

Review · Brooks Landon

Mrs. Bridge. By Evan S. Connell, Jr. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981. Pp. 246. \$7.50. *Mr. Bridge.* By Evan S. Connell, Jr. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981. Pp. 367. \$7.50. *Saint Augustine's Pigeon: The Selected Stories of Evan S. Connell.* San Francisco: North Point Press, 1980. Pp. 291. \$12.50.

Mention Evan S. Connell in literary circles and someone is almost sure to sigh appreciatively, "Ah, *Mrs. Bridge!*" Or, more rarely, "*Mr. Bridge!*" or "The Bridge Books!" If the circle is sufficiently literary, someone is almost sure to correct your pronunciation: "You mean Evan ConNELL." Like Thomas Berger or Anthony Powell, Connell seems to have become one of those writers we know to respect but may not have read. When William H. Nolte suggests in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that Connell "would probably rank today as the most important American novelist if critical reception were the sole criterion for determining the reputation of a writer," he undoubtedly overstates the case, but far wilder claims and far lesser writers have prospered in recent literary history. The very sensibility of Connell's fiction, the crisp straightforwardness of his prose, has worked against him: writers praise his mastery, but scholars have found no enigmas demanding explication. And Connell has never gone out of his way to court the public. When asked by an interviewer whether he could generalize about what he wanted to "get across" in his work, Connell's answer, characteristically laconic, was: "No."

Connell has written thirteen books, several of which must sorely test the cataloguing skills of librarians. Two of the most recent, *A Long Desire* (1979) and *The White Lantern* (1980), blend history, legend, and whimsy in essay form as Connell contemplates the singular obsessions of some of the great travellers, explorers, plunderers, and thinkers of world history. Two earlier books, *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel* (1963) and *Points for a Compass Rose* (1973), are haunting, sometimes cryptic prose poems, the latter of which was nominated for the National Book Award for Poetry in 1974. Connell's novels include *The Patriot* (1960), *The Diary of a Rapist* (1966), *The Connoisseur* (1974), and *Double Honeymoon* (1976). Of course, his best known and most respected novels are *Mrs. Bridge* (1959) and *Mr. Bridge* (1969) and it is in those two novels and in his short stories that Connell's fiction has been at its finest. With

the reissue of the Bridge books and the publication of *Saint Augustine's Pigeon*, Connell's selected stories, North Point Press has done readers a great service.

Mrs. Bridge consists of 117 short chapters, each a brief, ironic glimpse into the life of India Bridge, bona-fide Kansas City Country Club Matron and master of the pleasantly neutral expression. "It seemed to her that her parents must have been thinking of someone else when they named her," and her first name is the *only* chink in the armor of her militant orthodoxy. Her greatest fear is that she or her three children will be perceived in any way as different from everyone else. "Everyone else," it turns out, means the people mentioned in *The Tatler*, the Kansas City society magazine whose vapidly cheerful prose becomes a kind of blueprint for Mrs. Bridge's thinking. Each of Connell's vignettes captures the instinctive, self-imposed narrowness of Mrs. Bridge's life in the years between the World Wars.

In one chapter Mrs. Bridge flies into an inarticulate rage because her son actually *uses* one of the fancy towels put out for guests, towels her guests would never dream of touching. In another scene she is vaguely distressed by her son's penchant for coming into the house through the "servants' entrance" rather than through the front door. Mrs. Bridge teaches her children that you can judge people by their shoes and their table manners, instructs them in the difference between the acceptable term, "cleaning woman," and the unacceptable "cleaning lady"; and when at Christmas they all see a house on which is hung a large cardboard birthday cake inscribed "Happy Birthday, Dear Jesus," she gasps: "My word how extreme . . . Some Italians must live there."

Mrs. Bridge reads only what her friends say they are reading and diligently tries to think only as they do. The latter proves difficult. "How do you make up *your* mind?" she nervously asks one friend. When only 54 out of the 56 members of her Auxiliary vote to include the words "under God" in the Auxiliary constitution, she is disappointed because the vote was not unanimous and "unanimity was so gratifying." "Every time she heard or read about a unanimous vote she felt a surge of pride and was reminded, for some reason, of the Pilgrims." So implacable is Mrs. Bridge's innocence that she speaks of the outbreak of war in Europe in naively provincial terms: "It certainly changes things. I notice the difference everywhere. Piggly Wiggly still delivers, thank heavens, but the service is so much slower than it used to be. . . ."

