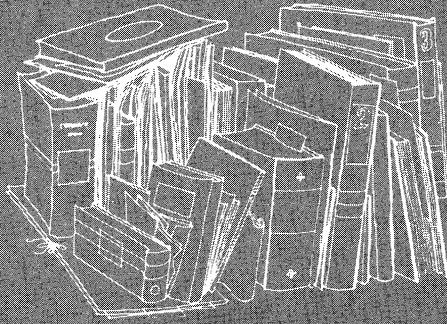


Book Reviews



The Glassy Sea, Marian Engel, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1978, pp. 167, \$10.95 hardcover.

Sherrill Cheda

When Marian Engel told me several years ago that she was writing about Anglican nuns, I thought she was slightly bonkers. In this era of so-called sexual liberation and psychobabble, writing about religious celibates seemed not only passé, but out of tune with the times. And so it was with a great deal of trepidation that I began reading what I thought would be a boring book.

Its simple beginning is deceiving because by the second chapter, the reader is caught up in an intimate personal letter that is so compelling it is impossible to put down. (Engel exploits the seduction intrinsic to the epistolary style: the hurried secretiveness of reading something not originally meant for your eyes; the delicious feeling of looking into partially curtained rooms.)

With her superb writing skills, Engel weaves a finely honed tale about one of the most interesting fictional characters of all time. Marguerite (Rita) Heber grows up female in a small rural community in the 1930s which is as real as Dunny Ramsay's village in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* in the early 1900s. No points have been belaboured, and no unnecessary words clutter the account of Rita's maturing into a young woman.

I liked it in church, too, because . . . I thought I understood Jesus. I didn't understand any of the other people I had read about because they did unheard-of things like get caught in lobster pots or vanish down rabbit holes, or were orphans, but there was He, born in a barn, child of a man who worked with his hands (and my father, too, would have walked miles in winter to be honest and pay his taxes) and a woman who obviously worked her fingers to the bone. And, like me, he asked a lot of questions. I was always asking questions.

On narrating the tale of Rita's quest for truth through her experience of life in a nunnery, marriage, parenthood and madness, to her eventual state of grace, Engel expertly raises many important questions about the touchtones which measure the meaning and quality of human life: integrity, spirituality, love, loneliness, loss —

Goodness counts, I know. But I don't tot things up in the spiritual way any more: one moment of serenity for God. My practical self comes astonishingly to the fore as I lead this impractical useless life by the seashore. I am learning to see things as they are. The windhover is up there, I am here on this chair. I am no more socially useful than he is; I judge myself for it, though not severely;It isn't given to us all to be useful, to be great.

Like Martha Quest in Doris Lessing's *The Four Gated City* and the nameless protagonist of Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Rita must come through to the other side of madness before she can resolve the conflicts stemming from being a woman in a world of male values, and emerge with her self intact.

The new 'women's' novels we've had to date which are written in the confessional mode tend to have unsatisfactory endings. When we last see the protagonist she is in bed with a teenybopper rock star sending postcards home to husband and children, or she is in a seedy rented room conceiving a child while in the (now hackneyed) throws of her first orgasm. Marian Engel successfully solves the problem of ending the feminist novel without resorting to sensationalism or sentimentalism—

The fall-out from the battle of the sexes is getting worse every day and will continue to do so. The men are running scared but not scared enough to carry out my mad plan for holocaust as relief: but there is a ghastly woman-hate in the air and they are acting it out; and women are responding with either aggression or fear. Men, forced by politics and literature and the facts in front of their eyes to see women as they are, are frightened. It is not for nothing that the Quebecois have used the analogy of forced marriage to present their case for separation from Canada: marriage is changing, people are afraid of change, war has broken out. That is how I force myself to see it now at any rate. It is easier to live by analogy, and if you find the right one you can forge it into a different reality, pack your trunks for war instead of a nunnery. It is easier to choose to be a Martha in a war.

But even more, she shows us the woman power lying dormant in the very heart of the patriarchy of the Church. In giving us a character who is at once strong and intelligent, sensitive and political, traditional and radical, we are willing to believe the conversion Engel envisions is now possible — especially for a Rita Heber, ex Sister Mary Pelagia, ex Mrs. Asher Brown.