far from handsome and far removed from the traditional romantic vision of the soft Spanish landscape.

It is told directly, with an economy unstrained by any effort to tell it better by telling it longer, is entertaining as it was meant to be and has an element of charm that perhaps was unintentioned but is there anyway.

Little Nini is a product of his time, the time his poor, remote village tries to cling to though buffeted by a different one imposed from the outside, and of his environment. There is no calendar except that of nature — the time to plant, the time to harvest, the time of snow and rain, the time of scorching sun — and that of the Church, the day of San Quinciano, San Damaso, or some other saint.

It is Nini who represents the unspoiled world of the region, who understands it, uses it, witnesses the undesired changes wrought in it and people marked and marred by the new. He isn't meant to charm, to be a child to take to the heart, but a part of him gets there.

He lives with the Old Ratter, who lives in a cave because he likes it, which angers Justito the Mayor, who thinks everyone should live in a house.

The Old Ratter, and his old bitch Fa, hunts rats, eats some fried and sprinkled with vinegar and sells the rest in the village. He isn't an exterminator, though. He spares the rat nesting in her burrow, for one nest is worth 40 reales in the near future.

No one but he is wiser in the ways of nature than Nini, who learned much from his grandfathers and much by observing and listening. Nature, the animals, birds, fruits and berries, gives him his food and the people give him money for his advice on the weather or how to get rid of crows.

He puts his skill to work for those whom he likes, curing their animals or expertly butchering their pigs, and against those he dislikes, as in imitating the distressed rabbit to call to foxes away from where Matias Celemin, the Weasel, is hunting.

The villagers have their joys and their problems with the economy, the weather, the mud and filth of undrained streets, celebrations of weddings and funerals, the gossip and philosophizing chiefly from Dona Resu, dubbed the Eleventh Commandment for it, their quarrels in the dirty cantina run by Balbino, named Malvino for his drunken temper.

But the central conflict in the unfeeling Mayor Justito's efforts, goaded by the civil governor and accompanied by threats of dynamiting, to force the Old Ratter from the cave and into a house, for he is a disgrace to a 20th Century town.

Then comes another, a young ratter from the neighboring town, who encroaches on the old one's preserve, and if he doesn't stop it, says the old one, he will kill him — and he means it.

victs.)
Columbas OB
Atmospheric
Dispatch
Novel Of
Rural Spain
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11-5-72

SMOKE ON THE GROUND.
By Miguel Delibes; Doubleday, \$5.

This brief novel by the well known Spanish author, translated by Alfred Johnson, may well become a classic. A pastoral in the true sense of earthbound, utterly primitive, almost sub-human people, it presents a cycle of the seasons in rural Spain and tells of the year's adventures of the boy Nini who lives in a cave with the town Ratter — so called from his profession.

Their efforts to stay in the only home they know, despite natural and human opposition, end in elemental tragedy.

DESPITE the encompassing cruelty, cunning and ignorance, the personality of the boy is gently and tenderly developed.

The innocent character of the unschooled, compassionate child, deeply knowledgeable of the nature lore of his people and of the religion, is beautifully presented, side by side with the sometimes horrific customs of these feral folk, and the splendid pageant of the year in earth and flower and plants and weather and the animal population.

The style and the steady story line make for unforgettable reading.

DELIBES is a teacher, a traveller, whose work is used in the schools of many countries; he is the father of eight children and understands well the natural order of life. The translator is himself a teacher of romance languages at Amherst, and is a personal friend of the author.— Geneva Stephenson

THE PAGEANT OF EARLY VICTORIAN ENGLAND. By Elizabeth Burton; Scribners; \$7.95

Fourth in a series of readable and informative volumes of British social history, the first three having covered the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Georgian eras. Again, drawings by Felix Kelly enliven a lively text.

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DELIBES

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23

Book Shows Spanish Villagers

SMOKE ON THE GROUND
by Miguel Delibes. Doubleday
and Co., Inc. publishers. 143
pages. \$5.00.



Reviewed By
BEA WILLIAMS

This is an unusual story, translated from the Spanish by Alfred Johnson, professor of romance languages at Amhurst College.

The author has chosen to reveal a very special world . . . a remote village in Castille where every day is named for a saint, years are measured by the size of the harvest and life is an unceasing battle against the elements . . . the cold, the rain, the drought.

The boy, Nini, who is enor-

mously wise in the way of the natural world and almost revered by the older people because he can foresee weather changes, lives with his father, the Old Ratter in a cave.

They kill and sell rats for a living, since rats are a delicacy in such a poor land.

Nini's adventures with the animals, who are his friends, and the people of his village, who may or may not be his friends, are both touching and funny.

Spanish Author Peoples Novel

Beaumont (Tex) Journal

With Simple Country Villagers

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11-2-72

SMOKE ON THE GROUND

By Miguel Delibes

Doubleday & Co., Inc.

Nini was happy living in the cave with the Old Ratter, a professional hunter of rodents, and the dog, Fa. The skinny young boy knew how to "relate the weather to the calendar, the crops with the calendar of the saints, to predict sunny days, the arrival of the swallows and the late frosts.

He had learned to spy on the hedgehogs and the lizards; to distinguish an azure-winged magpie from an indigo bunting and a stock dove from a wood pigeon."

All these things he could do because he listened to the old men and kept a constant watch on all the activities of the villagers. But, oracle-like, he disseminated his knowledge and no one was surprised when Farmer Pruden said "I tell you, that Nini knows everything. He's like God."

SMOKE ON THE GROUND is peopled by simple country folk in a remote Castilian village. Their lives are steeped in a superstition which, to them, is reality. Existence is dated from

Saint Day to Saint Day, with births and deaths between accepted as the regulated order of things.

Progress tries inroads. The Extremadurans experiment in reforestation; the oil men seek wealth in the hills; the civil governor plans to close the crumbling caves as too dangerous—even the Department of Public Health decides that rats (even marinated in vinegar) are no proper diet.

