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REVIEW

John A. Scott, *Blair*. McPhee Gribble/Penguin 1988. \$9.95. 182pp.

While *St Clair* firmly established John A. Scott's credentials as one of Australia's leading poets, it is not widely known that he began his writing career as a television comedy writer. *Blair*, Scott's first novel, shows, that despite six books of poetry and a teaching position in Canberra, he has not lost his ear for comedy.

Blair, above everything else, is a very funny book. The main character, Eric Blair (as in George Orwell), is a middle aged British academic-in-exile who is teaching at a small institution in Melbourne called the Centre for Human Achievement. Blair stumbles from the one comic situation to the next, at times taking on the dimensions of a tragic 'anti-hero', and at other times becoming more like a one man slap-stick comedy show.

While Blair can turn a simple procedure, such as lighting a match or answering the telephone, into a comic epic, he does have weightier matters on his mind. Blair is searching for love, or at least for another sexual encounter, and he believes he has found it in the person of Julia Brouwer. Having once been married and having "misplaced" his wife in the second year of their marriage — "as with a necessary text for an impending tutorial tossed upon his desk, she simply disappeared from view" — Blair is sadly out of practice in matters sexual. His pursuit of Julia leads him to a screening of Murnau's *Dracula* which ends in chaos, a frantic attempt to hide from a colleague in a sex shop and numerous discussions of the Elizabethan and Metaphysical poets with his beloved.

At the same time as he is running after Julia, Blair is also running from his mother. Having managed to ship her back to Britain fourteen years before, she is showing increasing signs of wanting to return to Melbourne. To add to his problem Blair is also having disturbing dreams which involve chopping his mother into small pieces and hiding her in a suitcase.

What makes *Blair* more than just a funny story is the often complex way in which different incidents are linked together by the narrative. Blair's dreams about cutting his mother up, for example, are recalled when he quotes Freud from memory, "every dream reveals itself as a physical structure which has meaning and which can be inserted at an assignable point in the mental activities of waking life" Blair's mother is recalled once again in a tutorial on D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. When Blair, confronted with the tutorial's complete ignorance

of the novel, attempts to start a discussion on the notion of the “crippled hero”, one feels that the term could apply as much to Blair as it does to Paul Morel.

The *Sons and Lovers* incident illustrates one of Blair's strengths. It is easy to feel that, because of the interconnected nature of much of the narrative, there must be a ‘deeper’ level to the novel. There is, for example, the mother/son/lover triangle. There is also the significance of the names that Scott has chosen for his characters. Eric Blair, for example, suggests Orwell, and Julia was the main female character in *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Other names also have an air of significance about them. Colonel Proctor, the arch-royalist with a love of artificial limbs; and his children, Hymen Proctor, a gay photographer “so named by his mother out of her initial deep respect for marriage”, Celica Proctor and “little Sarah Proctor”. Then there is Blair's ex-wife, Felicity Greenwood, his colleague at the Centre for Human Achievement, E.G. Brodly, the “greatest living poet”, Edward Finchley and Blair's ex-student, Fabian Purvis.

But it is difficult to know how seriously Scott intends us to take all this. A small group of Melbourne intellectuals and writers will, no doubt, recognise themselves and their friends/enemies in *Blair* and perhaps the characters' names and a number of the incidents in the novel will take on deeper significance. For the rest of us, the novel becomes something of a satiric game. Scott has, for example, given the reader all sorts of clues to find what is, ultimately, useless information. At the beginning of the novel we are told that “little Sarah was now half her half-brother's age. Eight years ago she was half the age of her half-sister who, twenty-two years ago was half the age of their half brother.” In order to make it easier Scott tells us later in the novel that “little Sarah” is nineteen. By which time, of course, we already have a good idea of the Proctor childrens' approximate ages.

But Scott's playfulness, ultimately, has a satiric bite to it. Anyone who has spent anytime at all at a CAE or university will recognise the attitude behind the statement made by the head of Literary Studies at the Centre for Human Achievement when he tells Blair and Brodly that a philosophy lecturer is not having his contract renewed: “Should've worked harder on tenure. Wasted too much time in the classroom.” Blair, Brodly and the rest of the Centre for Human Achievement, it seems, would feel perfectly at home on the campus of just about any tertiary institution in Australia.

While *Blair* may not be ‘great literature’ it is, nevertheless, a very entertaining and humorous read. Be careful, however, reading it on public transport. Private laughter in public places can be quite embarrassing.