

fought to hold onto hers. Despite shyness, illness, and at times suicidal depression, she committed herself to her public presence as a writer. International literary festivals and writers' retreats such as Breadloaf and Yaddo were second homes. Wherever she went, she was greatly beloved—and greatly disliked. Gore Vidal once said, "An hour with a dentist without Novacaine was like a minute with Carson McCullers."

Undiagnosed rheumatic fever led to a series of strokes beginning in her twenties that took her in and out of operating rooms dozens of times. She had surgery to reconstruct a hand, so she could use at least one to type, and to replace tendons in a leg, so she could walk with a cane. Her drinking didn't help, nor did smoking three packs of cigarettes a day. But through years of physical and emotional pain, as friends and family fell away (her caretaking mother died, her husband killed himself, allies such as Truman Capote became enemies), McCullers's indomitable will kept her alive and writing. It took her 15 years to finish her final book, *Clock without Hands* (1961), but she did finish it.

Although she left behind only a few plays, stories, poems, and essays, and the four novels, they are legacy enough to ensure her home in the modern canon. To McCullers, moral isolation was the normative human experience, and the desperate longing to connect, to find "the we of me," was the strongest human desire. In her fiction, she found it for herself—and gave it to a world of readers.

—MICHAEL MALONE

THE VIRGIN OF BENNINGTON.

By Kathleen Norris. Riverhead. 240 pp. \$24.95

"My story . . . begins with an untidy but cheerful job interview on a snowy day in early December 1968," writes Norris. A senior at Bennington College in Vermont, and an aspiring poet, Norris had gone down to New York to apply for an assistant's job at the Academy of American Poets. The director of the Academy, Elizabeth Kray, then in her mid-fifties, was friendly with one of Norris's professors at Bennington (a poet with whom Norris was about to lose her virginity). Norris was nervous

about her lack of sophistication and East Coast credentials—her family was from South Dakota and Hawaii, where her father played in the Honolulu Symphony. Precisely for those deficiencies, the woman gave Norris the job.

Betty Kray, as Norris discovered, was that rare soul, a true appreciator of poetry without ambition to be a poet herself. Kray sent poets out to talk in ghetto high schools. She mixed readings by established poets such as Auden and Eliot with appearances by young talents—the then unknown Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Kenneth Koch, and Donald Hall. In the days before the academization of everything, she created the poetry circuit, on which poets could support themselves by going from college to college. In exchange for a reading, the poet got \$100, a wine and cheese reception, and, often as not, an overnight stay in a student's bed.

At work, Norris learned from Kray; outside of work, Norris learned from New York, that hard-edged teacher. She looked at porno magazines in Times Square with the poet James Tate. She wore "a tight lacy blouse, scarlet velvet hot pants, and turquoise panty hose" to a party given by Erica Jong, with the result that a drunken Gregory Corso chased her around the room, and her ex-lover, the professor—who had come with a younger Bennington girl—snubbed her. Norris frequented Max's Kansas City at the dawn of celebrity culture. She remembers the night one of Andy Warhol's beautiful boys asked her, "Would you have my baby? . . . I have such pretty ones . . . all over the world." "My God," the young woman thought to herself, "I have met Narcissus."

Norris got out early. In 1973 she met her future husband, and the following year the couple took over the farm she had inherited in South Dakota. Many years, several books, and one religious conversion later, Norris describes serving a funeral lunch with ladies from her church: "slapping butter and ham onto sliced buns; setting out a variety of donated salads (heavy on the Jell-o)"—details that stand in stark opposition to life in New York.

So far, so good. The memoir has a gentle rhythm, a pleasing way of looping through time without losing momentum. Then, on page 161, we return to Betty Kray, and never leave. We learn about her family, her marriage, her background, her relationships with other poets, her death in 1978. This is where the

reader is likely to get exasperated. First the irresistible title, promising a comedy of manners at college, turns out to be a ruse, and now the book abandons all pretense even of being a memoir.

Readers new to Kathleen Norris aren't likely to give the book what it deserves: a second chance, in which they abandon all expectations and trail, lamblike, behind the author onto strange terrain.

Those who follow will be rewarded with something more interesting than a memoir. In considering the role Kray played in her life and in the lives of others, Norris comes to see her old friend and mentor as something akin to a spiritual leader. She may even wish us to see

Kray as a latter-day saint, though she has the good taste and sense never to say so.

Norris's two previous "memoirs," *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (1993) and *The Cloister Walk* (1996), were much admired for their nonstick spirituality. Here, too, Norris invites religious contemplation without a trace of ickiness. Her meditation on the life of Betty Kray—a "nobody"—illuminates the miraculous influence that one ostensibly ordinary person can have on another, even long past the grave. And such is Norris's unassuming but persuasive style of thought that the reader, too, may feel something akin to an awakening.

—A. J. HEWAT

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

BERTRAND RUSSELL:
The Ghost of Madness, 1921–1970.
By Ray Monk. Free Press. 574 pp. \$40

The second thick volume of Monk's biography of influential Welsh logician, philosopher, and social critic Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) traces the latter half of a long, eventful life. Monk, a British writer and broadcaster, argues tenaciously that Russell, despite his many professional and intellectual achievements, was a tragic figure of misdeeds, anxieties, and betrayals, a man whose life "seems to have been drawn inexorably towards disaster."

The story is indeed depressing in some respects. In 1921, Russell was 49 years old, an established presence in London literary circles, with half of his life still ahead—but his best philosophical work, including the groundbreaking arguments of *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and the three volumes of *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13), written with Alfred North Whitehead, was behind him. Because of his active pacifism, he had lost his fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1916 and had been jailed for six months in 1918. He had dropped his first wife, Alys, with a coldness bordering on brutality, and his relationship with his second wife, Dora, was difficult, partly because both were given to frequent infidelities.

To pay the family's bills, he wrote newspaper articles and popular works on science and politics and gave numerous public lectures in

England and America. Though often slapdash and rather vain, many of these efforts became Russell's best-known works (his logical theories are matters for specialists, and in any case were soon overtaken by the speculations of others). Though Russell returned to scholarship, publishing in the 1940s works on epistemology and an acclaimed history of Western philosophy, his concerns and writings were increasingly political, moral, and autobiographical. He regretted his inability to contribute to debates in logic, but he knew it was a young man's game. He received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950 "in recognition for his varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought."

His views were not wholly humanitarian. He harbored some unpleasant opinions, especially about blacks and Jews, and some exaggerated ones, especially about the evils of the United States. Politically he was of the Left, but he was high-minded, arrogant, and naive about the business of politics as only an aristocrat and a philosopher can be. (He succeeded his brother as the third Earl Russell in 1931.) He ran unsuccessfully as a Labor candidate for Parliament in 1922, but later abandoned the party and advocated more radical positions, including the justifiability of guerrilla war in Vietnam and Cuba. In his eighties he lent his reputation to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament,