

A Novelist Arriving: *Leaving Locke Horn*

John Canfield

Leaving Locke Horn. By Dorothy Casey. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1986. 286 pp. \$15.95 (cloth).

Dorothy Casey's *Leaving Locke Horn* is a good first novel. That qualifier, "first novel," may sound condescending to some, but that's not my intention. With Dorothy Casey, Algonquin Books has made another interesting find. The Chapel Hill, North Carolina, press, which was formed a few years ago, has specialized in "discovering" new writers. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., one of the founders and a professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has access to a ready store of talent. And that's how he found Casey: she was a student of Rubin's at UNC (she presently lives in Chatham County, N.C.). Several years ago, Rubin launched the career of another Chapel Hill writer, Jill McCorkle, by simultaneously publishing *July 7th* and *The Cheerleader*, her first two novels. But Algonquin Press doesn't want to be known as strictly a "regional" or "southern" press; the publication of *Leaving Locke Horn* helps achieve that goal.

Dorothy Casey grew up in Mexico, Maine, a mill town, and sets the novel in the Maine mill town of Locke Horn. A community of hard-working, mostly Catholic mill workers, Locke Horn doesn't seem at all southern. But then that uniquely southern sense of place doesn't really dominate this novel; rather, Casey emphasizes character. Annie Dillard says Casey's characters "remind me of D.H. Lawrence's: ordinary people, rendered in depth and with tenderness. Their moving story is unforgettable."

Casey opens the novel by introducing the reader to the Benson family. They spend their summers away from Locke Horn: "For the seventh summer in a row the Bensons left Locke Horn for Handsman's Cove on Piscataquis Pond." The family members try to forget their oppressive work environment: "Though only fifteen miles (and a comfortable commuting distance for Mr. and Mrs. Benson) from Locke Horn, the Piscataquis seemed immeasurably distant from the papermill town." We meet the family members

and soon focus attention on the Bensons' two daughters, Sheila and Ruth. Sheila, the older of the two, takes a summer job in New York City as a nanny. She longs to grow up, to discover the world beyond the provincial mill town. The narrator tells us that working as a nanny ". . . was the latest thing for high school girls, and Sheila was always up on the latest thing for high school girls, and Sheila was always up on the latest thing."

As the Bensons put Sheila on the plane for New York, our attention focuses on Ruth, a conscientious, sensitive 10th-grader who revels in their summer vacations: "Ruth stuck her head out the window, pushing her face into the moving air, trying to inhale the summer's essence, trying to clear from her lungs the mill and the Johnson's wax smell of St. Etienne's School." When the Hungerford family arrives to camp in a vacant field, we meet Ruth's partners for this year of discovery, Evelyn and Forrest Hungerford. The family creates a ruckus by daring to camp in the field where the symbolic "Virgin Mary" pine tree stands. Ruth named the tree thus because "the resemblance, in miniature, to the granite and ceramic grotto beside St. Etienne's convent was uncanny." She questions the camp's owner about his decision to allow them to stay there. She asks him if he wants "Mrs. Hungerford pouring her bacon grease around the base of the Virgin Mary."

The Hungerfords are a large, working-class family with two seemingly out-of-place children, the artistic Forrest and Evelyn. Forrest is "famous" around Locke Horn for having been accepted to a New York City art school, while his sister, whose artistic endeavors have been stymied, acts as her brother's motivator. Ruth, of course, falls in love with Forrest, and the trio spend their summer exploring the cove as well as themselves. Evelyn, the oldest, says she is nearly ready to "blow this small-time popcorn stand," blaming it for her artistic stagnation: "My trouble is . . . I can't stand the sights around me, but I don't know what anything else looks like." Forrest busies himself painting and saving money for his art school, while Ruth gets to know about love, art, and life.

Of course, the summer comes to an end, and the characters must go back to the drudgery of mill-town life. Sheila comes back from New York, more worldly, but also pregnant; Evelyn starts work as a waitress, still anticipating her escape; Ruth and Forrest continue their "mating ritual." There's a rather predictable accident at the mill, allowing Forrest to leave town and Sheila to resolve her pregnancy; and at the novel's end Evelyn visits New York to "open her eyes to the world."

The novels' characters are interesting, but at the end one is not quite sure what to make of them. That is, no one character really

holds the reader's interest enough to dominate, thus weakening the characters. Each of the major characters resolves his or her struggle, but the result is simply not that compelling. This is a shame, because Casey shows a real empathy for her well-rounded creations. Perhaps the fault lies with the plot: it fizzles a bit at the end.

Casey attempts a great deal in this novel—perhaps too much. Her symbolism sometimes gets out of control and leaves the reader feeling overwhelmed. For example, the “Virgin Mary” tree breaks in a lightning storm at about the same time that Sheila is off in New York getting pregnant; and a huge roller at the mill flattens a character in an accident just as Ruth and Forrest are visiting the Catholic church on Christmas Eve.

I point out these flaws because Casey's qualities of thought and writing do show flashes of real potential. She has the eye to describe “bicycles strapped on the roof with their wheels spinning and throwing off silver light,” and the ear to compose a line such as “spilled spices commingled in the bottom of a cardboard carton.”

Locke Horn's mill activity can lead to a kind of dull resignation, but Casey's prose lifts the reader out of a quagmire of futility. Her characters, especially Forrest and Ruth, beam with hope. The novelist's sensitive voice rings true in this description of a trip the couple takes to northern Maine:

They left the valley, splayed open by the Androscoggin, and drove into the hills. Hundreds of streams and brooks cut like hot steel wire through the land, feeding the river below, slicing the hills with knife-edged gullies just wide enough for a man to slip into and hide. Spruce and hemlock sprouted out of solid rock—as if rock were a decent medium to sustain life—and rose straight up, parallel with the faces of the hills they were born of. It had snowed a great deal. . . . The farther north they drove, the less cleared the roads, until they were driving on hard-packed snow which crunched under the truck's studded tires. The sun was hot through the windshield. Ruth opened her window an inch and icy air pasted a straight patch of cold along her face, drawing out an occasional tear and pulling it from eye to ear.

Dorothy Casey can write with feeling and empathy, and she has no dearth of ideas. With these two assets she has the potential to go far as a novelist. Certainly Algonquin was right to give her a start. She's reportedly working on a second novel; it should be one to look for.