WENDELL BERRY
Poems Celebrate
Farm's Rebuilding

CLEARING. By Wendell Berry. Harcourt Brace, $6.95, paper, $4.98.

Wendell Berry has written this poem in honor of his passion for the farm on the Kentucky River that he and his wife are reclaiming from years of abuse and neglect. Berry writes of his attachment as a "marriage" or a "sacrament" but the poems sometimes read more like an account of a love affair with a jealous mistress. In the rough, hard work of slashing and clearing off scrub growth, filling in eroded gullies, reseeding pasture and planting a garden, the land has entered his song, and in his work are the deep, steady rhythms of nature's own cycles: planting-harvest, summer-winter, life-decay-back to life again, work-rest-work. The words are clear, moving and affirmative.

The first part of Clearing chronicles the recorded history of the land Berry now works. He would not say "owned," how it was bought and sold many times with "this peculiarity: /from then until now, no parent/has ever left it to a child./Only one man kept it until he died, only/one of its owners became/its own." Then came a "developer;" then Berry to correct what had been spoiled.

The middle sections - "The Clearing," "Work Song," "The Bed," and "From the Crest" recount his labors, detail their effect on his life and foretell what he sees of his own end. Most touching and idealistic is a section of "Work Song" called "A Vision.

On the steep where greed and ignorance cut down the old forest, an old forest will stand, its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.

The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.

Families will be singing in the fields.

In their voices they will hear a music rising out of the ground. They will see nothing from the ground they will not return, whatever the grievance of parting.

Memory, native to this valley, will spread over it like a grave, and memory will turn into legend, legend into song, song into sacrament. The abundance of this place, the songs of its people and its art will be health and wisdom and illumination. Light. This is no paradise dream.

It's hardship is its possibility. It's no dream to Berry. It is the only way we will be able to save ourselves. "We are," he says in another place, "a people who must decline or perish," meaning the necessity to turn away from greed, power and the seduction of "progress," to care, hard work, thrift and husbands. But the poet has set up a conflict for himself. Hard physical labor can breed conservation and an intolerance for any not working. Ants don't take kindly to grasshoppers singing their way through the summer. And Berry as a singer is troubled by what he is doing to that part of himself. "Can it lead me away from books?" he wonders. What will I say to my fellow poets whose poems I do not read while this passion keeps me in the open? What is this silence coming over me? I am afraid, but I am afraid of a seduction of my poems, of my mind, of my awe. I love this warm light room, where words have kept me through cold days.

But now song surrounds it, the fields around it are green, and I must turn away from books, put past and future behind, to come into the presence of this time.

ISABEL ZUBER
Journal Book Reviewer

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In the title poem of this collection Marvin Weaver speaks of the vital parts of "the old bird." He speaks of the central and sinister and strong in taste as to be eaten only by the serious and by the truly hungry, as a metaphor for his work. When he is at his best, his most vital, it is entirely accurate. He has poems strong, muscled, and ultimately nourishing. True, this collection is weak in spots. The humor does not always come off and some plays on words jar. But these are minor flaws; when Weaver deals with his major themes he is on sure ground and the writing is fine.

An example is "Family Reunion," in which three generations struggle with their feelings for each other. In this poem the grandfather's "I conclude an argument that he started concerning the upbringing of grandchildren" gives his son a shove and takes off into the night. As he flees...

...the old man humming a tune from the 2nd world war. He doesn't remember the words. He thinks he remembers a time, say, back in the forties when we took our place at the table and ah, what was served was O.K., but only in the company of men and guns were good for they silenced all the right people.

Meanwhile tucked in his bed the sanderson is crying. He pictures his father and his grandfather like a couple of nearsighted beagles bumping into one another in the underbrush panting, bug-eyed, nervous and wet in their greeting...

The best of the collection, "Lost Colony," is worth quoting in entirety:

They passed the pop bottle between them at arm's length as if it were a calumet. Black hair smoked their faces as they breathed and twisted over upon their sides and twitched their legs like insects.

three of them there under the bridge
Simon Locklear, Willie Sampson, Rudolph Oxcidne
Tuscarora, Lumbee, Croatan whose chiefs ate the first white spirits
beached behind the cape on Roanoke
rendered the medicine in their blood
who drank the strong mixture half chainer tother half mountain
den they called smoke-on-the-water
for reasons that ceased

THE BEST JOURNAL
ISABEL ZUBER
PASSION for WRITING

The poetry in her worked its way out, line by line

Thursday, September 18, 1997

By Kim Underwood

JOURNAL REPORTER

Sometimes, words clamor for Isabel Zuber's attention.

"There are two notebooks in my purse," she said. "When anything comes along, I drag one out and write it down."

She also keeps a notebook by her bed.

Writer's block isn't a problem for Zuber. Generally, when she finds a moment to write, words are there, waiting for her.

