

# Battles, breathing, guilt and driving tests

**FIRST NOVELS: Andrew Biswell** goes down and out with new writers in New York, South Africa and the Gulf

**T**HE IDEA that truth is the first casualty of war is not a new one, but once in a while a comic novelist emerges to remind us forcefully why this is the case. The conflict in Christopher John Farley's *My Favourite War* (Grant, £8.99 pbk) is the Gulf War, and the central character is Thurgood Brinkman, an incident-prone journalist employed by the respectable *National Now* magazine in Washington DC.

Young, ambitious and black, Thurgood is anxious to win a reputation as a serious writer. Yet he suffers from nagging doubts about the American involvement in Operation Desert Shield — doubts fuelled by the radical black columnist, Sojourner Truth Zapader (alias "The Visible Woman"), who views the United States as an imperialist aggressor.

Forced to flee Washington after a scrape with a teenage girl, Thurgood finds himself being sent — much to his surprise — into the war zone as a battle correspondent. But it seems likely that his roman-tic yearnings for Sojourner are affecting his ability to judge the conflict.

Farley, who was born in Jamaica and works as a journalist for *Time* magazine, has produced a novel which is incisive, ironic and briskly paced. He has a gift for laying bare the absurdities of American consumerism.

I love new and improved. First fluid is the best known to them tell you your dish-washing man... A week later, they say — we screwed up! — the old stuff sucks! In fact it causes tumors! If you don't switch to our new and improved version, you have a month to live, tops.

Mick Jackson digs deep in *The Underground Man* (Picador, £15.99), in search of the mysterious fifth Duke of Portland, William John Cavendish-Bentinck-Scott. Deftly blending historical evidence and his own flights of manic invention, Jackson attempts to unravel the eccentric of this most aristocratic.

One of the book's more elusive questions is why the Duke has constructed a number of interconnected tunnels — lit by gas and wide enough to accommodate horses and a remarkable novel amounts to an elegant, engaging and labyrinthine portrait of an aristocrat who recognises that he is powerless to arrest the downward spiral of his class. Jackson, a graduate in

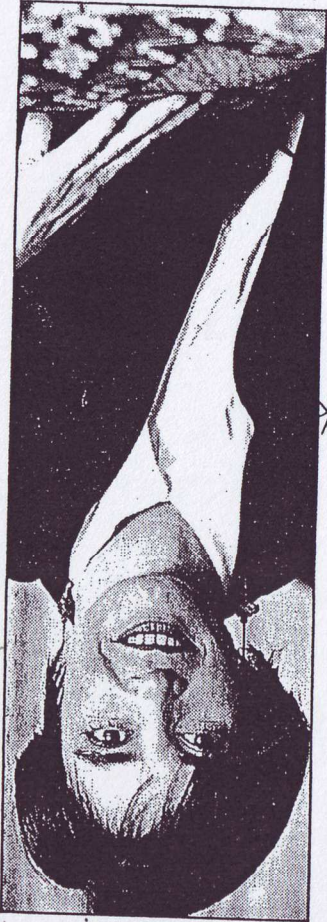
ing as a possible way of "locating" himself. He also suffers from a sense of internal unease — a severe case of trapped wind offering psychosomatic evidence that the elderly Duke is concealing his youth. Spliced among the journal entries are clues from other witnesses, including a local woman who and a household servant

Each lung is in fact a tiny inverted tree with the base of the trunk coming out at my throat. When I breathe in, leaves appear on the branches. When I exhale, the leaves disappear. Thus, the seasons are constantly shifting in my fibrag.

William Norwich's *Learning to Drive* (Headline, £16.99) is another novel about the world of journalism, and its middle-aged hero, William Orr, is a high-society columnist for a newspaper in New York. He is bored of being sent to cover endless product launches, and concerned that his writing constitutes little more than listing fashionable names. But he gets more excitement than he is expecting on the day when his driving test is due to take place, as he is kidnapped by Hector — an aggressive, foul-mouthed instructor — and taken for a lethal high-speed mystery tour of the city.

To attempt such a book requires an able and intelligent novelist, but Richards is up to the task, and her writing translates South Africa's violent recent history into a wise and substantial literary novel.

Jo-Anne Richards: able



Daily Telegraph 8-2-97