Yet in sheer quantity the great speeches are outweighed by pedestrian addresses to interest groups like the Wisconsin Agricultural Society. What the reader finds in most of these two volumes is not art but the conditions for art—not always great speeches but the process of revision that makes great speeches possible. As though in some enormous rough draft, Lincoln kept reworking the same ideas over and over, first in casual formulations, until at last—as in the "House Divided" speech—they issued forth in concise, unforgettable expression.

ELLEN FOSTER and **A VIRTUOUS WOMAN.** *By Kaye Gibbons. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 146 pp.; 158 pp. $13.95 each*

To add the name of a new author to the company of William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Tennessee Williams, and Thomas Wolfe is no small matter. Yet Kaye Gibbons, a housewife from Raleigh, North Carolina, not yet 30, has added a voice, original and recognizable, to southern literature.

Eleven-year-old Ellen Foster, the heroine-narrator of Gibbons' first novel, calmly describes her mother's illness: "You see when she was my size she had romantic fever I think it is called and since then she has not had a good heart." Ellen suffers, after her mother's death, some of the worst relatives found outside a Dickens novel. But Ellen represents the triumph of the decent and the practical over the tragic: "I fed myself OK," she says when her drunk father fails to appear for meals. "I tried to make what we had at school but I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it."

Gibbons' new novel, *A Virtuous Woman*, set in a contemporary but unnamed southern state, is filled with the family love so painfully lacking in Ellen's story. In alternating chapters, Jack Ernest Stokes ("stokes the fire, stokes the stove, stokes the fiery furnace of hell!") and his wife Ruby narrate their separate hardships, their unlikely meeting, and 25 years of living together. Before Jack, Ruby had a disastrous first marriage: "I just hated that the first big decision I ever made was the kind that can kill you if you make a mistake." Before Ruby, Jack had "never come close to marrying. Until I met Ruby I suppose the sweetest thing I'd ever asked a woman to do for me was to hold a mule still while I hitched him." Despite Jack's being a poor tenant farmer and 20 years older than Ruby, they build a good marriage. Yet it is hardly a match for life's sorrows—childlessness and Ruby's cancer. During the terminal stages of the disease, she fills the freezer with enough meals to last Jack through the winter. "Then maybe he'll feel up to planting a garden, carrying the whole thing through by himself."

Obviously, Gibbons can border on sentimentality, but she is saved by her vision of hard vicissitudes and necessary graces. More remarkable are Gibbons' spare sentences and paragraphs in which not a word can be changed without serious loss. From Madison Smartt Bell to Bobbie Ann Mason, contemporary southern writers describe a South shedding its distinctive features—as though Faulkner's mellifluous tragedies had washed up somewhere between tract home and shopping mall; these younger writers' language rarely sounds distinctively southern. But Gibbons' idiom—dry and practical as a farmer's skin, studded with clichés that somehow seem fresh, semi-illiterate yet never so intrusive as dialect—is recognizably southern and recognizably hers. And it is this, the creation of a voice, that makes her cousin to the "old masters," Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, and even Faulkner himself.

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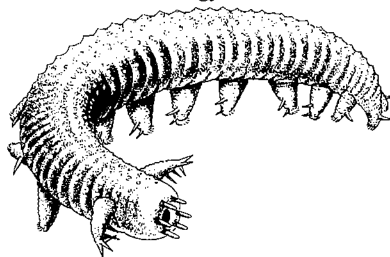

WONDERFUL LIFE: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History. *By Stephen J. Gould. Norton. 347 pp. $19.95*

In 1909 the prominent geologist and longtime-head of the Smithsonian Institution, Charles Doolittle Walcott, was digging in a quarry in the Canadian Rockies when he uncovered a