

BOOK REVIEW

Lisa St. Aubin de Teran, *Joanna*, Virago, 260pp. 1990.

Many women novelists have addressed the topic of female reluctance to carry out the childbearing and nurturing roles assigned to them by husbands, doctors, legislators, and clerics. *Joanna* contributes to this theme with a melodramatic exploration of a woman's refusal to concur with the stipulations of female reproduction. This woman's life becomes a path of irrepressible anger as she revolts against her body and entire existence being taken over by an unwanted appendage life. Kitty, Joanna's reluctant mother, refuses to accept her conception yet denies abortion to her daughter. It is Joanna's response to this onslaught against her body through rape, pregnancy, and childlabor which determines the development of the lives of grandmother, mother, and daughter. The novel spans the lifetimes of these three generations of women, from the 1870s to the 1970s, concentrating on the period from Joanna's conception in 1920 to her adolescence. This setting, an era redolent with anti-feminist attitudes to women and their sexuality, is distant enough to allow an intensely dramatic investigation of a woman forced to be a mother. The reader is made to realize that motherhood is not necessarily a positive experience for women. It could, on the contrary, be utterly destructive for all involved. The narrative technique is particularly successful — three women relate their memoirs separately. We see the same events narrated from three different points of view, by three different temperaments, and each woman fully justifies herself and exculpates herself from any guilt that may appear to fall on her in the narrative of another woman. While Kitty may be blamed for her cruelty to her daughter and her mother condemned for trying to insist that she carried out a pattern of motherhood prescribed by the Catholic Church, each woman is quite clearly the victim of the roles assigned to her.

Onto this plot are woven wonderfully nostalgic memories of Jersey, the sea, and their privileged life there. The novel has the intoxicating atmosphere of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but an even more significant feature it shares with this novel is the consigning of its leading female character to the category of "mad-woman" and being bound by physical constraint because her behavior does not correspond to the stereotype.

While the narrative is smooth and satisfying, the imagery is at times infelicitous. "Shame shave away one's friends like unwanted hair" (p. 167) seems odd and inappropriate. The metaphorical uses of "crochet" (p. 106) and "suture" (p. 98) are also unfortunate given the repeated use of these verbs in their literal senses.

The novel is a multi-dimensional piece, dense with psychological, social and descriptive insight, and can be enjoyed many times along with the certainty of new observations one makes on the craft of an excellent writer.

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