

me,” he says, referring, sadly and primarily, to himself.

Although *My People's Waltz* is slim, its ten stories secrete penetrating and beautiful prose. Phillips's images are vigorous and fresh, dreamy without seeming saccharine. Take, for instance, the narrator's recollection of a night spent camping with his father and his son: "I settled into the warm spot between their sleeping generations, and for the first time in my life I felt humbled by that ache which even pharaohs knelt down before when they saw the capstone set into place, and they yielded to how we would remember them." Such writing could hold its own in any district. But if we are to believe Padgett Powell, who in his preface to *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1998* (in which Phillips is disappointingly absent) claims that what distinguishes Southern fiction is a quality of "whippedness," then Phillips's work is exemplary of the genre. Because it is exactly that struggle, the grieving over what they can and cannot have, that defines Richard and his clan. In Dale Ray Phillips we have discovered a writer worthy of his tradition, but also deserving of so much more.

Jenifer Berman is an editor and writer living in New York.

***For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, by Nathan Englander. New York: Knopf. 256 pages. \$23.**

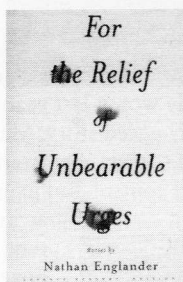
### **Benjamin Taylor**

One thinks back to the works of Bernard Malamud's *The Magic Barrel* and Cynthia Ozick's *The Pagan Rabbi* for fit comparisons to this exceptional first collection of stories, the work of a twenty-nine-year-old American now living in Israel.

Nathan Englander's characters are nearly all Orthodox Jews, many of them living in Hasidic communities of New York and Jerusalem. Englander knows absolutely everything about the *halachic* fold in which his characters dwell. And he seems to know everything about the fearsomeness and glamour of adjacent Gentile worlds as well. Truly, it is as if Malamud were with us again.

The more outlandish Englander's premise, the harder he rides it. In "The

Gilgul of Park Avenue," for instance, an upper-middle-class Protestant is suddenly gripped, coming home one evening in a cab, by the certainty that he is a Jew. In "Reb Kringle," a failed rebbe with barely any congregation but



with a paunch and white beard as real as Edmund Gwenn's in *Miracle on 34th Street*, hires himself out each December as a department-store Santa.

In the title story, a man whose wife continuously menstruates and is therefore unapproachable according to Jewish law, obtains a rabbinical dispensation to visit a prostitute—for which purpose he drives from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, "the city of sin." In "The Tumblers," a ragtag band of Hasidim doomed to the death camps (natives of Chelm, a town of incurable blockheads in Jewish folklore) inadvertently board a train of circus performers and, mistaken for acrobats, briefly stave off fate by doing what they can to tumble for an audience of Nazis that seems to include the Führer himself.

My personal favorite in this very strong collection is "The Twenty-seventh Man." It is perhaps the kind of story Isaac Babel would have written had he survived the Stalinist liquidations. Beyond summary or description, it restores to the word *legend* its root meanings—has to be taken up, has to be read. The fable of a holy fool of literature, one Pinchas Pelovits, littlest of the legion of tortured and murdered Russian Jewish writers, "The Twenty-seventh Man" is itself holy, in my view—canonical, as they say.

What great fiction must be is furiously provincial, focused on a community of people who are embroiled to the death with one another. The sublime trick of the art is to be simultaneously inside and outside of all such provinces, to inhabit the little world and the great world simultaneously. Only thus may life in the provinces come to implicate life universal. The special grace of Nathan Englander's stories is their ability to evoke, richly

*continued from page 26*

and authoritatively, a circumscribed milieu, while reaching out to the turbulences of flesh and spirit that are not only Jewish but comprehensively human.

Benjamin Taylor's most recent book is *Tales Out of School* (Turtle Point Press, 1995).