

An edible woman sees herself through her meals

Margaret Atwood: THE EDIBLE WOMAN:
McClelland & Stewart

"It's about ordinary people who make the mistake of thinking they are ordinary."

So Margaret Atwood describes her quite extraordinary first novel, *The Edible Woman*. Whether her description is accurate or not is debatable, for her characters are as unusual as her novel, which is unusual indeed.

It concerns, as the blurb somewhat too glibly explains, "the generation freshly hatched from college—not the hippes, but the other ninety-five per cent who are trying to opt, not out, but in." Most of all, it is about Marian McAlpin, a confused but determinedly self-aware girl, whose world involves

such unnatural phenomena as her roommate Ainsley, her boyfriend Peter, the lady down below, her market research job, and Duncan, who defies epithet.

It also involves her sudden inability to eat.

Thematically, then, the novel concentrates first, on Marian's struggle with romantic and roommate-ic involvements, especially her engagement to Peter; and secondly, on her frustration at finding herself identifying so strongly with food that to eat would be tantamount to cannibalism. (Another interesting and relevant theme worth mentioning but not pursuing is the "what-else-can-you-do-with-a-B.A.-these-days" theme.)

Any relationship, however, between these two main themes or plots is, at best, uncertain, and the second is suddenly thrust upon the story (over half way through the book) with no apparent connection to the first plot line.

Thus the two themes are developed alongside each other, and although any brush of the two—such as Marian's supper with Duncan and his roommates—is quite hilarious, there seems no significant intersection until the last few pages. Here Marian's simultaneous resolution of both her problems, while most fascinating, is iced with too many obviously symbolic connections to seem at all a serious or insightful resolution. We feel the same astonishment Peter did as he "stared from the cake to her face and back again" to find that "she wasn't smiling."

Nevertheless, the uncertainty in plot-structure does little to impair the enjoyment of the page by page reading, and the reason for this lies in Miss Atwood's irresistible style. Written in a language that combines a modern slang with the more traditional "virtues of prose," it is an exceptionally readable and articulate novel, one whose greatest strengths are its humor and its originality of expression. Ainsley's floor is "covered by a treacherous muskey of used clothes with ashtrays scattered here and there on it like stepping-stones"; "the roll of toilet paper crouched in there with me"; "my mind was at first as empty as though someone had scooped out the inside of my skull like a cantaloupe and left me only the rind to think with." The book abounds with such phrasing, the dialogue is similarly vibrant and stimulating.

The dialogue, of course, comes from correspondingly vibrant and stimulating characters. All the major figures in the novel come across as individuals, originally conceived and well-drawn. Marian, Ainsley, Duncan, even Peter—all are interesting and idiosyncratic people, and all can be transplanted, to some extent at least, into the reader's

world of apparently normal or eccentric people. Both they and their quite individualized problems are fully realized in the novel.

When Miss Atwood sketches the minor characters, however, she resorts to the grab-bag types, and her characters lack consistency and originality. Leonard loses dimension completely as a person in his hysterical (and not even humorous) scene with Ainsley ("You weren't interested in me at all. The only thing you wanted from me was my body!" and becomes simply a ploy of the author and foil to the other characters. His regression at the end is likewise contrived and somewhat too convenient.

Clara, whose "life seemed cut off from her," is the stereotyped housewife—lethargic, haggard, bored, overcome by child-bearing; yet she is given some of the most realistic and vivid dialogue in the novel, especially when she talks about her children. ("He just loves to shit in the garden. He thinks he's a fertility-god . . . I don't know what he's going to do when it snows." ". . . he's become a hoarder. He rolls the shit into little pellets and hides them places . . . maybe he'll grow up to be a banker.")

Fish, another potentially interesting character, becomes the stereotype of the mindfucking intellectual, who is made to give an apparently serious lecture on *Alice in Wonderland* as "a sexual-identity-crisis book." He's right about one thing, though; it is "old stuff," and its value as satire is negligible. Later, he becomes a completely characterless *deus ex machina* to solve Ainsley's problem.

The weaknesses of the novel are, however, easily compensated for by its strengths, and the book as a whole is most certainly a success. As can be expected, the forward is overly enthusiastic when it says the story is told "with a great deal of wit . . . and perception by a young Canadian writer who deserves international recognition for her rich and original talent and her ability simultaneously to entertain and to enlighten." Nevertheless, as a first novel, it is certainly laudable, and though I would question somewhat the word "enlighten," there is no doubt about its entertainment value. Her prose style is unique and exciting, her humor refreshing, her major characterizations excellent, her control and sense of timing commendable, and her whole novel quite surprisingly rewarding.

The novel is indeed well worth reading.

Besides, what else can you do with a B.A. these days?

—Leona Gom

Zurich troupe performs "black comedy" in German

A Swiss drama troupe, on its first tour of North America, will perform in SUB Theatre on campus, Monday, Oct. 6.

The Schauspieltruppe Zurich will appear in Friedrich Duerrenmatt's insane comedy, *Die Ehe des Herrn Mississippi* (The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi).

The chief roles will be taken by Maria Becker and Robert Freitag, who together with Will Quadflieg, founded the troupe in 1958. They established the troupe in the French tradition, in that it is the only one in German-speaking Europe which is directed exclusively by the actors themselves.

The Schauspieltruppe Zurich has made several tours of western Europe and has presented not only Swiss, German and Austrian plays but also European and American drama translations.

Duerrenmatt's works are in the tradition of "black comedy," distinguished by their sharp realism and underlying social criticism. The Marriage of Mr. Mississippi was first introduced in 1952, but was recently revised by the author and will be given in the new version by the visiting troupe.

The production will be in German but an English synopsis of the play will be available at the theatre door.

Tickets are \$1 for students and are available from Globe Travel, both north and south side, Olympic Musical, Inter-Nation Travel Agency, the Department of Germanic Languages, or at the theatre on the performance night.

The production will begin at 8:30 p.m.

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