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## Amazon Adventures

**Paule Marshall:** *Praisesong for the Widow*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

**Susan Monsky:** *Midnight Suppers*; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

**Rebecca Hill:** *Blue Rise*; William Morrow; New York.

by Diane Long Hoeveler

These three novels reveal both how far the "woman's novel" has come, and yet how far it has to go before it speaks to readers about universal concerns. Each of these novels is primarily concerned with exploring the ambiguities implicit in being daughter, wife, or mother to male figures who are at best misguided, at worst oppressive. And each of the heroines supposedly triumphs at the conclusion, earns her victory by rejecting either the patriarchal values of society or the more subtle tyranny of the family structure. The implication is that there can be no easy relationships for the woman who realizes herself as an individual. Freedom for these authors consists in liberating oneself from the constricting definitions and roles that society, religion, and family impose on women.

Despite the individual artistic merit of each novel, one cannot help but notice a certain myopia in the authors' viewpoints. Paule Marshall's heroine Avey Johnson (her real name being Avatara, symbolic of her identity as the black female bourgeoisie) undergoes a spiritual quest that includes a mystical call to reject the white values she and her husband so fiercely embraced in order to escape the poverty of the black ghetto. After deserting a Caribbean cruise (archetypal symbol of the white corruption and usurpation of Afro-Caribbean life),

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she finds herself descending into an underworld of black native culture of the Caribbean. Her spiritual guide is a black native who has stayed in touch with his African heritage; he attempts to recover Avey's black identity by taking her to the "Big Drum," a series of native dances done in honor and memory of the "Old Parents," the "Long-time People." After a purgation and reliving of her past life through dreams and memories, Avey is ready to reclaim her African past and join in the circular dance that comes to her effortlessly, instinctively. Her salvation, after she returns to white society, will continue as she operates a camp and sanctuary for her own grandchildren and other black children who will be taught about their ancestors and their Pan-African heritage.

The heroines of *Midnight Suppers*, a Jewish mother and daughter in the South, find their identities both oppressive and liberating. Because they are the periphery of a periphery, they have the freedom to break and make laws as they see fit. And so the mother has a long-

died at birth. All the characters' biblical names—Esther, Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca—serve as reminders that the Jewish heritage is a vital and strong presence that speaks of suffering and isolation, promises kept and promises broken. A Jew in the South, in Monsky's perception, is as much an outsider as Paule Marshall's blacks are throughout the country. What neither author conveys is that alienation and the perception of isolation is a *human* experience, certainly not limited to a particular religious or ethnic group.

Rebecca Hill presents her novel about a woman's decision to get a divorce against the backdrop of rural Mississippi. A woman who has forsaken her Southern Baptist upbringing in favor of marriage and a life in Des Moines comes home to seek her widowed mother's approval for the divorce she desires from a man her mother can see only as a good man, a good provider. In a series of vignettes that explore the options available to Southern women, Ms. Hill presents all women as victimized by their

"Monsky . . . has succeeded in writing a novel about her subject, instead of an exemplary case history."

—*Village Voice*

standing affair with her husband's business partner, which causes her husband and daughter more than a little anguish. Triangular relationships mark every encounter in this book; even the dead first wife and son of the husband figure prominently in a novel that suggests that every human arrangement requires multiple others as buffers against the pain of encounter. The daughter, unsure of her paternity, distances herself from all three parent figures, capturing and freezing them in the photographs she is exhibiting of her life in the South. But coming to terms with her heritage also means accepting the pain of loss and the reality of death, so she names her first son for her dead father and his son who

own dependence on men who are conditioned to deceive and abuse them. But it is the mother-daughter relationship that is the focal point of this study of familial desperation. In trying to understand her mother's devotion to a husband who beat his children, the daughter tries to justify her own decisions and failures. Since she married a man as unlike her father as possible, she realizes that she still has not taken responsibility for her own life. She says at the end of the novel: "I am finished believing that there is salvation by relationship." But the opposite, she must admit, might also be valid. As an adult, she can no longer continue to blame her unhappiness and failures on her relationships with others.