Connell's satire would become sadistic were it not for his ability to

reveal the emptiness beneath the crushing boredom of Mrs. Bridge's narrowly circumscribed life. Several times she almost recognizes her own plight. Once she looks in a bookstore window and notices a curious title: *Theory of the Leisure Class*.

She experienced a surge of resentment. For a number of seconds she eyed this book with definite hostility, as though it were alive and conscious of her. She went inside and asked to see the book. With her gloves on it was difficult to turn the pages, so she handed it back to the clerk, thanked him, and with a dissatisfied expression continued to Bancroft's.

Another time, Grace Barron, her one thinking friend, asks her: "Have you ever felt like those people in the Grimm fairy tale—the ones who were all hollowed out in the back?" Mrs. Bridge remembers the question, however, only when she hears of Grace's suicide. Only once does she try to articulate to herself her vague dissatisfaction. When she realizes that her successful lawyer husband will never cut back on his long hours at the office, nor seem less distant when at home, she considers her marriage:

They had started off together to explore something that promised to be wonderful, and, of course there had been wonderful times. And yet, thought Mrs. Bridge, why is it that we haven't—that nothing has—that whatever we—?

Mrs. Bridge is always about to ask an important question, but she never does. Her life settles into a necessary sequence of delays and interruptions, insuring her a contentedness that is also a kind of despair. As her children grow up she finds it harder and harder to pass the time. One morning she stays in bed, wondering if she is about to die:

She did not feel ill, but she had no confidence in her life. Why should her heart keep beating? What was there to live for? Then she grew cheerful because she recalled her husband had told her to get the Lincoln waxed and polished.

But, alas, even that task had been done the week before.

Unlike the hapless, purposeless Mrs. Bridge, her husband, Walter,

efficiently structures his life around a few severe and inflexible principles—beliefs that would cheer anyone worried that Herbert Hoover was a bit too liberal. In *Mrs. Bridge* those principles appear only occasionally and always briefly, since Mr. Bridge spends almost all of his time at the office, too tired when at home to be bothered with the petty concerns of his wife and children. Mr. Bridge prides himself in providing for his family's fiscal and philosophical welfare: good, safe stocks and bonds supply the former, quotations from Abraham Lincoln the latter. As glimpsed in *Mrs. Bridge*, Walter Bridge seems hardworking, honest, and dour—a good man even if unlikable.

Mr. Bridge does nothing to change the essentials of this picture, but the world forced through the nozzle of Walter Bridge's perspective becomes a far darker place than it was in *Mrs. Bridge*. Because Mr. Bridge's life is so much more complicated than is his wife's, his story takes longer to tell. While *Mr. Bridge* continues the pointillist format of *Mrs. Bridge*, it is over a hundred pages longer than the first book, and Connell's treatment of Mr. Bridge generates a more bitter satire. Mr. Bridge's world seems almost exclusively composed of relationships indicated by, but not defined by, money. The three pillars of his self-image are: "financial security, independence, and self-respect." Money itself means nothing to him (he is neither greedy nor jealous), but money provides the markers that measure his achievement in all three categories.

Mr. Bridge can imagine no hardship that will not yield to the virtue of hard work; the Depression has not particularly affected his life or the lives of his associates, so why should it bother anyone else? When a shabby-looking man stops him on the street and demands his money, Mr. Bridge simply huffs "Don't be ridiculous" and walks away. As he later ponders the incident, Mr. Bridge finds himself quite exasperated: "The man's presumption was extraordinary. If he had no money he should get a job like everybody else." A similar reaction troubles Mr. Bridge on a trip to France when he visits Millet's simple hut. After contemplating the indignity of living in such a hut, he finally blurts out to Mrs. Bridge:

I do not insist a person has to live in a place like Versailles or anything of the sort. Far from it. But it beats me how that Millet could be indifferent to ordinary comforts. . . . If the fellow liked to paint pictures, all right, but if there was no

public for his pictures why didn't he get a job like everybody else? He could have done his art work over the weekend.

Material success merely confirms for Mr. Bridge that he has charted his life by the proper assumptions, and the humor of this book rises from the two or three occasions when doubt momentarily undermines his priggishness. The book's funniest chapter, "Hair Shirt," has Mr. Bridge obsessed with the memory of a free-spirited acquaintance who wore brilliant yellow socks to a ballet. The idea of male dancers disconcerts Mr. Bridge, but the idea that someone he knows would wear yellow socks to a ballet actually distresses him. The acquaintance happens to be a psychiatrist, and Mr. Bridge remembers his once saying that "it is not what a man does that he later regrets but what a man has failed to do." Accordingly, Mr. Bridge reasons that the shocking socks must have resulted from a policy of gratifying sudden whims.

