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PRIVATE FAME

By Richard Burgin

Univ. of Illinois Press

The haunting Magritte-esque illustration on the jacket is our first clue. As in his debut collection *Man Without Memory* (called by the *St. Petersburg Times* "a classic waiting to happen"), Richard Burgin intends to unsettle even as he amuses. Once again he populates his tales with people whose minds lurk so far in left field it's hard to tell if they're fair or foul. By the time we've finished these 11 disquieting stories we've slalomed the seams where the sane meets the deranged.

In the earlier collection many characters were compulsive list-makers, a quirk diagnosed as "a rage for order." For Burgin that compulsive rage is a reaction against the chaos and fragmentation of our era where we are too mobile to plant roots and, even if we did, the ground under us trembles.

The narrator of "Heidi Indoors" notes: "In this passion for cleanliness and order lies another paradox, for it sometimes leads to needless repetition and ultimately to insidious disorders." It leads him to a bizarre 3-week tryst with a thirtyish blonde where the meeting place is always her Southern California apartment, for she refuses to leave it, even to buy food. Newly cured of skin cancer, Heidi never sees the sun, tucked reclusively in her room-turned-womb.

No mere chronicling of the kinky, Burgin's is a mature artistry founded in his gift, like Browning's, to empathize with the underlying causes of aberrance: there but by the strength of ego go I, these stories say. Even his least sympathetic character, who finds his thrills scaring (but not hurting) people in "The Spirit of New York," seems just a slight caricature of the modern urban temper: "From the dapper young executives at the power lunches to the hookers on the street, the message was, 'Look at me. Take me in carefully. . . . Can you really afford *not* to buy what I'm selling?'"

The most amusing of these tales, "From the Diary of Gene Mays," gives the deadpan account of a directionless clod who lives off his parents' money while continually failing at love and work until the gift of a painting provides his life with meaning . . . before he drives six hours to find the painter both engaged and unattractive. Undaunted, he charges quixotically off to the shore to experience life directly and finds God "behind the walls and mirrors of phenomena."

Tellingly, Burgin relates the stories about his most nearly "normal" characters in the more remote third person, yet fills them with powerful recognitions. "Silver Screen," set in St. Petersburg, sketches the powerful impact parents still wield even when we are middle-aged or they are no longer living. Visiting his mother at her Gulfport condominium, Allen recalls his late father whose "behavior was technically

irreproachable but elusive, faintly detached. After he died Allen felt a blankness and momentary terror, as if the universe suddenly contained one less diety, but he didn't feel the kind of sadness he thought he would." The powerful emotions--love, guilt, exasperation--attach to his manipulative mother. She was the one who whenever Allen brought a girlfriend home "acted as if her soul were being attacked by a large and brutal army." She is the one still telling him, "You always have a home here."

Allen's mother fears aging, like many Burgin characters no matter what their age, even one 26 year-old woman who is about to hit "the horror age" of 27 by which point she'd always felt she should have both personal and professional life in order. But she doesn't.

In this book few do, for time does not bring answers nor even lead us to the right questions. But Burgin's contemporary strangers, like the rest of us, find ways to keep plugging on.