Nini is young and an adapter. But Old Ratter, to whom rats are both food and friends, cannot change—progress, and the people who bring it are his enemies. Violence erupts in a somehow-expected climax to a starkly realistic tale.

The author of SMOKE ON THE GROUND is Miguel

Delibes, a teacher in Valladolid, Spain, and one of the country's leading authors. One novel won the prestigious "Nadal" prize. Alfred Johnson, the translator, is a professor of romance languages at Amherst College, and a close personal friend of Delibes.

—Bernice Grey

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Smoke On The Ground by Miguel Delibes; Doubleday; 133 pages, \$5.

LUELLA EDGAR

A more miserable listing of calamities I hope I never see!

The locale of Delibes' story is a little village near Castille, Spain. The main character is Nini, the son of a brother and sister.

The mother retreated into mental oblivion when Nini was a small child, and was committed to the asylum for the insane. Nini and his father live in a cave overlooking the village and valley, and trap rats for the villager's cuisine.

Nini is a sensitive, kind nine-year-old, and credited with a super-intelligence by the villagers. They seek his advice for everything — when to plant, when to harvest. Hog

killing was postponed until Nini said the time was right.

The title of this book relates to Nini's prediction of rain — that the villagers had been praying for — when he observed the smoke from their cave fire traveling along the ground instead of moving skyward.

There are a few gentle moments, quickly erased by some shocking brutality — such as the incident concerning the yearly practice of the villagers beating to death a cow in order to ease the angry frustrations built up during the previous year by their environment and circumstances.

The gentleness is Nini slipping out the night before the "festival" and releasing the cow.

Believing that to be worth the time of writing, a book should be worth the time of reading, there is little to justify this one. It is not entertaining, nor enlightening, and certainly not inspiring.

EUDACIA MIGUEL DELIBES

**S M O K E O N T H E
G R O U N D.** By Miguel Delibes.
143 pp. Garden City,
New York: Doubleday and
Co. \$5.00.

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This one sounded rather promising, but the promise went tantalizingly unfulfilled. Miguel Delibes is one of Spain's foremost authors and has captured awards for fiction and non-fiction, as well as considerable acclaim for best-sellers.

The present story is about a child whose strange wisdom casts a strong influence for good and for evil on the other inhabitants in his agricultural Castille community. The steady flaw in presentation may be the responsibility of the translator, Alfred Johnson. Whosever the fault, the boy comes across as too quaint and precious, and that pretty well spoils it all.

—J. D.

Chattanooga

Times

10-8-72

INDICATOR

MIGUEL DELIBES

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10-1-72

One year in life of Miguel

Quinston (ala) Star

“SMOKE ON THE GROUND,” by Miguel Delibes: Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y., 1972, \$5.

“Smoke on the ground. . . rain all around,” goes an old Spanish proverb. Miguel Delibes, a prominent Spanish writer, teacher and lecturer, has chosen it for the title of his latest novel, the story of a young boy and the people of his Castilian village.

Nini lives in a cave with his half-witted father, known as the Ratter. Their life is harsh, even cruel, a hand-to-mouth existence in a bleak land. But Nini is regarded with a certain respect by the villagers, for he is already wise beyond his years and possesses an uncanny knack of foretelling the simple things of the farming community — when the frost will end, when the storks will be back for the summer, when it is time to butcher hogs or start mushrooms.

A calm, serene child, he goes through a year of country living — winter, spring planting, summer heat, and harvest — until an act of shocking violence brings a terrible end to the tale.

Himself the father of eight children, Delibes has a deep understanding of the young, and also loves the world of nature. All of these interests enter into this unusual little novel, one of 14 books by this busy author.

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FUNDATION MIGUEL DELIBES
Miguel Delibes

Spanish novel offers slim reward for time spent reading it

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SMOKE ON THE GROUND. Miguel Delibes. Doubleday. 143 Pages.
\$5.00

The kindest remark that I can make about this novel is that it is not excessively long, though it seems endless to a reviewer. Left to my own inclinations, I should have quit after the first ten pages without feeling that my literary future was being blighted by this abandonment.

The story of a year in rural Castille focuses on the young boy Nini, whose mother and father (the Old Ratter) were sister and brother. The child is preternaturally intelligent, albeit only in the ways of the natural world. His is a simple and innocent life, disturbed only by The Weasel and his father's fanatic determination to keep what is his, the cave in which he lives and the business of catching rats. Nini is regarded with great awe by the villagers,

Books

rather cardboard stereotypes of Spanish peasants. Everyone has a nickname, a single predominant characteristic, and the same stilted style of speaking. Delibes seems to pride himself on character creation, but it is a false pride. Even Nini never comes alive, though he is closer to life than any of the other persons in the book.

The plot, loosely termed, concerns itself with the attempts of local authority to evict the Old Ratter from his cave-dwelling because such a life style reflects upon the standard of living in the village. A second thin thread deals with the arrival of a young ratter from outside the village whose presence threatens the livelihood of Nini's father.

Ultimately the Old Ratter kills his

WB

Daily Olympian

Olympia Wash
8-13-72

12



Touches Home

Smoke on the Ground by Miguel Delibes (Doubleday, \$5), is a novel that kind of touches home if you were raised in a small town.

The story takes place in a little village in Spain and centers around a small boy named Nini who lives with his father, a rat trapper, and is supposedly quite wise for a child his age.

The characters who make up the village and the story (each has a nickname to go with his real name) are, in reality, individuals representing the different types of people in the world: good people, evil people, poor people, rich people.

Nini is the typical example of a child growing up in a confused and struggling society. His parents are his brother and sister and his

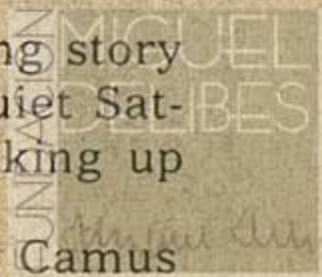
friends are anyone he takes a fancy to, mostly older people and animals.

