

Book Review

# Next New World's brilliance is in the language

By BARRIE HAYNE

Bob Shacochis, who won the American Book Award in 1985 for *Easy in the Islands*, a collection of short stories set in the Caribbean, ranges further afield in his new book, *The Next New World*.

The title, indeed, is rich in allusion: of this book's eight stories, five are set in the New World of the United States, two in the still newer world of the Islands, and one in the world of Shakespeare's theatre - "O brave new world, That has such people in't."

The Shakespearean story, *The Trapdoor*, is the least successful of the eight, which suggests that Shacochis is best at home in the very contemporary new worlds that he mostly inhabits. It does, however, bring on stage the ghost of Hamlet's father, and ghosts of one kind or another are the principal link in these otherwise rather disparate stories.

There does not seem to be much in common at first sight, for instance, between the story of two ancient sisters living in a rotting mansion on St. Vincent, who invest the various men who visit their plantation with sexual fantasies, and the story of a family reunion in Washington, D.C., in which two an-

cient brothers meet for the first time in 50 years and reach back through a wilderness of senility to some kind of understanding. And in between, these stories deal with cannibalism, cancer, the worship of dead men's bones and the encroachments of Alzheimer's Disease. But it is ghosts - perhaps visitors from a new world that is also the oldest of worlds - which make the common pattern.

The two old Miss Parkers (*Les Femmes Creole: A Fairy Tale*) are raking in their past for a love that was never there - they hated their father - and one of their visitors mistakes them for ghosts themselves.

In *Celebration of The New World*, Bernie, a former professor of politics at Columbia, "a man who has influenced American foreign policy," has fallen back on a pig-German patois to express the thoughts he no longer has, and Uncle Joachim, his brother, up from Mexico, lives in a world inhabited by the ghost of Trotsky, whom he knew. These two stories are amongst the best in the book. But everywhere in the collection, people are fleeing toward their ghosts (like the old Southern colonel of *Where Pelham Fell*, who has taken the bones of a detachment of Confederates and, in trying to put them back together, finds his reason for living, and dying), or else away from their ghosts (like the title character of *Squirrely's Grouper*, a man held in contempt by his North Carolina neighbors until he lands a fish of record size,

but then finds his past as a war criminal catching up with him.)

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There is a fair emphasis on age in *The Next New World* (Crown Publishers, 224 pages, \$23.95), too, as though all these characters were on the verge of another world; for some, there is an echo of Tennyson's Ulysses: "Come, my friends, 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world." The least sentimental story here, and one of the best, is *Stolen Kiss*, in which Burton Glass - a man perhaps as aimless, if not as alienated, as J.D. Salinger's family of the same name - is painting the vacation home of a family of New Yorkers, and finds on a post a "kiss, circled by a glossy halo of oil that seeped out from the image." He drifts off into sexual fantasy, with both the New York wife and the daughter, ruminating as well on his own wife of 39 years, who prefers to live in New York. Having come to terms with his past life and his present, the caretaker presses his lips against the mysterious kiss, then paints it over.

While most of the haunted characters of *The Next New World* come to final terms with themselves, Burton Glass is the only one who does so in a clearly healthy way. At the far end of both the age scale and the health scale is the young musician of *I Ate Her Heart*, the most disagreeable of these stories, who finds his unfaithful mistress murdered; as a final act of love, he comes to terms with himself by performing the act

of the title. In this story, Shacochis has gone beyond metaphor to an actuality which will be to few readers' tastes.

Perhaps the young musician is too close to his own story. Of the three stories told in first person, *I Ate Her Heart* is the least convincing, while the other two, *Celebrations of the New World* and *Squirrely's Grouper*, are among the most. Both these stories are told by narrators not quite central to the action. Both narrators are searching for an answer to what has happened to their haunted heroes. That they invite the reader to join the search is what makes these, along with *Les Femmes Creoles* and *Stolen Kiss*, the most satisfying, yet, of course, ultimately unsatisfying, stories in a brilliant collection.

Much of the brilliance is in the language. Shacochis is a real wordsmith, forcing us to see old ideas in new combinations, and doing this primarily through the witty art of his diction. The senile mind, partly

knowing its senility, is captured in "His eyes become the eyes of a priest fingering through a racy magazine, trying to concentrate and be casual and indifferent simultaneously." An old man's hands are "clawed" to the steering wheel. The two old sisters "reigned" over a room where once they reigned over a plantation. (The word reminds us again of the gap between new world and old.) And the world of Bob Shacochis' wit is not the least of the new worlds that the reader will encounter in this very original collection.

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