

MARGE PIERCY

Woman on the Edge of Time

New York: Knopf, 1976. Pp. 369.

Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* is the latest in a series of feminist Utopian novels whose most famous predecessor is Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975). Piercy's novel owes a debt to Russ, both in theme and in solutions to Utopian problems, but takes on an even harder task—she wants to have both men and women present in her world. When Russ was asked in an interview why she didn't include men in her "Whileaway," she replied "The Whileaways wouldn't let me." Russ believes that at this time, it is impossible to create a sex-equal society with men in it, but Piercy's book gives a blueprint for one.

Even before the days of Mary E. Lane's *Mizora* (1890), women have been trying to write books about feminist and female-dominated future societies. Such societies could provide a plot for an adventure novel or a theme for a tract on reform. These books try to solve all the problems men have failed to—Lane has free education and job choice, and since it is a single-sexed society, no competition exists with men. Most of the female-dominated Utopias are tightly organized—M. F. Rupert's "via the Hewitt Ray (1930), with its tiered structure; Richard Vaughan's "The Woman from Space" (1932), and Owen Johnson's *The Coming of the Amazons* (1931), with their aristocracy of the intellect; John Wyndham's "Consider Her Ways" (1957), with its caste system—with superwomen at the helm. Piercy has gone in the other direction and has created an anarchistic society, with total freedom and independence, and total decentralization.

Marge Piercy's future society is sandwiched between alternate worlds—that of today, as seen by a mental patient, Connie, and that of a future where every one of today's faults (dehumanization, over-technologism, violence, lust, authoritarianism) is exaggerated to an appalling extreme. The future world that the protagonist, telepathic Connie, visits most often, however, is the communal paradise of Mattapoisett, a kind of supra-commune with a limited technology for the improvement of life, but which has retained its rural values.

Piercy's last novel, *Small Changes* (1973) also opposes the idea of a horrific "straight world" to a communal ideal, where the protagonist, Beth, finds a comfortable refuge from the sinister heterosexual alternative her friend Miriam Stone chooses. This latest novel allows men to be in several relationships, aggressive in Connie's "real world" of the asylum, and supportive in Mattapoisett, but still uses rigidly good and bad characters. Piercy is a moralist, writing polemical fiction, and it's hard to avoid some simplification when a political statement is to be made. At times, her caricatures are so broad, however, that they destroy the fabric of her characters' reality.

Her answers are, predictably, not to be found in this world but in the next, the future world. Her method of composing by alternating characters and chapters, the device of *Small Changes*, is replaced by "future visits" that happen sporadically throughout the text, as Connie is assisted into the future by means of a Mattapoisett psychic, Luciente. In Mattapoisett, humans are honored, sex is free, roles are equal, and babies come from machines. Each family has several mothers, and after them aunts, and everyone has lovers of both sexes (so long as sex does not occur among mothers of the same family). The notorious third-person masculine and feminine pronouns are replaced with "per." Committees decide everything democratically.

Connie's social situation, poor, Puerto Rican in an insane asylum for striking out against her oppressors (and even against her innocent child), provides a contrast with the lovely, tranquil Mattapoisett. This future paradise also has its opposite in the novel—a dystopic world that is entirely manufactured. In it, there are no real foods, no real bodies, no real air, no outside, and so on. Mattapoisett is constantly at war with the dystopia, trying to preserve its own earth-based heroic values. Piercy takes her vision of women trained to do many jobs from Joanna Russ, but her attempt to destroy sex roles goes farther, because men are involved. Both male and female children play at practical tasks: farming, cooking, repair, fishing, manufacturing, plant-breeding, and baby-tending, just as all the adults share these tasks with one another. Neither sex has usurped the practice of aggressiveness or seductiveness.

Piercy's Utopian society, presented to us by a visitor from "our" society, and a mental patient, is seen confusedly, from an outsider's point of view. Piercy's choice of events presented at Mattapoisett is anthropological: the visitor comes to a feast, a funeral, a birth, an adolescent's rite of passage, a civic conference. The society can never come completely into focus because the reader does not observe it functioning at normal times—the plot is somewhere else, in our world (as it is in Joanna Russ's *The Female Man*). This might save the author the trouble of working out every detail of the society, but also requires clumsy plot devices (the trances that precede the visits to Mattapoisett, the retropection in *The Female Man*).

Piercy's real achievement is also the greatest fault of the novel. She exposes the hypocrisy of society's institutions for the mad, and the immorality of brain control, by examining one of these institutions from the inside. She emphasizes the relative advancement of the future society by demonstrating how little of it one of our brainwashed inhabitants can understand. But because Piercy fights so many fights at once (against insanity, sexism, racism, war and violence), the narration drags as she explains society's ills through her protagonist's experiences. The culmination of the plot in murder reflects the only use to which the "madwoman" Connie can put her understanding of Mattapoisett's philosophy. In our world, such values are destructive. Connie is the destroyer who might start the process of change to the new world, but can never successfully complete that transition herself. Piercy is a writer for whom Utopia itself remains a vision, glimpsed perhaps but never clearly perceived or examined. *Woman on the Edge of Time* is caught between the action novel and the essentially descriptive moral tract.

Elizabeth Fifer

EFRAIM SEVELA

Truth is for Strangers: A Novel About a Soviet Poet

Translated from the Russian by Antonina W. Bouis
Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976. Pp. 209.

In an era of increasing interest in Soviet affairs and especially in the question of intellectual dissidence in the USSR, the appearance of Efraim Sevela's novel *Truth is for Strangers* should prove to be a most timely event. The author, who has previously published a collection of short stories entitled *Legends from Invalid Street* (1974), explores through the peripeties of his hero two of the most agonizing problems of Soviet life: the crisis of conscience among the intelligentsia and the struggle of ethnic minorities for survival. The hero, Algirdas Požera, is a poet who has won national fame and acquired all the perquisites accorded to the artistic elite by toadying to party officials and glorifying an ideology with which he has made a comfortable and cynical accommodation. But he is more than a poet. He is a Lithuanian poet, and therein lies the conflict. Though trusted and even coddled by the authorities, he harbors bitter memories of persecutions in his native land, memories that come to the surface when he meets a group of Lithuanian-American tourists on a train leaving Moscow for Vilnius. His conversations with them and especially with an attractive young graduate student in literature lead to a series of flashbacks that reveal the horror of the period immediately following the Russian annexation of Lithuania, when Stalin's genocidal policies very nearly destroyed that Baltic state. Since Western readers know very little about this doleful episode in East-European history, Sevela's forceful and often deeply affecting portrayals of heroic Lithuanian patriots will elicit surprise and admiration even as the frustration of their heroic efforts will provoke sorrow and outrage. His vignettes of personal courage in the face of impossible odds are, in fact, the artistic highlight of the novel.

Požera's sense of alienation from the society he himself has helped to fashion reaches its climax when he meets Sigita, a seventeen-year old girl who is being taken to Kaunas to be tried on a charge of larceny. Realizing that in taking the money