The superstitiousness and primitiveness of the people is quite refreshing. Each day is given a saint's name and each season is described by the weather. The type of year is marked by the size of the harvest, and life and death are all just a part of time and taken in stride.

Delibes is a colorful and descriptive writer, sometimes a little too descriptive.

All in all, it's a refreshing story one could relate to on a quiet Saturday afternoon while soaking up the sun.

—Vikki Camus



Peninsula Living

Post Office Box 5188

REDWOOD CITY, CALIFORNIA 94063

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WB
OCT 7 1972

"SMOKE ON THE GROUND," by Miguel Delibes (Doubleday, 143 pages, \$5).

This remarkable story is set in a small village in Castille, not named because the livelihood of its inhabitants and the harsh poverty imposed by the land are typical of an agricultural Castilian village. The people exist from season to season, stoically waging a patient battle to eke out a living.

The hero is Nini, a small boy who lives in a cave with his father, Old Ratter. Nini is keenly observant, learning about ani-

mal life, all forms of vegetation, and weather signs. He mingles with the men and from their wisdom and superstition learns to prophesy the weather, tell when to butcher a pig, and answer life and death questions of the villagers.

The artistry of Delibes lies in his vivid, realistic description of the lives of the characters and their pet animals, the vegetation, the weather, and the valley and barren hills.

The plot line portrays Nini and his close contacts with village life. As the reader hears, tastes, smells, and sees crude violence, shrewdness, kindness, pathos and pride in the daily procession of village life, he vicariously becomes a simple, puzzled Castilian villager. Delibes, one of Spain's leading modern authors, lives up to his reputation in this poignant novel.

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—Bob Vanderlip

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FUNDACIÓN MIGUEL DELIBES
Miguel Delibes

Recent Release That M

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Smoke on Ground

SMOKE ON THE GROUND, by Miguel Delibes, (translated from the Spanish by Alfred Johnson (Doubleday, 143 pps., \$5)

THIS SHORT and charming book by one of Spain's leading novelists captures the essence of true literature — a truthful and penetrating look into the human condition.

In "Smoke on the Ground," Delibes tells a tender tale of a small peasant boy living out a year in a poor Spanish village. His companion is a mongrel dog, and side by side they meet, talk with and live among: a recluse who catches and sells rats for food (after all, they are similar to rabbits and people eat those); a 100-year-old village sage dying from cancer; a shrewish old maid who finds fault with everyone and everything, and an inept government official who thinks his title forgives his incompetence.

I don't know whether the original Spanish contains the vivid and inspiring descriptions of the translation, but the English version describes the countryside, the weather, the food, and everything with a flourish. The reader is transported to a land without TV weathermen, where

you predict tomorrow's weather by the clouds and sunsets. There are no newspapers or radios, and the passage of days is marked by observing the feasts of the saints. And on particular feast days, you know whether to plant crops, kill hogs, or harvest grain.

The simplicity of the tale is deceiving. In this out-of-the-way place across the world, one might be able to find the answers to living with others, and living with oneself. —Jan.

South Bend
Tribune

9-24-72



Camden (NJ) Courier Post
9-13-72

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WB

Delicate Story From Spain

**SMOKE ON THE
GROUND.** By Miguel Delibes.
Doubleday. 143 pages. \$5.

Nini, the boy, and Old Ratter, his father, are the poorest inhabitants of a poverty-stricken Spanish village. Though their neighbors live under the perpetual threat of famine, at least they have hovels for shelter. Nini and Old Ratter must make do with a cave.

But they are poor only to the outward eye. The cave is comfortable and the rats they hunt provide them enough to eat. Why should they yearn after roof or shoes?

THEN THERE is Nini's great gift, the gift of knowledge. Nini reads the weather and the seasons, expertly tracks the hare and the fox, is consulted on such matters as when to kill the pig and how to scare away the crows. In the villagers' eyes, he has almost magical powers.

His magic, however, is not potent enough to avert the evil influence of the Weasel, who also hunts rats. The Weasel, from another village, is no respecter of natural rhythms. He hunts with a gun and will even kill a nesting female.

He is a threat to the livelihood of Old Ratter, whose simple-minded anger finally explodes in violence that destroys all the certainties of his and Nini's lives.

DELIBES has taken these crude lives and crude emotions and, by some miracle of his own, fashioned them into a very delicate novel. His sensitivity and craftsmanship turn the simple story into a work of art that is carefully preserved in Alfred Johnson's fine translation.

Delibes is the author of fourteen books of fiction and



non-fiction, among them several bestsellers and a novel that won the prestigious Spanish "Nadal" prize. He is known in the United States chiefly for his books "El Camino" and "USA y Yo," which are widely used as Spanish language texts.

ANDREA KNOX

Of life in Spain

76

SMOKE ON THE GROUND,
by Miquel Delibes; trans-
lated by Alfred Johnson;
Doubleday, \$5.

This short novel by a distin-
guished author of 14 books,
including best sellers, and
winner of the Spanish
"Nadal" prize is a child's
story for only the most mature
children and adults. Nini
Roman, not yet in his teens,
lives with his father in a cave
outside a town in Castile
where agriculture is, at best,
precarious.

Within sight of a mountain

called "the Nipple of Torrecil-
lorigo," the father and son
pursue the occupation of
"ratting." With their hound
and steel lances to drive rats
from the river bank, they
have for years hunted saleable
game which townspeople say
is as good as rabbit.

With realism and a live-
and-let-live ethic, Delibes
narrates brilliantly the com-
monplaces of Nini's existence;
avoiding sentimentality and
nostalgia, he effects a deli-
cate, sometimes brutal, lyri-
cism of rural life unmatched
in modern English-language
fiction. **EDWARD MORIN.**

Detroit News
10-15-72
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WB
AMD, 37, 13, 1
Louisville Times 10-5-72
17

3 novels explore lost-innocence theme

A review by RICHARD BEARDSLEY

Youth and loss of innocence, a favorite fictional theme, rises again in varying degrees of fascination in three novels written recently by foreign writers.

