

narrative skill" (99). Likewise, Wilson's discussion of storytelling in the romances draws our attention to the way *The Winter's Tale* "turn[s] upon the narrativization of a radically absent story, [and thus] stands out as a play reflexively preoccupied with the problem of narrative" (100). Yet, Wilson's discussion of such "narrative reflexivity" (102) in the romances and in other plays, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*, tends to emphasize the weaknesses of his approach at the same time that they offer interesting new ways of thinking about narrative moments. Because the romances, particularly *The Winter's Tale*, also contain important moments of what we might call dramatic reflexivity, moments which Wilson briefly and parenthetically acknowledges, the exploration of the connections between the dramatic and the narrative seem even more crucial. One also wonders what Wilson would make of Gower's constant reiteration of the limitations of narrative when compared to the enacting of dramatic action in *Pericles*, a romance which receives surprisingly short shrift in this study.

While Wilson's book makes the reader yearn for more of that interpretation which is admittedly not the author's aim, this book also contains many other pleasures, from the lucid discussion of theories of character construction (151-82) to the analysis of embedded narrative worlds as "set[ting] up contrasts, [and] explor[ing] imaginative alternatives" to the examination of the multiple ways in which Shakespeare's narrative "embedded discontinuously within the dramatic action . . . explodes outwardly into the play's world" (187). It will prove a valuable and thought-provoking resource for those interested in further exploring the narrative dimensions of early modern drama.

MARIE LOUGHLIN



Maria Lauret. *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Pp. 241. \$62.95, \$22.99 pb.

The cover of *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America* offers a black and white photograph (1970ish) of a slender young woman standing in an open doorway. She is the image of the male-world revolutionary woman: she is young, sexy (but not cheap), solitary, possibly African American, tough, pretty, stylish, and armed with a big gun. Whose fantasy is she? Whose feminism does she represent?

Not that of the book Maria Lauret has written, with its earnest scholarly treatment of neglected feminist novelists. Lauret starts with writers of the 1930s, gives serious attention to the relationship of the Harlem Renaissance women to the leftist black men and the white women writers of the time, and reasserts some modes of principled feminist thought and writing of the last 60 or 70 years. Lauret is sensitive to the seductions of nostalgia and the charms of individualism. She watches for them in the novels she discusses, and identifies the

ideological freight of the critics and theorists she uses. Lauret's interest is in the books that "change lives" and her aim is to argue that books are important because they do effect social change at least as much as they reflect it. Deeply informed by the thinking of Fredric Jameson among cultural critics, and by a range of feminist thinkers and writers, Lauret positions herself carefully as a feminist who is impatient with theoretics and abstractions that ignore the material conditions of women's lives and that treat reductively the complexity of "realism" in fiction. She asserts that feminist criticism has not treated "the imaginative literature of its own—that of the Women's Movement—very well" (2). She is not anti-intellectual, a charge sometimes levelled against leftist feminists. She argues with Jane Gallop, Rita Felski, and others, but the primary focus of her discussion is on the novels themselves.

Her task is to correct both the paucity of critical treatment of feminist fiction of the 1970s and 1980s, creating "new meanings for that body of texts" and to "relocate them in their historical moment" (2). For Lauret, this means that she opens her discussion of novels of the "second wave" of American feminism, by acknowledging the writings of Tillie Olsen, Agnes Smedley, Zora Neale Hurston, and Meridel LeSueur. Rather than undertake close critical analysis of their novels, she positions these writers in terms of the orthodoxies of the left, the aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance, and socialist women's self-assertion in the face of male hegemony. She intends, she says, "to suggest that the relation between 1930s women's writing and that of 1970s feminists consists in the common (not the same) problems of forging a counter-hegemonic cultural-political discourse" (6). Lauret finds that similarity, that common ground, in the "resolutely realist, unrepentantly referential" (42) women novelists whose association (for instance, Olsen and Smedley to Marge Piercy; Hurston to Naylor and Walker) provides much of the literary substance of the book.

Her purpose is not just to draw connections, however, but to "question the aesthetic assumptions" that cause "so many feminist critics to champion the work of Fay Weldon, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter and—lately—Toni Morrison over that of Marge Piercy, Alice Walker, Marilyn French and Maya Angelou" (43). Lauret does not seem to notice that not one of the white women on her list of novelists who are "championed" by feminist critics is an American. Given that her project is American (that is, the US) feminist novelists, it is interesting that her examples of those white writers affirmed are either British or Canadian. She does not comment on this oddity, despite the fact that her extended discussion takes up Margaret Atwood at length—an issue to which I'll return. Lauret, herself, is scrupulous in balancing her treatment of African American and white writers, and acknowledges the existence of writers who fit neither category.

