

Dreams and illusions

ears now South America has the novel's most potent content — a riveting political new-found-land where daily oppressions come raw enough to jack up the most jaded appetite for concerned realism, but also a cornucopian version of what James Joyce labelled Who-found-land, a place inciting endless fabrication, dream-work enough to outlast a thousand-and-one nights. 'Brazil,' the movie, knew where all this was at. Zulfikar Ghose, long a Brazil-nut, shows there's life in the South American Connection yet.

The figures that enchant Ghose's shanty-town dwellers and office drudges are lucky lottery numbers, cock-fight winnings, the impossible noughts they fantasise as appearing on the end of their nugatory stipends. These will be tickets, they imagine, to the paradise islands, the bliss of the colour-TV soaps that enliven the protracted grimness of their slums.

And Ghose sympathises, as who wouldn't, with his people's dreams of comfort and delight. But the folly of their efforts to gain Utopia also mightily bemuses his prim narrative. Whoring just turns beautiful girls into drudges, pimping gets their husbands shot dead in the gutter. Government statistician Gamboa, victim of corrupt civil administration, does get landed in a paradisaal spot, but his particular Brave New World sours in the customary fashion, monkeyed about with

by agents of the commercially powerful, not to mention a local version of Caliban, goatish beast-in-man. And being well-off to start with—as the careers of the wrinkled old birds paying hugely for young gigolos are meant to illustrate—is unsatisfactory too.

In fact, *Vanity of Vanities* is Ghose's wryly pervasive theme. It has him arranging moral vignettes as furiously as John Bunyan, and sounding off much of the time like Malcolm Muggeridge. Instructively bad ends come to almost everyone, especially those who profit financially by ministering to foolish human lusts.

What's good about Hans Koning's *Acts of Faith* is the way it reanimates some of the physical and moral terrains that used to electrify fiction the day before yesterday — namely the Civil War in Spain, and Catholic crusades against the heretic hordes. When ex-journalist John Balthasar goes back to Pamplona in 1983 he finds himself haunted by a chance encounter with some Basque separatists that happened 10 years earlier. Asked to smuggle a nationalist fighter into France, he'd lost his nerve at the frontier. Now he feels himself being sucked into a strange rerun of that old plot, involving odd coppers, strangely

VALENTINE CUNNINGHAM

FIGURES OF ENCHANTMENT
by Zulfikar Ghose

Century Hutchinson £10.95

ACTS OF FAITH
by Hans Koning

Gollancz £8.95

PROMISE OF RAIN
by Gail Morgan

Virago £8.95/£3.50

LESS THAN ZERO
by Bret Easton Ellis

Picador £2.95

dated bullfight posters, weird dreams about heretic burnings, and a whore in curious medieval garb.

Returned home, his quiet life at the New York Public Library is invaded by flotillas of mystifying Spaniards-in-exile. There are bumpings-off, military preparations in Florida vegetable patches, coded talk about *autos-da-fé* and Final Crusades against Communism. Is Balthasar, he and we wonder, going off his rocker.

Our detective-hero's conclusions earn the usual scepticism. Are these hints of a neo-Francoist plot, to get

even with Russia by provoking a nuclear war, really on? But then, Catholicism itself is pretty absurd, isn't it—and Balthasar's wife and all the Spaniards are Catholics. *Non quod sed quia absurdum*: Balthasar keeps quoting the old believer's, and fictionist's, formula: the more ridiculous the more likely. So why shouldn't dark old witch-hunting determinations and Manichaean oppositions surface as a key to east-west relations? Hans Koning makes his speculations pretty mesmerising.

Cruel Catholic fictions haunt the Sydney childhood of Gail Morgan's heroine in her most promising first novel, *Promise of Rain*. Irish nuns gorge Lucy Stapledon's imagination on tales of the self-denial and bodily mutilations God likes his saints for—only a partial preparation for her later work as a kind of missionary taking culture to remote evening classes in the red desert heartlands of Australia.

This nicely attentive tale of transition from devout girlhood to sceptical womanhood, from bungalowoid Sydney to corrugated-iron Alice Springs, from convent-school simplicities and genial scorn for Italians to the complexities of loving an aboriginal half-caste in a place of hard-convicted racism is managed with

unhurried grace and a kindly eye for the varieties of Australian silliness. Gail Morgan's feel for the power of traditional story — narratives about growing up, weighing the world, confronting your moral lacunae — impresses and attracts.

A few traditional cruel fictions imposed early on might, you can't help feeling, have stopped the youthful lives in *Less Than Zero* from turning out quite as vile as they are. Narrator Clay returns to Los Angeles for the Christmas hols and settles back into the depraved routines of his old coterie of zonked-out, laid-back, rich children. If you want it, take it, because you can pay for it, is the barren ethic they've inherited from their messy, movie-making, real-estate developing parents — deeply into astrology, fake tans, face lifts and transplanted hair.

Existence is all pool-side lounge, fast car and instant gratification — booze, snuff movies, gang bangs, coke, smoke, uppers and downers. No greedy orifice stays unplugged long. Intellectual hold is brief, language power minimal, moral bearings missing. And if Bret Easton Ellis is oddly incapable of suggesting any solutions, he does at least show some vexation with the absentee parents whose whereabouts these children have to look up in gossip columns, the dire TV preachers, and the lascivious men who pay to get their hands on young flesh.