The best—by far—is "Smoke on the Ground" by Spain's Miguel Delibes. With a simple power that at times approaches poetry, Delibes creates a not-so-pretty world in a remote Castilian village as a stage for a very special boy, Nino.

Nino has no schooling, but he is wise to a point of marvel in the ways of nature. Will the drought end soon, Nino? Will next week be the week we should harvest, Nino? Why are there fewer rabbits this year, Nino? Nino tells them and is always right. The villagers marvel at the boy's mystical powers.

But Nino's gift is not mystical. Nino simply takes the time to watch, consider and understand the signs nature leaves for those willing to see them.

Nino and his father/uncle (a complication of no little embarrassment to "proper" villagers) live in a cave and hunt rats for a living. The governor wants all the caves eliminated (unsightly to tourists and they will think us backward).

The reviewer, a sports reporter for The Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times, concentrated in literature at Colgate University.

The mayor of the village, reacting to the governor's threats and promises, sees Nino and his father/uncle only as hindrances to his political-social advancement.

Delibes provides few surprises as he



the book scene

weaves the plot to an inevitable conclusion—just a growing sense of disgust that one has to identify with his "civilized" characters.

A profound little tale that demands reflection.

Italy's Giorgio Bassani, author of the "Garden of the Finzi-Continis," tells a story that should prove disquieting for any but those who lived an isolated childhood in "Behind the Door."

A young boy of wealth is wrenched from the familiarity of elementary school and tossed into the uncertainty of high school without the very innocent companionship of a friend who had become the center of his life.

Very bright, he finds himself competing, with little success, against the popular class leader. A new "almost repulsive" boy joins the class and immediately attaches himself to the obviously lonesome lad.

But this new friend is cynical, conniving, sexually uninhibited and all too aware of the hold he exerts on his new companion.

With classical precision, Bassani develops the relationships between the boys in muted shades that add to the

starkness of the horrifying conclusion, a moment of betrayal that perhaps every one lives through and from which he is convinced he never will recover.

Thomas Keneally's writing in no way can be considered pretty. But then, there's nothing pretty about the story he tells in "The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith."

Jimmie Blacksmith is an aborigine, "educated" by missionaries helping to claim Keneally's native Australia for the white man at the turn of the century.

Jimmie, his teacher tells him, is someone special, someone with the talent to overcome the strictures of black blood and be a success in the white world.

Taking the words to heart, Jimmie tries, is, of course, rebuked and retaliates with a lust for killing that makes him a scourge of the continent.

"Thomas Keneally has not written 'anybody's protest novel,'" insists the dust jacket of the book. "He has rather held a flawless mirror to man's unending and elemental struggle with his fellow man and with himself."

The dust jacket is wrong. Keneally has written Jimmie's protest novel and a protest novel for all the Jimmies who believed the same lie and reacted with the same violence.

SMOKE ON THE GROUND. By Miguel Delibes. Doubleday. 143 pages. \$5.

BEHIND THE DOOR. By Giorgio Bassani. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. 150 pages. \$5.95.

THE CHANT OF JIMMIE BLACKSMITH. By Thomas Keneally. Viking. \$6.50.

The New Black Poetry

By MEL WATKINS

In the July 30 Book Review David Kalstone said of Jay Wright: "His book ["The Homecoming Singer"] is partly informed by a young black's sense of exclusion. He stands apart from the white society of his childhood . . . but he also, as a child, stood apart from the mysteries of his own blackness." Wright's poetry, then, was cast in a familiar literary mold—the alienated artist struggling for rapprochement with his past and with his society. That traditional posture has a further complication for the black artist, for his exclusion from American society is real, not psychological, and, as yet, unresolved. With the increased publication of young black poets, however, one aspect of that dual alienation is being eliminated. Many black poets are accepting their separation from American society a priori, consequently, their work is focused on reappraising their ethnic experience and attempting to shape a "positive" black consciousness.

The approach of these "new black poets" breaks with established, academic poetic tradition in style and content. There is, moreover, a clear distinction in intent between the poetry of most contemporary black poets and that of their predecessors. To move from Phyllis Wheatley's,

*'Twas not long ago since I left my native shore
The land of errors, and Egyptian gloom.
Father of mercy, 'twas thy gracious hand
Brought me in safety from those dark abodes . . .*

—(From "To the University of Cambridge in England," 1767)

to Countee Cullen's,

*Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."*

*I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember . . .*

—(From "Incident," 1925)

to these lines by Gwendolyn Brooks,

*Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.
Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late*

GENERAL

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The Last Word

*For having first to civilize a space
Wherein to play your violin with Grace . . .*

(—From "First Fight. Then Fiddle," 1963) is to move from an artistic consciousness riddled by self-abnegation and helpless passivity to one defined by defiance and self-assertion.

For the poets who have made that transformation of sensibility, there is an increased opportunity to explore the black psyche and life style without restrictions. Contemporary poets such as Don L. Lee in "We Walk the Way of the New World" and Nikki Giovanni in "Nikki-Roasa" have demonstrated that this can be done with resonance and amplification. And, working both within and without that tradition, poets such as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Larry Neal, Ishmael Reed, Quincy Troup, Calvin Hernton and David Henderson have continually produced successful work.

But there are pitfalls. Since much of the new black poetry is dedicated to "consciousness raising," "teaching," or "coatpulling," as Carolyn M. Rodgers calls it, and is aimed at the black masses, it often tends toward shrill exhortations and direct propaganda of the "Off the Pig!" variety. Elevating the need for black unification (a realistic and effective goal) above all other considerations, as some poets have, has resulted in a lessening of treating the subjective experiences that initially compelled that urgency. Therefore, dramatization, metaphorical speech and ironic illumination growing out of personal experience and insights are often replaced by abstract, staccato commands: "Get up, get up, get up!/Black man." But despite writer-critic Baraka's rightful assertion that "all art is propaganda," it does not follow that all propaganda is art—or poetry.