Now these brief plot summaries do not do justice to the undeniable artistry that these novels possess. The narrative voice in each is clear, engaging, and suggestive of the complex nuances of human emotion. But the depiction of the women themselves, as heroines or as secondary characters, causes one to marvel at each woman's naiveté. For instance Marshall's heroine mourns, in a long dream-memory sequence, the corruption of her life and her husband's. Where once they had danced to the seductive strains of black jazz singers and accepted their poverty, they can no longer do so after the arrival of three children. Now they must struggle to achieve financial success, the husband returning to college in his thirties and establishing an accounting firm. Her work as a civil servant enables them to purchase a home in a white suburb, thereby achieving the status and security that have become their goals. But she sees this success as having been bought with her soul—specifically, her black soul. In denying the heritage she knew as a child in the black South and in embracing the "white" values of work and money, she has become spiritually dead. But surely all adults look back nostalgically on the lighthearted pastimes of their youth, activities in which they did not have the responsibilities of raising and supporting children. And surely working to support oneself is not an inherently dehumanizing activity forced on one by "white" values. It seems that Ms. Marshall wants to have it both ways: she wants to condemn the wealth and leisure work can provide, but without that wealth and leisure one would not even have the luxury of an identity crisis.

And what about the Jewish women? The mother wants only to be supported and so she marries an older widower who is a successful pediatrician. But she always feels that she is sharing him with his late first wife. She turns to her husband's medical partner for comfort, and they continue for the next 30 years a

## LIBERAL CULTURE

### *Neo-Mothers*

Human follies are, of course, unfathomable and as old as the earth, thus the latest fad of fatherless conceptions and "families" is new only in a technological sense. That sometimes a woman has to assume sole responsibility for her family because a man has deserted her, perished in a war, or otherwise made her suddenly a widow is not new. What's *new* is the sociocultural propaganda advocating solitary motherhood in the face of life's dilemmas and perils, and the demented contempt of man as a positive component of a woman's existence and of the family's spiritual welfare. The recent trend of bringing up children without fathers is a direct offspring of the feminist mystique, and the militantly trendy *New York* magazine recently scrutinized the phenomenon in a long feature oozing with inane admiration for "these unwed mothers [who] are exploring uncharted territory."

The foremost message that the *New York* story conveys to an unprejudiced mind is that human consciousness, perception, and self-evaluation can sink into a freakish abyss under pressure from cultural fashions. A woman who, to satisfy her yen to be the "vice-president of one of the largest Madison Avenue public-relations agencies" and have a fatherless child at the same time, "casually drop[s] her baby" of 18 months in a junkie-infested area with "ten kids in [a] small, filthy room" on 14th Street (Manhattan's idea of a child-care center), explains her moral stance:

As a city kid, she'll have to fend for herself I grew up in a very sheltered environment, and I want it to be different for my children.

In her feminist barbarity she seems unaware (a vice-president of a Madison Avenue firm, mind you) that even primates do not expect their offspring to fend for themselves at that stage of infancy.

This kind of nonchalant attitude is

heartily supported by mindlessly modish scientists, such as one Martin Cohen, a "clinical psychologist . . . on the faculty of New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center," who says about out-of-wedlock births:

I don't think it's a bad thing at all.

The infinite agglomeration of sorrows, torments, despairs, and neuroses that must result from the engineering of human fate that he so callously endorses in the name of "progress" "change," or socioeconomic conditioning obviously means nothing to him. He reaches an apex of cruel idiocy by promulgating:

[Woman's] relationship with a man is based on issues like power, sex, and sharing.

It's a strange, lobotomized psychology they must be teaching these days at Cornell: the word "love" has disappeared from their lexicon.

*New York* next presents a sad grotesquerie: fatherless children being produced with the help of artificial insemination. One of the pioneer mothers is reported to have "checked off her genetic preference on a one-page chart." She then "paid \$430 to be artificially inseminated four times." Her past sexual activities, a series of one-night stands, *New York* calls with inimitable suavity her "social life." Thereby, the magazine enters that specious area of approval via publicity, where what is "objectively" featured in the press is actually promoted as a commodity, fashion, lifestyle. Perhaps the best summation of the entire subject is provided by that imbecilic Madison Avenue public-relations vice-president:

People may think my life is crazy, but these babies are products of a brave new world.

