

Many publishers have expressed their envy of Four Winds Press for getting the Montana Estates Essay Series (\$14.95) off the ground.

In *Under the Influence* (from the third and most recent set of essays) Manhire reminisces in his wry, rather off-centre way about childhood in the south, raised in pubs between Invercargill and Dunedin. Recording a time when it was inconceivable that the six o'clock swill could give way to espresso being a normal pub order, Bill Manhire's autobiographical observations range out from the story of his imbibing father to the landscape including top-dressing planes, concrete posts and comic books. It is not all heart and it has a good head. In this memorable pocket-sized essay, next year's Menton Fellow has a way of striking home even if your father isn't from Winton.

Joan Didion is the author of several memorable novels - for example I always unpack *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, *Play it as it Lays* and *A Book of Common Prayer* every time I move house - but in *Political Fictions* (Vintage, \$29.95) she takes her knife to modern democratic process, USA style.

In these coolly observant essays she dissects "that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life" (and, maybe, as Michael Moore says in his proselytising *Dude Where's My Country?* the future of the world.) Analysing three presidential campaigns, an impeachment and a sex scandal, Didion's writing is full of precision and wit. She forms the larger questions and her analysis and prose is exciting and daunting. Susan Faludi says of *Political Fictions* that "one of the most preeminent voices of journalism has just stepped into the ring."

In *Stranger on a Train* (Virago, \$ ) a fatalistic Jenny Diski records her Amtrak trip around the perimeter of the USA, and her reluctant meetings with people who wanted to talk.

Brooding out the window on subjects such as solitude, friendlessness, chain-smoking, and psychiatric hospitals, this book could sound bleak. But Diski is an old expert on vignettes and their meanings, as readers of her fiction or her bestselling memoir *Skating to Antarctica* will know. She says "We were on a train, out of the way of our lives, any of us could tell anything we liked. We were, for the time being, just the story we told." My beautiful Jenny Diski poster for her novel *Then Again* (Vintage \$ ) has been regrettably lost to a wild purge. But soon she will be here on an author tour, a welcome addition to the NZ Post Writers and Readers Week line-up next March.

A recent disappointment for two of us at Unity Books is the feel-better biography *The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell* (Penguin \$ ) by the prize-winning writer Hilary Spurling. Even so there are appealing parts, for example a nephew compared being on the receiving end of one of Sonia Orwell's tirades to a drive-by shooting. Jenny Diski's review in the TLS is very revealing of both subject and author, and it might be that this book about George Orwell's tragic second wife is more of a duck than a turkey.