



**Hermit in Paris,**  
by Italo Calvino,  
translated by Martin  
McLaughlin (Penguin,  
£10.99)

In this volume of autobiographical writings and interviews, Calvino professes himself uncomfortable with the idea of celebrity: "I believe that writers lose a lot when they are seen in the flesh." Anonymity is "the ideal condition for the writer", he says. One of the most interesting pieces here is also the longest - some one hundred pages and previously unpublished. "American Diary, 1959-1960" consists of letters sent to a friend at the publisher Einaudi, where he worked. It records his impressions of the New World: its cities, writers and publishers. Arriving by ship in New York is "the most spectacular sight that anyone can see on this earth". He is impressed by his first glimpse of colour TV: "Wonderful. It should be introduced as soon as possible into underdeveloped countries." But he was less impressed by the vast bookshops, complaining that staff "would not dream of knowing anything about books". These essays reveal Calvino at his most subtle and intelligent, full of insights that plant themselves in the reader's mind like slow-growing seeds. **PDS**