There might be some sound psychological principle here. Indeed, he reflected, there might very well be considerable merit in this. He recalled how often he had denied himself some inconsequential object he wanted, denied himself a slight pleasure or satisfaction for no truly reasonable reason but only because his heritage argued against indulgence. . . .

Mr. Bridge, therefore, decides to buy something—anything—on the spur of the moment. "He hoped that when he found the object he was seeking it would not be too expensive, or too ridiculous; however, it should be expensive enough to cause discomfort, and mildly absurd." After a week or so of looking, during which time he "calculated that he had wasted two or three hours," Mr. Bridge abandons the quest, settling for buying a completely unremarkable red-plaid wool shirt—thus setting once and for all the limit of his vision. After he wears the shirt once at home to the compliments of his family, he banishes it to the closet, "knowing that every time he opened the closet door and saw the shirt he was going to be annoyed."

As the shirt episode suggests, Mr. Bridge is not totally unaware of his limitations, but he rationalizes most of them into virtues. What he cannot dismiss or rationalize is his troubled relationship with his oldest daughter, Ruth, whose sullen rebelliousness and flaunted sexuality arouse both consternation and pangs of desire in his otherwise tightly control-

led life. It may well be, as Guy Davenport has suggested, that “in Mr. Bridge’s intuitive sense that Ruth is somehow right in her rebellion is the meaning of the two novels.” Certainly, Mr. Bridge finds Ruth the most disturbing thing in his life, not only beyond control, but beyond understanding.

We know Mrs. Bridge through her failures, Mr. Bridge through his successes, and we realize that both have imprisoned themselves in sadly limited views of the world. Mr. Bridge’s opinions infuriate as much as Mrs. Bridge’s naivete amuses; the two books are almost completely different, yet perfectly matched. Even when Connell seems on the edge of overly-neat, overly-predictable intersections between the two stories (Mrs. Bridge worries about a strange tower her adolescent son builds; Mr. Bridge notices only the cave his son and his friends dig for a secret meeting place) he maintains the profound dissimilarity between Mr. Bridge’s perception and that of his wife. Yet, for all the difference between means, Mr. Bridge and Mrs. Bridge are doomed to similar ends. As Connell eventually muses: “They had lived reasonably and logically, with fine practicality, and it had come to this.” Not since Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives* have the rhythms of daily life been so marvelously represented, the repetitions of the mind made to seem so inexorable.

Connell’s short fiction shares some of the concerns and all of the precision of the Bridge books. One story in *Saint Augustine’s Pigeon*, “Mademoiselle from Kansas City,” borrows a chapter title from *Mrs. Bridge* and the worst fears from *Mr. Bridge* as it seems to follow Ruth Bridge to New York and eventually into a puzzled life of prostitution. While the stories in this collection are remarkably varied, most focus on characters trapped in the sameness of their lives. Of the sixteen stories in *Saint Augustine’s Pigeon*, four come from Connell’s *The Anatomy Lesson and Other Stories*, five come from his *At the Crossroads*, and seven have not been previously collected.

Two of the most engaging of Connell’s stories, “The Walls of Avila” and “The Palace of the Moorish Kings,” resentfully scrutinize the life of a restless world traveller through the Bridge-like eyes of the small-town friends he left behind. Three stories portray the frustrated and disappointed life of Karl Muhlbach, the protagonist of Connell’s *The Connoisseur* and *Double Honeymoon*. Apart from the heavy-handed Christ imagery in “The Fisherman from Chihuahua” and the slightly cloying situation irony of “Promotion,” the stories in *Saint Augustine’s Pigeon* are uniformly fine, delicately enigmatic.

That North Point Press has chosen to publish these three books by Connell is doubly fortunate: Connell deserves to be read and a book from North Point almost demands to be held and admired, as does any finely crafted artifact. Now in its third year of publishing, North Point Press prints its books on acid-free paper, sews all bindings, and provides dust jackets even for its paperbacks. Real cloth covers the hardbacks.

In a recent *Publishers Weekly* article, Jack Shoemaker, editor-in-chief, explained that North Point hopes to support itself from steady backlist titles rather than through frontlist publishing. Their press runs are small (3,000 to 6,000 copies), and usually of unmistakably significant writers. "If we can prove that people can make a living publishing books this way—with efficiency and control and limited growth," Shoemaker continued, "we might be able to encourage a dozen others to stake out their own territory, however wide or narrow it may be and give it a try." North Point's publication of these three books by Evan Connell should certainly support that vision.