Moreover, if black poetry is to be judged only by its capacity to communicate and its effectiveness at expanding black consciousness, then it should be

measured against today's popular rhythm & blues songs, for their influence on the black audience is much more immediate and intense. Few poems, for instance, have equalled James Brown's "I'm Black and I'm Proud" in reaching black audiences and raising their consciousness. Certainly songwriters such as Brown, Bill Withers and Curtiss Mayfield have produced lyrics that have elicited more response in black communities and, often, those lyrics have reflected a poetic sensibility missing in the more strident works of legitimate "poets."

How is one to judge contemporary black poetry then? Establishment critics have provided no answers. Often they have reacted negatively to what seems like nothing more than an implicit self-assertive attitude and a reversal of traditional values and images—something that was being done as early as the 19th century in W.E.B. DuBois's "The Song of Smoke" when he portrayed blackness as just and divine and whiteness as hell. There are also those who, as Baraka has suggested, insist that a good poem cannot be written about killing white people. Their critical faculties, however, do not function with the same sensitivity when they are assessing the merits of the writing of H.L. Mencken or a film such as D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation."

The new black poetry, then, functions largely in a critical void. Most black critics and spokesmen assess these works only in terms of their revolutionary fervor and the poet's commitment to black unification; there is little discussion of how well the poet has handled the rudimentary elements of poetic construction. Most white critics are either so defensive about what is being said or so confounded by black linguistic mannerisms and inner-cultural puns and ironies that they debunk these works as "mere verse" or pretend that they don't exist. Still, there are critical and evaluative distinctions to be made about the raft of contemporary black poetry that is now being published. At its best it incorporates the current positive black awareness and consciousness and, by creating new images and employing the elements of black speech, produces imaginative, relevant poetic works. At worst, it is dull, repetitive and simplistically propagandistic. For the sake of the poets themselves, someone should begin making critical distinctions. ■

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1. UPI. 6. H. Cartier-Bresson/Magnum (left); Bruno Barbey/Magnum. 7. Calligraphy by Mao Tse-tung from "The Poems of Mao Tse-tung" (top); Magnum. 20. Al Kaufman. 21. AP.



Julio César

"Smoke on the ground: rain all around"

Miguel Delibes has been for many years one of Spain's most distinguished and best-selling authors. Now, with his first published book in English, Señor Delibes may achieve equal acclaim here.

SMOKE ON THE GROUND is a novel about the villagers of a tiny, remote town in the barren hills of Castille, people who are always aware that they live in precarious balance with an uncompromising nature. In such a community the important individual is always the local authority on vital problems: on how and when to sow, to reap, to slaughter; on the prediction of crop-saving rains, or killing frosts; on habits of livestock and predators. And here the village "patriarch" is, oddly, a very young boy named Nini, who comes by his lore through observation, and patient attention to the advice of a very old man.

The story of Nini and the sometimes beneficent, sometimes cruel, sometimes foolish people of his village is a simple, direct, entertaining narrative. But throughout SMOKE ON THE GROUND, there is also a touching awareness that modernization and "progress" must inevitably win out against older values — values which only Nini, the youngest of the villagers, still clearly sees as worthwhile.

Every advance reader has found the book irresistible. Perhaps Fletcher Knebel, author of the current bestseller, *Dark Horse*, said it best: "This bittersweet story of a boy and the harsh land that he loves and knows with an ancient wisdom haunted me long after the reading ended."

L.L. Day
Editor-at-Large

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Smoke On the Ground, by Miguel Delibes, translated by Alfred Johnson, is available at all Doubleday Book Shops and other fine book and department stores. Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York.

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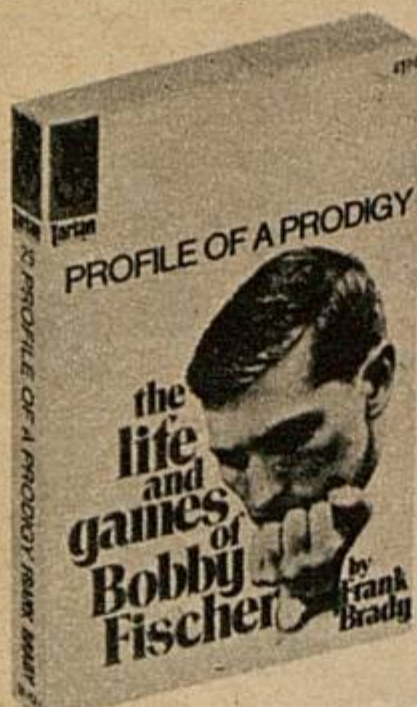
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New & Novel

By MARTIN LEVIN

Smoke on The Ground

By Miguel Delibes.
Translated by Alfred Johnson.
143 pp. New York:
Doubleday & Co. \$5.

Anglo-Saxon novels about nature tend to be charming and nostalgic. This Spanish novel is as different from such ventures as the Castilian hills are from the Salisbury Plain. The land is wretchedly poor, the climate is harsh, and the atmosphere has a haunting, 19th-century bleakness, although it is set in the age of moon missions.

All of the episodes revolve around Nini, a small boy living in a cave with his father, who is identified only as the Ratter. Nini appears to be the offspring of a union between brother and sister. But while the Ratter is half-witted, Nini is prematurely wise, and regarded as inspired by the locals. He gives advice on when to butcher hogs, grow mushrooms, make a scarecrow. He forecasts the end of a killing frost; he predicts the day the storks will return; and he is full of homilies learned from the Centenarian, the village ancient. ("Smoke on the ground . . . rain all around.") There is a dramatic contrast in the book between Nini's serenity and the brutality and harshness that surround him. The Ratter pursues his calling with a dog and an iron bar, and sells what he doesn't eat, in case you'd like to know.

What Happened

By Merle Miller.
342 pp. New York:
Harper & Row. \$7.95.

