

to extensive cultural exchange among the Egyptian, Sumerian, and Indus River civilizations. At a different level the story may be read as pure sea-going adventure. As they struggle to avoid reefs, pirates, and supertankers, Heyerdahl's "Sumerians" sometimes wonder if the expedition is worth the trouble. It is. A must for all armchair mariners.

—JOHN S. PETERSON

### Asking for Trouble

by Donald Woods  
Atheneum, 384 pp. \$12.95

DONALD WOODS, former editor of one of South Africa's leading liberal newspapers, gained international prominence a few years ago when he fled from his country under the noses of the

police. With him went his family and the secret manuscript of his book *Biko*, an emotional account of the South African security police's alleged murder of Steven Biko, Woods's close friend and the leader of the opposition Black Consciousness movement.

Woods's autobiography tells the story of his life up to his cathartic escape. He chronicles his boyhood on a tribal reservation, his rise to prominence in journalism, and his increasing confrontations with the governing National party over apartheid. As a result of his agitations, Woods was "banned" in 1977. He was forbidden to publish and to speak in public, even to talk to, or be in the same room with, more than one person at a time. His family was tormented by security police, who, among other

pranks, mailed a T-shirt sprayed with powdered acid to his young daughter.

Woods also recounts his growing political consciousness: He is an Alan Paton or Nadine Gordimer character come to life. Neither oversimplifying nor overdramatizing, he can summon the beauty of South Africa as readily as he can describe its searing political problems. Yet Woods is a gifted reporter, not a soapbox ideologue. He lets South Africa speak, or rather cry, for itself.

—SUSAN K. REED

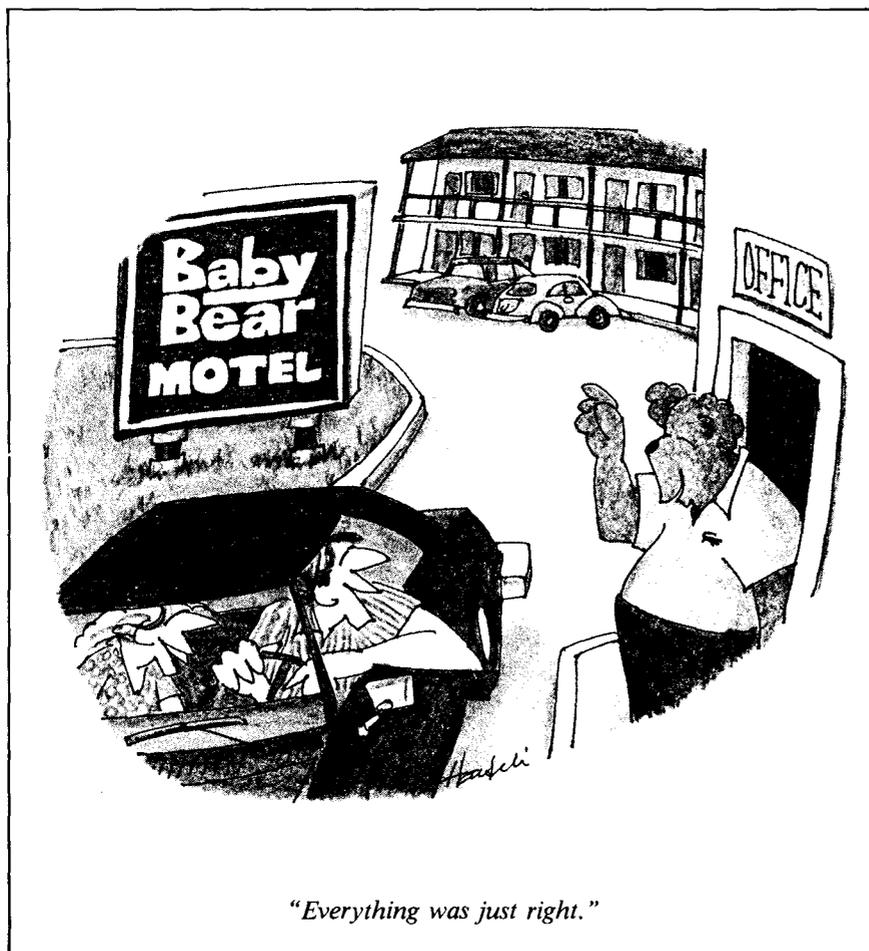
### Friends From the Forest

by Joy Adamson  
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich  
96 pp., \$9.95

BEGINNING WITH *Born Free* and continuing with her tales of rearing various African animals in captivity before releasing them into the wild, Adamson won a wide circle of readers. People were drawn to her books not so much for the literary experience but because they enjoyed seeing nature through her eyes.