She seems unaware that Aldous Huxley intended his title to express condemnation, bitterness, fear, rage, contempt, and mockery. □

sporadic affair. Is this affair a matter of convenience or great love? One is forced to conclude that human beings have a way of justifying their needs in such a way that they can accept their own duplicity (others have gone over this same terrain very thoroughly before). A woman is lonely, feels neglected by her husband and jealous of his first wife, so she adds another triangle to an already triangular relationship. Later she maneuvers her daughter into acting as a mediator in the parents' ménage. It seems to be simply a case of prolonged adolescence; like a jealous child, the woman amasses love the way children hoard blocks. If this Jewish mother is meant to be a sympathetic character (and I think Ms. Monsky intends her so), her enigmatic morality is, at best, difficult. She may justify her amorality to herself, but one doubts that others will find her conduct anything but pathetically neurotic.

The third heroine is a woman seen only in relation to other people. When she tries to be alone she is constantly interrupted by visitors or phone calls; she represents the reality of women as helpmeets, servants for family and friends. Again we see an adult woman, the mother of a five-year-old daughter, returning home to her mother for support and approval. There are powerful and wrenching scenes between mother and daughter, but most of them tend to read like slightly fictionalized narrations from psychology textbooks. She wants very much to understand how her mother could have endured for so many years a marriage that was demeaning and oppressive; at the same time, she wants her mother to approve of her plans for a divorce. When her mother refuses to cooperate, she sulks and rages and wallows in guilt and anger, the responses of a child. None of her familial relations, in fact, prove particularly supportive. When she goes dancing with a cousin, she is shocked and repulsed by his sexual advances. After confiding in a divorced female cousin about her own sexual problems, she later discovers that this cousin is having an affair with

the husband of her own best friend. There are many such sordid episodes, episodes designed to evoke rage and pity for the lot of women today. But in all this the reality of choice is omitted. Most marriages these days are events of free choice, and one does rather tire of women (and men) who refuse to accept the consequences of their own actions.

If each of these novels is a "woman's novel," one must conclude that women are still exploring the theme of female

victimization in a male-dominated society. But if women are victims, how much does the victim collaborate with the victimizer? None of these women accept much responsibility for their own lives. What realities do women need to face before they have the freedom and equality they want? Don't we all, male and female, black and white, ultimately have a similar goal: trying to make sense of the chaotic realities around us. □

## No Time for Saints

Mary Gilligan Wong: *Nun: A Memoir*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; San Diego.

by Edward N. Peters

It is not easy to offer interesting commentary on a boring book. And *Nun*, more than informative or scandalous, is boring. Mary Gilligan Wong's memoir—something between a diary and a psychotherapeutic notebook—may be of interest to Mary Gilligan Wong, but it will hardly interest anyone else. Modestly, Wong opens with the moving Anouilh soliloquy in which St. Thomas à Becket explains why he chose to leave the abbey and return to public life; Wong apparently feels her situation and Becket's to be analogous. But whereas Becket gave up the quiet contemplation of God, leaving a life of utter poverty, Wong gave up pizzerias and apartment living, group-encounter sessions and dates with former priests. And while Becket went to a life of righteous strife and eventual murder in the cathedral, Wong went to practice psychology in California and (to judge from a photo on the *Nun* dustcover) to frolic on the beach with a husband and two children. Becket made his decision in a spirit of sacrifice and love, Wong made hers out of disillusionment and

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contempt. Thus does analogy become pretension.

Not surprisingly, Wong's memoirs are nearly devoid of serious intellectual content. For example, in a brief history of her religious order, Wong suggests that the French Revolution exposed a whole generation to "cynicism and disbelief." And one can only smile at Wong's account of a friend's chastisement for what Wong described as the latter's attempt at intellectual development—reading *Newsweek*. Is such a source of sagacity seriously to be considered when it later opines that the Baltimore catechism was an "obvious" failure, or that it would be a "travesty" to teach basic Church doctrine to high school teenagers more interested in trendy social theory?

Not all of her observations are of such a general nature; her favorite subject is herself. Wong thinks it important to note that in convent dining rooms, if one leaves one's coffee cup upside down it means one does not want coffee. She recalls that in her first elementary school teaching assignment she had many classes, short lunch breaks, and little time to get to know individual students. And several tedious pages are devoted to an account of her first trip to a beauty salon. Now, at the risk of betraying some insensitivity to a young girl's discovery of table etiquette, a young teacher's first taste of professional frustration, or a young woman's experimentation with