

Cathedral of the conquistador

Other new fiction

Nicci Gerrard

READING *The Dogs of Paradise* (Hamish Hamilton £13.99) is like entering a vast Spanish cathedral full of stained light, flying buttresses, incense, crashing music and dark corners. Illicit sexuality, opulent icons and the rituals of devotion and obsession assault the senses. Nothing is plain or calm in the Argentinian novelist Abel Posse's crisis-ridden fiction about the discovery of the Americas; the smallest action or least phrase is freighted with the history of medieval conquests and abuse.

Set in fifteenth-century Spain and the New World, *The Dogs of Paradise's* appropriate protagonist is Christopher Columbus — a picaresque visionary, convinced that his mission in life is to find an earthly paradise. The young Ferdinand and Isobel (whose erotic couplings and expansionist dreams transform history into a fabulous epic of sex and power), the Borgias, la Bobadilla and several famous popes keep him company on his journey across earth and ocean.

There is also a gibbering, sweaty cast of anonymous thousands who swarm through the narrative extravaganza: Jews disguised as monks, priests dressed as musketeers, sword-swallowers in carnival death masks, a plethora of spies and pimps and flamenco dancers, troops of masturbating street urchins, a procession of sad women who open their legs for the explorer and powerful ones who try to stop him from moving on.

Posse's prose reflects his themes of adventure, discovery and conquest, storming the reader with its inventions. Why use one syllable where three will do? Why write a simple sentence that arrives quickly at its object when each sentence can be a reckless journey in itself, over-crammed with clauses and brackets and playful digressions? References to Shere Hite and contemporary sexuality, or to Picasso, invade descriptions of medieval life.

Yet *The Dogs of Paradise* is a mobile novel which never clogs in its own riches. Posse springs light-footed over history's rubble. There's delight in his words and magic in his steps.

Where Posse's journey is epic and exhilarating, that traced in Alan Sillitoe's *Last Loves* (Grafton £12.95) is staunchly realistic, light on humour and heavy with booze and male talk. George and Bernard have been friends for 40 years; now, at 60, they return to Malaya, where they were in army service together, and meet Gloria, who is looking for the ghost of her dead father.

The unlikely triangle explores old memories and the possibility of happiness in late middle age, before a climax of betrayal and death. Sillitoe's characters never quite measure up to his reflections on the nature of love and disenchantment.

Bernard and George are sub-Graham Greene creations with weak bladders and polished shoes; they drink too much

whisky and leer at women's breasts between lurches to the urinals. Gloria is a very masculine creation — a lipsticked smile, shapely legs and little to say. All three seem to have stepped out of a West End farce and now find themselves trapped in the wrong story.

Dwarves of Death (Fourth Estate £12.95) is like a Hitchcock movie on drugs; an abrasive and funny detective novel set in the jazz clubs and housing estates of North London, whose unwilling sleuth only notices clues when they reach out and punch him on the nose.

Jonathan Coe's muddle-headed hero William is only half-connected to life. For all his street-wise friends and low-life haunts, he remains an Innocent Abroad, writing unperformable songs, eager about cool women, clinging to sentiment in a seedy, druggy and bad-tempered punk world. When he witnesses two dwarves commit a bizarre murder, William's amiably blind drift through the badlands of London is halted.

Coe is a bit perfunctory about solving the mystery and dispatching his hero, chastened, back to the safer north of England. His real and idiosyncratic charm lies in zestful descriptions of contemporary London,



Abel Posse: Assaults the senses.

delight in bizarre characters and delicious contempt for Andrew Lloyd Webber. From its opening chords to its final fade-out, *Dwarves of Death* is a novel of considerable gusto and panache.

Anne Fine's black comedy bounces along its sprightly one-liners without flagging. The would-be narrator of *Taking the Devil's Advice* (Viking £12.99) Oliver, is a pedant-philosopher; his head in the clouds of abstraction, he is continually stubbing his toes on domestic details and trampling over finer feelings.

Staying the summer with his ex-wife, Oliver spends the warm days writing his autobiography in the laundry cupboard. But literary efforts are continually interrupted by his scornful children while the manuscript is sabotaged by Constance's very different interpretation of the past.

At times the relentless and laugh-aloud comedy of *Taking the Devil's Advice* resembles music-hall patter, and prevents its darker side of the tale developing. It is as if Fine does not dare to stop being bitterly funny; she should have more confidence.