Perhaps it is a fitting tribute to her status as a beloved storyteller that, in the wake of her murder in the African bush last year, even the fragmentary writings she left behind have been deemed worthy of publication. Some of Adamson's fans will probably be charmed anew by her accounts of the Colobus monkeys and Verreaux's eagle owls that were her companions on her African estate. But the two unrelated sketches read like diary entries or hasty jottings intended for later reworking. Unconnected thoughts and awkward phrasings abound.

Stylistic qualms aside, this is a good, old-fashioned natural history, based purely on personal observation. Adamson's sympathy with all manner of beasts makes for good stories. And her unabashed anthropomorphism adds charm to her anecdotes, although it leaves the more scientifically oriented reader a bit wary. Pretty thin stuff, even for the devoted. —PHILLIP JOHNSON



## Poking Around

I think it is a safe bet that I am the only person left on earth who can still recite all of Robert W. Service's *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. This ability is little appreciated. Hardly anyone ever says, "Come on, Tom! Recite *The Shooting of Dan McGrew!*" Change that "hardly anyone" to "no one."

I frequently do the whole thing silently, though, while jogging or walking or riding my bicycle. The first line, "A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute Saloon," is such a rouser that it often just pops into my head at such active but relatively mindless moments, and I carry on from there: "The kid that handled the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune," and without giving it much thought, I find that I've gone through to the end.

As you might expect, having the unusual ability to recite this old, scarcely remembered poem and keeping it all to myself can be frustrating, so once in a great while I inflict it upon people. It isn't easy to find an opportune moment, but if I keep my eyes and ears sharp, every few years I can work it in. Not long ago, I did the whole thing for a group of mostly young adults. The last line, you may remember, goes: "The woman who kissed him, and pinched his poke, was the lady that's known as Lou." One of the young women asked if that wasn't a rather off-color line for a poem of its period. She mustn't have been entirely attentive during the whole of the poem, because the stranger's poke is mentioned twice before: "He tilted his poke of dust on the bar" and "I'm here to state, and my words are straight, and I'll bet my poke they're true."

In my youth, a young lady who had asked that question would, on having *poke* explained to her, have been

covered with confusion, I think.

On second thought, I doubt that any young lady of that time would have asked the question. She would have assumed that no older gentleman would recite to her a poem with an off-color last line.

I'm pleased to report that, although the young woman who *did* raise the question was in no way covered with confusion, she nevertheless blushed winsomely.

A poke, of course, is a small bag. *OED* says: "A bag; a small sack: applied to a bag of any material or description, but usually smaller than a *sack*."

**She blushed  
to learn that  
"pinched his poke"  
isn't off-color.**

Pokes, as small bags, are seldom mentioned any more, except in the expression "a pig in a poke." To buy a pig in a poke was considered unwise, because you might find on opening the poke that you had purchased an alley cat or some other creature less valuable than a pig.

Thanks to the young lady's misunderstanding, I did a bit of research into *poke*. It is an interesting word. According to Mencken, *poke* is, or was as late as the Forties, criminal slang for *wallet*, and an empty wallet was a *cold poke*. Mencken says, "A wallet is a *poke*, *leather*, or *okus*." Then he has a footnote that carries us back to the days of the pulp magazines: "In 'Along the Main Stem,' *True Detective*, March

1942...a writer signing himself The Fly Kid suggested that *okus* (or *hokus*) may have issued from *poke* by way of *hocus-pocus*."

We law-abiding citizens may not use *poke* very often, but we use several words that are its close relatives. *Pocket* is obvious. *Pouch* is less obvious, but since *pouch*, *pocket*, and *poke* are all related to the French *poche*, we can easily see the family resemblance.

*Poach*, too in both senses—poaching game and poaching eggs—is related to *poke*. Poaching game is bagging game (putting it into the poke), but it is also tied to the Old French *pocher* or *poquer*, and thus to the English verb *poke*. *Pocher* and *poach* mean not only to bag game illegally, but to trespass or encroach—to poke in where you don't belong. Just like the husband who poaches on his wife's territory on the tennis court.

The *poach* in *poached egg* also comes from the French *pocher*. *OED* says, "*Pocher*, in this sense, is usually explained as referring to the enclosure of the yolk in the white as in a bag." At first, that struck me as farfetched—a bit of folk etymology—but I thought of the last time I actually poached an egg, fiddling with the spoon, trying to enclose the yolk in the white, and it isn't farfetched at all. It really is a matter of building a pocket of white around the yellow.

It occurs to me that, if Service were writing today, the last line of *Dan McGrew* would go, "The woman who kissed him, and ripped him off, was the lady that's known as Lou," and I wouldn't have delved into all this, and it certainly wouldn't have occurred to me that a "poke of dust on the bar" had any etymological relationship at all to a poached egg. ■