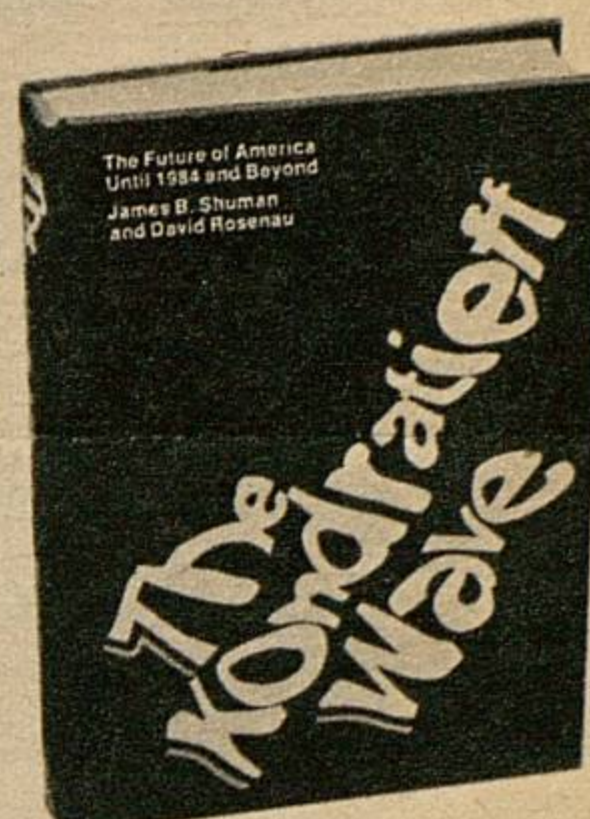
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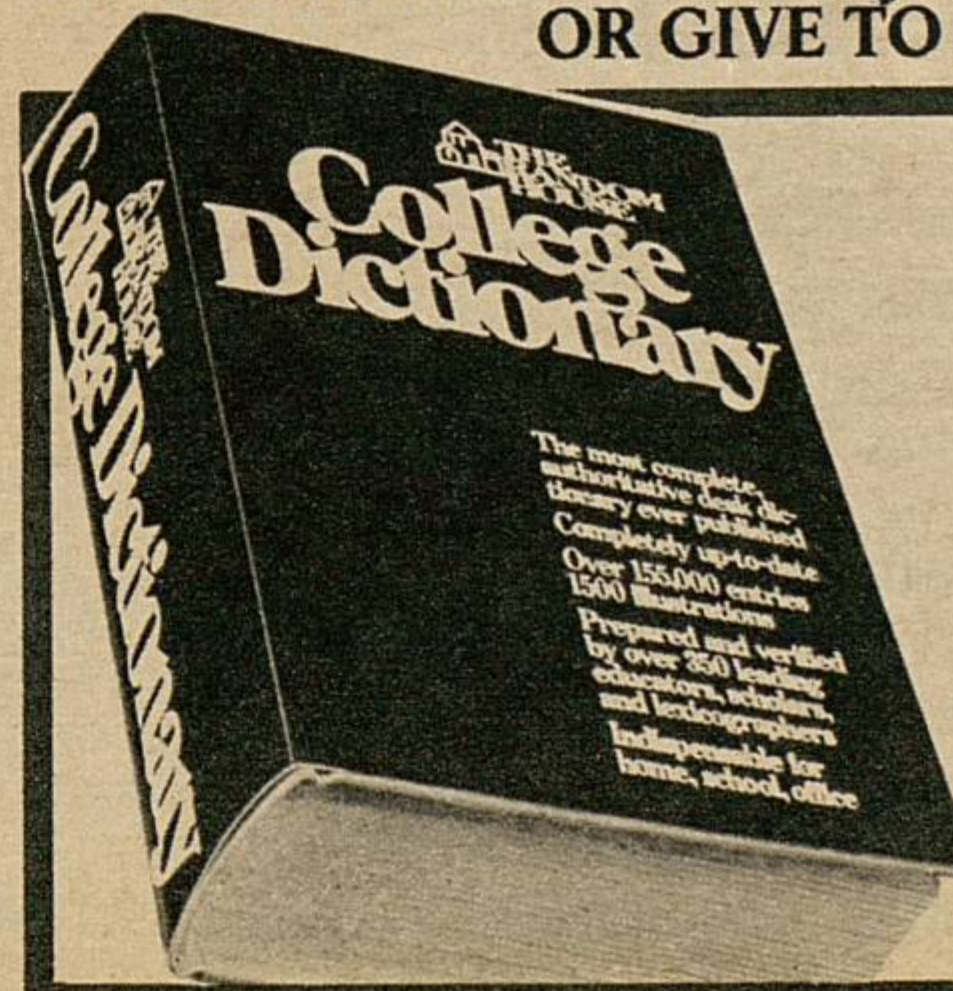
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The New York Times Book Review

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Publishers' Weekly

June 5, 1972

**SMOKE ON THE GROUND.***Miguel Delibes*. Doubleday, \$5.95

This well-written book is a word picture of the cycles of life, bounded by weather, superstition and religion, in the barren hills of Spanish Castille. Nini, son of the town rat hunter and of his sister, is an individual central to the struggle for survival of the population of a small farming village. Among other things, he knows when to plant, when to slaughter pigs, when it will rain and how to keep crows from eating freshly sown seed. The people listen to him as a sort of minor mystical prophet who knows more than one would expect from the son of an idiot and a lunatic. For his part, Nini resists the villagers' attempts to civilize him and send him to school. Most of all, he and his father, the ratter, resist the mayor's attempt to evict them from their cave-home. The ratter's conflict with the mayor, however, is minor compared with his and everyone else's basic struggle to survive in the face of the elemental forces of nature. Only Nini is able to find some continuity, life, even peace, among the wild creatures and natural elements that surround him. Translator Albert Johnson deserves special credit. [August 11]

MD

DELIBES, Miguel. *Smoke on the Ground*. tr. by Alfred Johnson. 168p. Doubleday. 1972. \$5.95. ISBN 0-385-03972-7. LC 79 186031. 8-72 F