The "aesthetic assumptions" held by feminist readers and writers do need to be questioned. But they are not the only issues that need to be

addressed. Lauret examines the significant elements of the Women's Movement (her caps, but I adopt them with pleasure) as it unfolded through the 1960s. She gives concise information about the relations of Women's Liberationists to the global movements (in China, Angola, Vietnam) and various factions and groupings that they evolved out of (Civil Rights Movement, SNCC, the New Left, the Anti-War groups) and into (NOW, ERA supporters, black feminist groupings, lesbian feminists, and so on). Acknowledgement of these historical roots is refreshing.

Against this background, *Liberating Literature: Feminist Fiction in America* sets a nice central chapter in which the novels of American feminism are drawn together under the umbrella questions about informing aesthetics, Women's Liberation theory and practice, and the presence of the feminist reader as a significant force in the evolution of feminist fictions. This chapter alone provides a helpful compilation of the primary questions feminists have taken up as readers and writers, and offers groupings of presses, critics, theorists, and novels in ways that make it an extremely useful introduction to American feminist literary studies. The rest of the book, about half, deals with individual novels and novelists, with important chapters devoted to critically underread novels by Alice Walker and Marge Piercy. Lauret focuses on Walker's *Meridian* and the issues it raises about African American body politics. By situating *Meridian* in its many contexts—black history, African-American literary history and criticism, the Women's Movement (black and non-black, cultural and radical)—and contrasting Hazel Carby's view with Barbara Christian's in terms of political versus cultural feminism Lauret makes a strong case for a re-reading of Walker, and defends what Lauret call her "misunderstood womanist aesthetic" (143).

Piercy's *Vida* offers the flavour of radical white women's experience of political activism in the late 1960s and 1970s. Lauret reads it with care and conveys at least some of the ethical commitment and hunger for social justice that pervaded the time and permeates this novel. Lauret asserts what is hard now to remember let alone believe: that we trusted that we *could* change the world in a generation, that our will and the rightness of our cause would do it, for poor people, for blacks, for women—for the world.

Lauret does not succumb to the too easy temptation to be ironical and self-mocking about the passions and naivete of that generation. Her concluding chapter presents an earnest critique of "backlash fictions of the 80s" (165). Here, while excoriating Atwood for "the usurpation of" African American tradition, she discusses her as an American feminist! I have no particular argument with other aspects of her treatment of *The Handmaid's Tale*. I agree that novel is "confused" in its feminist politics (180). Atwood would not, I suspect, be upset by that observation. But the accusation that Atwood's book

makes a “wholesale subordination of the African-American discourse of slavery to a truly postmodern fiction of speech without presence and history without meaning” (182) is excessive. Atwood’s reference to the “Femaleroad” is clearly based on the Underground Railway that transported escaping slaves north (here Lauret concedes that Atwood might be making an ironic comment about Canada); but Lauret also claims public hangings, the use of the masters’ name for the enslaved, and the academics’ discussion in the Historical Notes as further evidence of the appropriation of African American history. This ignores the range of sources upon which Atwood drew and the other sites of oppression, enslavement, and tyranny the world has to offer. By treating Atwood as an American writer, Lauret herself performs an appropriation that offends me as a Canadian, and uses a righteous tone that offends me as a feminist.

Lauret’s conclusion asserts that a feminist book cannot end on a dystopian note. It seems fair, then, not to end a feminist review on one either. This book has reminded me of how important feminist fiction has been in my own work and life, how many possibilities of rereading remain, and even that feminism can be cultural and personal without abandoning its political heart.

JEANNE PERREAULT



Keath Fraser. *As for Me and My Body: A Memoir of Sinclair Ross*. Toronto: ECW, 1997. Pp. 96. \$12.95 pb.

Asked to name a few memorable Canadian lives, most of us would probably not place that of Sinclair Ross at the top of our lists. He is generally—and justifiably—better known for his originally neglected but later much celebrated novel, *As For Me and My House*. The details of his life—birth on a prairie homestead, a father who left when the boy was still young, a subsequently sheltered upbringing by his mother, a long career as a bank clerk interrupted by a few years of military service in World War II, retirement to Greece and Spain, the onset of Parkinson’s disease, and eventual confinement to a Vancouver nursing home until his death in 1996—have, at least until now, not been conducive to extended emphasis, although Ross has received bio-critical attention from, among others, Lorraine McMullen (*Sinclair Ross*, Twayne, 1979) and Morton L. Ross (*Sinclair Ross*, ECW, 1990), and an extended biography by David Stouck and John O’Connor is apparently in the works.

Will the revelations of Keath Fraser’s *As for Me and My Body: A Memoir of Sinclair Ross* greatly affect the commonly held perception of Ross as a rather ordinary and solitary man, who just happened to produce one of the definitive classics of Canadian literature? Time will tell, but for the present, this is a book that will be difficult to ignore by anyone familiar with the conventional “life” of James Sinclair Ross (Fraser refers