Zuber, an award-winning poet and fiction writer, is one of 60 women writers participating in the program at the North Carolina Women Writers Festival, being held Friday and Saturday at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Zuber will be one of three writers on a panel discussing "Making Poetry in Southern Voices."

Zuber grew up in Boone surrounded by books. After supper, the family would gather in the living room, and her father would read to everyone -- Winnie-the-Pooh stories, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens novels.

"That's what you do when you don't have television," she said. "It was the entertainment. My father had all the voices for The Wizard of Oz."

She loved those performances and came to believe that being a writer was the most wonderful thing in the world a person could be.

Zuber started her first novel when she was 6. It had something to do
with Texas' war for independence. It was a subject about which she knew nothing, but she was inspired to take it up after the minister mentioned it in a sermon.

Her passion for writing accompanied her into adulthood. But she found that graduate school, work, marriage and children all conspired to keep her from writing as much as she would like.

"I don't think it's unusual for women to start writing later in life, especially if you've been married and had a family," Zuber said.

When her two children were young -- her son is now 34 and her daughter 30 -- she wrote down bits and pieces -- poem fragments, a phrase or title that came to mind, a quote that she wanted to remember -- in notebooks as she found the time.

When she returned to work in 1969 cataloging books in the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University -- she's now a circulation librarian there -- she would sometimes write down a poem on a 3-by-5-inch catalog card. "You had to write around the hole," she said.

After transferring her poems to the typed page, she would submit them to various publications. Some weren't accepted. Others were. Over the years, her poems and short fiction have appeared in such publications as The Laurel Review, Poetry and The Crucible. A short story won the Irene Leach Contest.

In 1986, she was one of 16 North Carolina poets chosen to read their poems on WUNC radio. One man was so inspired that he made a point of looking her up, Zuber said. "I think he was very disappointed."

Her poems won the 1987 North Carolina Writers' Network poetry chapbook competition. (A chapbook is a small book of poems.) North Carolina writer Fred Chappell was the final judge, and the poems -- which Zuber describes as fragments of stories, often with a medieval feel -- were published as Oriflamb.

One of the greatest compliments she was ever paid, she said, was when a woman told her that she had memorized every poem in Oriflamb -- while she was quitting smoking -- and that after her power had gone out during a hurricane, she had sat in her living room and recited them.

Zuber's second chapbook -- Winter's Exile -- was published this summer as part of Scots Plaid Press' Fine Poetry Series. Many of its poems are about the life and death of her father, Herman Roland Eggers, who died in 1990.
She writes in free verse. She admires and likes to read more structured verse, she said, but whenever she tries writing it herself, it's a disaster.

Zuber has finished an as-yet-unpublished novel about a marriage at the turn of the century. She expects her next project to be honing a group of short stories that are connected to the characters in the novel.

As far as tips that she can pass on to aspiring writers, Zuber said, first on the list is: Don't throw anything away. As writer A.R. Ammons told her, you never know what little piece of your old writing is going to trigger something fresh. And sometimes you will find that an earlier version is the better version.

"Of course, you have a very messy house and a very messy office, if you do that," she said. "I try to put things in files, but I have a lot of stuff."

A book on writing that she has found helpful is *The Passionate, Accurate Story* by Carol Bly.

Zuber was among the writers at "North Carolina Women Writers: Making a Difference," a 1992 conference at Salem College. Organizers of the UNCG festival consider it an outgrowth of that conference.

The 1992 conference was tremendously successful, Zuber said, in inspiring women writers and fortifying a sense of community among them. She hopes that the people who attend this festival also will make or strengthen connections with other writers.

"I've gotten so much from other writers," Zuber said. "I think that is the main thing that they should take away from it."

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MUCH TO SAY: Isabel Zuber is among 60 women writers who will participate in a conference at UNCG. The painting at left, by Anne Kesler Shields, shows writers who took part in a 1992 conference at Salem.

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THEY
from Oriflamb

After we had destroyed them all
we came to worship their art,
would sit for hours in conquered, fretted
doorways to watch the play of fountains
on paved courtyards, fondling the while
those carved stone dogs. We wrapped ourselves
in sinuous robes of a fabric
we could not name, hid our rough invaders’ faces
behind bland masks with narrow plucked brows.
The smoke of pipes polished as water
curled from our nostrils. We drank
the bitterest, the most severe
of all
their remedies, forgot our own memories.
Flute, drums moved our bodies in dances
we never made and in time we prayed
to the very gods who could not save them.

HE SANG TO ME
from Winter’s Exile

He sang to me
a long while back,
of harps hanging
on willow trees, those
summer dying roses,
haft winter’s exile
in his voice even then
and I so young knew
the song sad but
didn’t know why,
as sad then as now
when I do know.