



seem to have been replaced by the government's social welfare system, it is often a grandmother or a distant relative who comes to the aid of the child when all other safety nets have failed.

The Place I Call Home grew out of a classroom project for students in a dropout prevention program on Manhattan's Lower East Side. While the book, with its listings of support group addresses, hotline numbers, and a glossary of street language, seems geared to other teens, it should be required reading for adults—teachers, social workers, police, counselors, bureaucrats, and the rest of middle-class America. After reading it, they might realize that the only thing separating them and their children from this fate is a steady job. □

The Invisible Women of Washington

DIANA G. COLLIER

Clarity Press, \$10.00 paper, ISBN 0-932863-02-7,
3277 Roswell Rd NE, Suite 469, Atlanta, GA 30305

With homelessness a growing and apparently enduring feature of urban life in the late twentieth century, the experience of the homeless seems more and more a project waiting for a powerful fictive treatment. Rich in the modern themes of heartbreak, horror, alienation, and loss, it has oddly remained the province of news magazines and television documentaries. But the subject contains more complex significance than any Bill Moyers' special possibly could. Where is the great novel, the *Oliver Twist* or *Grapes of Wrath* of the 1990s?

Certainly the project is a daunting one, for the reality of homelessness is so hard to imagine. So many homeless are mentally ill: How does the novelist portray that in a sympathetic main character? So many are from the ghetto, barrio, or trailer park, which most writers are not. All of them, in our fear-of-falling culture, have slipped further into a hole than the vast majority of us will ever slip, God willing. The hole is dark and the leap of imagination required is promethean. Who wants to go there? Who can go there?

In *The Invisible Women of Washington*, Canadian novelist Diana G. Collier takes the reader to the edge of the abyss. Her protagonist, a White woman named Abby-Jean Brown,

leaves behind family, rural South Carolina, and a fast-food job for the allure of Washington, D.C. But she is wholly unequipped to deal with what awaits her there. After days of sitting with her suitcases in the downtown bus station, afraid to move, she takes a room in a pay-by-the-week hotel for women. Abby-Jean is a simple woman, but her mind is a fascinating place as she tries to fix up her dismal room, learn typing on an aging portable, and get to know people who don't seem to want to know her. We venture out with her from the hotel as, alone and with other women, she is humiliated in an expensive restaurant, a temporary employment agency, and a cosmetics counter.

Will Abby-Jean find her bearings? From page to page, she is on a slide toward homelessness that is slowed only by her dwindling savings and a compelling character named Louise Crisp. Louise is an older woman who's been around, knows the angles, and takes Abby-Jean under her wing—to a point. As we come to know the character of Louise, we're glad for her companionship but scared of what she portends for Abby-Jean: She's accustomed to leaving people and places, she's made a radical severance with her past, she's completely on her own. This new and coldly survivalist way of life could well be Abby-Jean's—if she makes it that far.

The Invisible Women of Washington is deftly written and, despite some shoddy editing and production (there is a misspelling or typographical error on every other page), reaches moments of almost lyrical sympathy: "She began to feel strange, as if she were losing touch, drifting, so she talked longer than was necessary to cashiers, to waitresses, to sales clerks in stores, to women in line for buses, until she felt sure they wondered what kind of crazy lost soul she was." This is not the "feel-good" book of the year, but an act of brave imagining. □

SOUTH BRONX

Some call them the rat killers,
the boys who lurk behind the hospital,
the Robeson School, a bunker for the wars.
With broomstick poles,
they hunt the fat and gluttonous ones
by the tracks where the trains
speed through to New Haven or Oyster Bay.
They keep vigil (and a stockpile)
under the grape vines
of a shingled house from the fifties,
quarters for cold drinks and sticky buns
for auto workers and nurses.
Landscape of burn and gut
and the tenantless condominiums,
the streets are blackfish and flounder
at open counters, unmuffled cars
and fur-lined vans painted with palms,
panthers, the shadows of She-ra.
A jibaro turns a crank to peel fruit
and a longbeard Jew lets loose
the smells of coffee and lemon into morning.
From the bridge where Africans
sell sunglasses and Bolivians their ponchos,
Bob Dylan blares, as if out of a dream
of the great white father paralyzed,
slurred down to a frazz in a box,
If I could be in your shoes,
but of course he never would be.
A man in thought walks by,
as if to complement the picture.
The boys in hideouts sing of virgins,
sit with soda and speak in epics
about a world a hundred years from now
populated solely by wolves.
Beyond the marshes of the Harlem,
no-man's land and border
to ice-cool Manhattan, unapproachable Oz,
no doors open but for the dead men
of the South Bronx.
A windowless factory boasts
of shoes that will not rip
another for caskets of solid oak.
But for these boys,
the river is more than skin-deep.
While they pile up the rats,
we slowly do away with their fat
and gluttonous spirits.

W. Allen
NEW YORK, NY