Son of Ratter, a moronic Spanish peasant, and his lunatic sister, the boy Nini is a gifted child of nature whose wisdom is partly inherent, partly learned from watching the birds, the animals, the turns of the seasons. He and his father live in a cave and catch rats for a living. Nini is considered a soothsayer by the villagers. The crises of natural disasters and human conflicts reach a climax when Ratter kills a man, and it is obvious to Nini that their half-wild life is over, that Ratter will be seized and Nini will be forced into the civilized world. The story is a modern folk tale, bleak and harsh, but told with delicacy. It moves smoothly in a good translation. Highly recommended.—Jeanne Lopez, Oberlin Public Library, Ohio *Library Journal*



THE KIRKUS REVIEWS 6-1-72

Delibes, Miguel. SMOKE ON THE GROUND. Doubleday \$5.95. (8/11. LC: 79-186031)

This opens on a landscape so empty of familiar reference points and a culture so reduced and stylized that it might well be mistaken for Delibes' fantasy instead of the provincial Spain we've come to know through so many more sentimental novels. But it is just this presentation — the author's unromantic way of proffering facts while withholding their context — which makes something special of a story that could not have survived a heavier touch. It revolves around a boy named Nini who lives in a cave with his uncle/father, an opaque dawn-man called "the Ratter." They exist by hunting rats for village tables; but Nini also acts as a kind of resident oracle, having absorbed an otherwise lost tradition of farmer lore from an old man who is scorned by the others. These others, and especially the few villagers of "substance," have vested their hopes in the remote world of education, engineering, civil government, etc.; and two in particular, Justito the Mayor and an imperious bourgeoisie known as "the Eleventh Commandment," devote their powers to reforming Nini and the Ratter. This despite mounting evidence that modernization is a dangerous concept in the crumbling local economy. Still, the vision is darkly equivocal and Nini, helplessly alone in his comprehension, is simply the nerve which registers a historical truism as the experience of doom. His story takes place in the hiatus between traditions which Delibes realizes via a spare, tensile, tragicomic poetry; it is essentially a modest work unlikely to claim all the attention it deserves.

The building of this long-dreamed-of bridge occurred in the 1870s when, in a context of political squabbling and charges and countercharges of graft and corruption, "the greatest municipal work of the age, the most inspired structure Americans had yet attempted" overcame all obstacles. The bridge was designed by German-born John A. Roebling, who had gained fame as the first manufacturer of wire rope in America and as a builder of suspension bridges. His mighty work between Brooklyn and New York was carried on by his son, Washington A. Roebling, a Civil War hero, who was chief engineer during the entire 14-year construction of the bridge. These two men stand out in McCullough's story as commandingly as the two gigantic stone towers supporting the cables of the great span.

To engineering problems, supply problems and severe medical difficulties (men working in the caissons were subject to the "bends") were added the political raids and deals to be expected in Boss Tweed's New York. McCullough recounts with meticulous care the political and financial intrigues on both sides of the East River which at times threatened the completion of Roebling's project. Yet the work went forward and on May 25, 1883, "a total of 150,300 people crossed on foot, and 1,800 vehicles went over carrying an unknown number of others." The "eighth wonder of the world" now has seen nearly a century of public service. With normal maintenance, say today's engineers, the facility should stand for at least a century more.

• • •

Perhaps it is too early yet to assign the late James Thurber his permanent place in American literary history but there seems no doubt that his literary legacy, perhaps larger and more lasting than at first may have appeared, is with us yet. Charles S. Holmes demonstrates this in his thorough and delightfully witty study of Thurber's literary career titled *The Bells of Columbus* (Atheneum, \$10). The book captures the personality that captivated Thurber's writing friends and created an army of "Thurber fans" out of his readers.

Holmes shows that the shy and retiring student at the University of Ohio wrote some college magazine sketches

that contained the germ of the famous Thurber manner. Thurber had two years of government service in Paris, mostly owing to the fact that the request of our ambassador in Paris for code books was mistaken (the situation is Thurberesque) for a request for code clerks. Thurber was over 30, with a newspaper background but little success as a writer, when a fortunate connection with the new and struggling magazine, *The New Yorker*, came about. Soon Thurber's essays and his even more popular drawings of men, women and dogs made him one of the most sought after humorists of the 1930s and beyond.

The title of this book comes from a phrase of Thurber's. "The clocks that strike in my dreams," he once wrote, "are often the clocks of Columbus." This is a touching and pertinent reference to Thurber's home town and to his family, for both of which he carried a life-long devotion. Columbus, Ohio, formed the character and horizons of the young man who made out of his memories and his "stream of nervousness" a body of work of "wild and original humor." *The Clocks of Columbus* traces Thurber's career and accounts for his works with a perception and enthusiasm which suggest that the creator of Walter Mitty and other "frustrated, fugitive beings" will be read and considered relevant for quite some time yet. The book is *de rigueur* for all Thurberphiles and should create many new Thurber fans.

• • •



The first book by a great, contemporary Spanish writer to be published in the United States, Miguel Delibes' *Smoke on the Ground* (Doubleday & Company, \$5), is a delightful story, told from the point of view of a Spanish child living in extreme poverty in a Castilian village. Nini is the son of the Ratter, a stupid man who lives in a cave and catches rats for a living (they are the food of the very poor). His mother was the Ratter's sister, who finally has been sent to a mental hospital. The personages around the child as he lives through a year of his starkly poor yet fundamentally happy life are earthy, primitive. Some are frightening in their stupidity, some shrewd and humorous, others have an almost saintly perception of basic values.

Nini, with his young innocence, his closeness to nature and the Church's solemn calendar, seems untouched by the horrors of the existences surrounding him. He is thought by the villagers to have unusual powers of prophecy, especially with respect to natural phenomena—weather, crops, the ways of animals. Traveling with his dog, studying nature or helping his fellows in their work with gravity and skill, he seems

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NOTES ON 'LAS RATAS'

by Miguel Delibes *



Total effect on the reader. In the Introduction to the Harrap (1969) edition of *Las ratas* I suggest that the novel is an interesting stylistic achievement in that, while the subject-matter is gloomy, the characters tragic, and the situations unsavoury, yet the lightness of the style and the many anecdotes and descriptions prevent the reader from feeling any sense of oppression until the last scene. Does this claim seem justified? If so, how is the balance between gravity and lightness worked out? After all, a reader enjoys the book as a single unit, not just *what* is told or *how* it is told, but a relationship between them; the experience he undergoes is caused in him by the integral whole.

