

Carol J. Scott. *Kentucky Daughter* (New York: Clarion Books, 1985) 186 pp., \$12.95.

Carol Scott sets out in her first novel to cover some interesting territory: ninth-grader Mary Fred, a girl from a poor white family in Kentucky, decides to make something of herself, and so in order to go to a better school, she moves in with an aunt and uncle who live in a Virginia city on the Chesapeake Bay. As she grows and changes, she comes to recognize the value of her country heritage. Along the way she encounters the prejudices of the “in” crowd, the usual pubescent difficulties with boys, and sexual advances from a disturbed teacher.

One problem with the novel is the treatment of rural dialect (*them* for *those*, for example) as simply wrong. Nowhere is there recognition that code-switching would be an appropriate goal for Mary Fred, rather than simple-minded eradication of her home dialect. Even her little sister Cindy Lou, who stays in Kentucky, starts to clean up her “grammar.” In real life, there would be a great deal of social antagonism toward her for talking “uppity.” Dialect-switching is a major conflict faced by minority children in the school system, and this book should have given it a more understanding treatment.

One may also be slightly disappointed with Scott’s handling of the boyfriend motif. Scott is trying for a complex character, but winds up with one that still has some of the same old hang-ups: Mary Fred will not join the school paper until she is sure Norman likes her. About the time she finally decides she wants to join because she wants to write, the Norman-problem is resolved. Norman is an appealingly shy and un-macho boy, however, and we cannot help but want the two to overcome all obstacles, particularly since Mary Fred does not have to stoop to using such stereotypical wiles as pretending to be stupid.

One may also have some misgivings about Mary Fred’s finding her roots. This theme revolves around a wool coat her mother has woven and dyed for her. It seems very ugly, but Mary Fred finally decides to take pride in her mother’s work and wear it anyway. The other kids continue to torment her, but this first step to independence gives her the courage to face them down. However, it seems unfortunate that the key here is an item of clothing, and Mary Fred ends up eventually being more “in” than “out”: the coat is just like those sold at Saks Fifth Avenue. This is such a good book in many ways that one would hope it would do more to de-emphasize dressing.

To turn to the novel’s best points, one must note especially the treatment of sexual abuse. Mary Fred and two other girls stand up to the teacher and eventually share their stories with the principal and their relatives, providing a model for how to cope in this kind of situation. Mary Fred’s shame and inner turmoil are well portrayed, as is the line of

reasoning that makes her finally talk to the adults about the incident. Their responses are loving and reasonable, another reassurance to the younger reader who might be experiencing this predicament.

Kentucky Daughter has enough good writing in it to keep the reader going past some awkwardness in the early pages, where the dialogue seems strained and uncomfortable. Scott appears to gain fluency and confidence in the course of the novel. Particularly apt is the Chesapeake crab migration—the females first cradled by their mates until their shells harden, then eventually migrating alone to their destiny with “strength, dignity, courage” (p. 143)—as a metaphor for both Mary Fred’s journey to Virginia and her mother’s growth as a folk artist after the death of her husband. Mary Fred at one point says, “I wish I had someone to hold me while I grew strong” (p. 122), but she does not, and she still goes on. She is such an engaging character, such a complex and interesting person to know, that we end the book feeling that both Saks and Norman are only temporary way-stations on her drive to be somebody, and that that somebody will do worthwhile things.

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**Samuel Selvon. *Moses Ascending*. (London: Heineman, 1975)
141 pp., \$5.50 paper.**

Sam Selvon’s fifth novel *Moses Ascending* addresses the ethnic experience with dual prongs: linguistic and racial. Although the situation of the novel is not new—the plight of the subject come to the motherland—having been treated by George Lamming and others, this handling of the basic theme is: all the sacred cows fall before Selvon’s iconoclastic pen. Moses, the “I” protagonist, is but a faintly veiled, highly disillusioned Selvon who dares look at the present world situation: the emperor has no clothes.

An assault on the King’s English, this book is a linguistic experience in many ways: disrupted syntax, dialects, clichés from many cultures, sounds. The author’s mastery of the various dialects, not to mention languages, represents a certain evolution in his writing. For example the early work (1952) *The Brighter Sun* laid in his native Trinidad makes use of dialect strictly in dialogue. *The Lonely Londoners* to which *Moses Ascending* is a sequel often employs the Trinidadian speech patterns.