

about the 'sordid assertion' that the world has 'neither joy nor love'. So much for Arnold's shattering realization of the nature of a world from which God has been banished. And Mr Duffin makes matters worse by his crude and offensive remarks about the account of the poem that a more sensitive critic, Mr J. D. Jump, has given us: 'I observe that Mr Jump, with gloating approval of the "best" philosophy, concludes that this is Arnold's greatest poem'. It is Arnold's greatest poem, and I imagine most readers would recognize it as such, whether they were Christians or agnostics. Mr Duffin's comment is merely stupid; and by no means untypical of this naive, garrulous and useless book.

BERNARD BERGONZI

MORTE D'URBAN, by J. F. Powers; Gollancz; 21s.

THE CLIMATE OF BELIEF, by Jennifer Lash; Gollancz; 16s.

Mr Powers is the chronicler of American presbytery life, but he is - improbably, with so constant and restricted a theme - a writer of astonishing virtuosity, alarmingly exact in his perceptions and the possessor of a spare and devastatingly ironical style. Up to now he has only written short stories, and *Morte d'Urban* retains the care for detail, the inquisitive inspection of flecks of character that mark his special genius. But it is an organized and important novel and demands the most serious critical attention.

Father Urban belongs to the Clementines, a dim religious order that has hardly made the grade in the competitive world of brand-new novitiates and holy publicity. He is fifty, is elegant and intelligent, ambitious for some improvement in the Clementine image. A stupid Provincial banishes him to the latest white elephant, a retreat-house in Minnesota, and here he suffers from the cold and the discomfort, is made to paint the walls and bide his time. But he has friends, and in particular Billy Cosgrove, an archetypal Catholic tycoon, an impulsive buyer of property and donor of coloured television for the Fathers he thinks worth backing. The retreat-house begins to flourish, the people come, the bishop takes notice, and Father Urban resumes his role as the acceptable speaker at Catholic gatherings, the obvious choice for the special sermon. But he has to suffer ludicrous indignities (he is knocked unconscious by the bishop's golf-ball on the course that Billy has provided for the Clementines: he falls foul of Billy in the end, when he is left stranded on a fishing-trip; he is humiliated by a rich and eccentric lady benefactor, whose lapsed daughter tries to compromise him - and succeeds, in a way).

But Father Urban ends up as Provincial all the same. His career has been a success, it seems, but what about *him*. The title, with its Arthurian overtones, is the answer. Father Urban towers over the rest of Mr Powers' characters, brilliantly observed as they are, and in him he has explored a whole universe of

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clerical weakness masked as strength, of an essential goodness that gets clouded over with the demands of the acceptance world. And the wit that illuminates his pathetic chronicle of clerical vanity never falters. Mr Powers understands what is really happening beneath the surface you see, he discerns the essential sense of goodness and dedication under the bingo-bourbon-golfing preoccupations of the pastor who has arrived. Like Mr Edwin O'Connor he is the novelist of American Catholic life as it is lived, and both of them have a compassion and wit that make their themes matter.

Miss Lash, we are told, is only twenty-two, and her novel, too, is about a community of men - this time English Benedictines of a higher social cast than Mr Powers' Clementines. She really knows an astonishing amount of the inner affairs of a monastery, and her Dom Lucius, who believes but cannot love, dominates this story of what vocation means. Set in the pre-ordained orderliness of her abbey, the pattern is of failure: of a novice in finding his vocation, the much further failure of Dom Lucius to penetrate behind the cover of his intelligence, and the failure of Bella to find the love she seeks in the monk's response. Miss Lash has a serious intelligence, and is at home in the climate of her title.

PEREGRINE WALKER