Social problems. Injustice is denounced at least by implication: absentee landlords, unequal distribution of land (Don Antero) and wealth (Sr. Rosalindo's phrase about sowing, page 44, Harrap ed.), poverty, misery, snobbery (contrast Sra. Cló with Doña Resu and Columba), government irrigation non-plan (ch. 4), inadequate insurance, tourists dictate, neglect of el Nini's education, other injustices (Governor, Mayor, Frutos).

Personal problems. Unjust impersonal society militates against the freedom and individuality of the person (Ratero), the individual's way of life and happiness as against progress (is this liberalism, anarchism?), concern for others (co-operation, praying or drinking together, killing the pig), religion (the post-conciliar D. Ciro contrasts with D. Zósimo), animals, birds and men in a common struggle against the elements, poor land, unfavourable weather.

Descriptions begin almost every chapter, constitute the bulk of the book. Usually it is the description that is beautiful, poetic, not the thing described: Malvino's dirty bar, wheat fields, several morning scenes, landscapes, farm yard, hunting, eating together, the fox and rabbits at night, the baby fox, the straw-heap, winter scenes, Don Alcio against the light, inside the cave, candle-light, the village in summer and winter.

Village life. Costumbrismo? Bucolic? Idyllic? Realistic or idealized? The prayers for good weather, proverbs, daily jobs, religious ceremonies, importance of saints' days, the people's happiness when doing something together, drinking, etc., make up "una visión trágica y dura, acre y misérrima de un pueblo castellano, muy distinta de la visión tierna e irónica de su novela *El camino*." (I. Elizalde in *Hechos y Dichos*, October 1962.)

★ EDITOR'S NOTE. *It is proposed to include in Vida Hispánica from time to time some brief notes on a text set for 'A' level by one or more Board(s). The notes will be compiled by a specialist on the author in question, and their purpose will be to suggest some points which pupils might keep in mind or watch for as they read the book. There is no intention of forecasting examination questions, much less of trying to suggest what examiners should do, but only of emphasising a few key ideas which may be useful as starting points for a study of the text. We hope they will prove interesting.—A.D.*

Characters. Do they matter to us as people or just as elements in the story? Identified, authenticated persons or just props? Do you agree that “el personaje esencial del libro es el pueblo mismo, hecho de tierra y de alma humana, hecho de injusticia y de desigualdad”? (Enrique Sordo in *Solidaridad Nacional*, 2nd May, 1963.) We are told, for instance, that Sra. Cló’s sister-in-law is married to a telegraph employee in Mieres: is this relevant in itself or only to authenticate the woman’s reality?

The raconteur’s role. The novel does not tell itself; the reader is aware of a story-teller at all times: how?

Language Levels. (a) Colloquial narration, the story-teller’s conversational style: “El resto del morral se lo quedaba el Malvino” (p. 26), “el Rabino Chico se llegó donde Don Zósimo” (31), “sin ir más lejos” (36), “El caso es que . . .” (47), “No se cogería los dedos” (53), etc. (b) Cultured language of impersonal descriptions: “volara” (26), “atrabiliario” (27), “prosopopeya” (62), “usara” (120), etc. (c) Specialized vocabulary: bird names, pruning terms, etc. (d) Slang, crude language of conversations: “freza”, “cagada”, etc. Could F. Sainz de Robles have justifiably said after *Las ratas* (1962) that Delibes “no posee un vocabulario demasiado rico ni brillante” (*La novela española en el siglo XX*, Madrid, 1957, p. 244)?

Similes and metaphors. “Nube de cuervos reunidos en consejo”, “tres paraguas cerrados. . .”, “extensa tizonera” (25) and countless others throughout: what is their effect? Are they well chosen?

Symbolism. Nicknames (the real individual) as against official common names, the *extremeños* (hard work, resignation), Ratero (the individual oppressed by society), Nini (innocent, intelligent childhood), Doña Resu (obnoxious society), governor (official dishonesty, injustice), the cave (individual’s right to live as he likes provided he harms nobody), city = progress = ambition (Columba), = civilization = “eso es inventado” (78).

Humour and anecdotes. Repetitions or “latiguillos”, el Nini’s innocent games, Marcela and the stool, sand in a fork, Yayo’s penance, the last carriage on a train, etc.: folk tales found in many communities in varying form, usually passed on as true.

Realism, naturalism, tremendismo. The coffin falls open, “cosquilleo viscoso” (43), Rabino Viejo’s death, D. Zósimo’s cousin’s death, hare bites off an ear (56), fleas from the fox (56), José Luis’s upper lip, Simeona’s finger feeling the hens, the old man and his cancer eating for two, screaming dog tied to the cart, enemma hanging on the bed, Centenario’s face, fly on the dead man alights on the priest’s nose, the corpse doesn’t fit in the coffin, the final horrific fight, etc. Do these and the other repulsive factors (like discords in a symphony?) add to or take from the beauty of the whole? To what extent are the people free and to what extent do they seem determined by their environment?

Recent books on Miguel Delibes. Umbral, F., *Miguel Delibes*, Madrid (Epesa), 1970; Alonso de los Ríos, César, *Conversaciones con Miguel Delibes*, Madrid (Emesa), 1971; Díaz, Janet W., *Miguel Delibes*, New York (Twayne), 1971; López Martínez, Luis, *La novelística de Miguel Delibes*, Murcia (Universidad), 1973. (N.B.: Apart from pages 145 - 161 of López Martínez, none of these is particularly relevant to a study of *Las ratas*.)

LEO HICKEY.

(University of Salford)

