

of Walyy al-Din's novel. Nevertheless, as I said earlier, the novels share an ambience. Each contains a wanderer, or an exile. In *From the Travels of the Egyptian Odysseus* the mental wanderer and Egyptian exile seeks a refuge in Detroit; in *al-Karnak*, the café is "a perfect resting place for a wanderer" (p. 69); and in *Hommos Akhdar*, Badie'a feels exiled from her social class and from her professional colleagues and she drifts into madness. Madness forms a link between Elkhadem's novel and Walyy al-Din's, and all three suggest despair and madness are the product of political tyranny. This theme is least apparent in *Hommos Akhdar*, but even here there is a sinister reminder of how the state reacts to those who appear to threaten it. Because of what Badie'a says in a seminar, the political "pressure on her became increasingly cruel and hysterical" and ultimately drives her into deep depression and paranoia. We cannot protect ourselves from the politics of power no matter what our age or what our profession. Nor can we travel away from it; Odysseus, whether he is Egyptian or Greek or American, can only continue to search while struggling with his despair.

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DAVID WATMAUGH

No More Into the Garden

New York: Doubleday, 1978. Pp. 207.

JOAN BARFOOT

Abra

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978. Pp. 198.

Since Genesis man has preserved the myth of the garden, that secluded, ideal world that is a refuge from the ills of society. Two recent novels which employ the garden as a central image but in different manners and with different conclusions are David Watmaugh's *No More Into the Garden* and Joan Barfoot's *Abra*.

Watmaugh's novel tells the story of Davey Bryant: his childhood in Cornwall, education in London, travels in France and teaching and writing career in Vancouver. The theme of the novel is the loss of innocence which comes for Davey with the discovery of his homosexuality and his struggle to come to terms with his condition which takes the form of several distinct stages: initial aversion and shame, then avoidance and sublimation, next total indulgence and finally, in middle age, mature acceptance. The early stages of adjustment are characterized by escapist yearnings to return to a state of youth and innocence (the garden), and take the form in Davey's mind of his idyllic childhood in rural Cornwall described in terms that are highly reminiscent of Dylan Thomas: the sensuous pleasures of Christmas and the beauty of nature. It is only in the final stage that Davey realizes and accepts the fact that the garden

is not achievable in this world and one must make the best he can of circumstances. He makes this discovery amidst the natural beauty of West Coast British Columbia and the reader senses that while he has lost something of his more idealistic dream, there is an acceptance here not only of life's limitations but also of what is realistically possible. The mythical garden has been replaced by a more achievable, if less perfect state. One cannot help but compare the function of the West Coast setting in *No More Into the Garden* with that in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, that other novel of a sensitive, expatriate Englishman for whom the Canadian landscape brings solace and new beginnings.

While Watmaugh's novel does provide insight into the condition of the homosexual as a minority and often ostracized member of society, there are weaknesses in his portrayal of Davey Bryant that strongly undermine it. For one thing, Davey is not a character who obtains our sympathy, although he desires it. Rather, he emerges as a long-suffering but self-pitying, weak individual with few qualities one can respect. In fact, there are highly objectionable traits to his character, including the very critical attitude he has to others, even his closest friends, and the smug, self-justifying position he takes toward himself. Granted there are times when Davey is the tragic victim of circumstance, as when he endures the homosexual demands made on him as a very young man serving in the Navy. However, there are frequent examples of his acting spoiled and petulant, as when he laments that he has to coach rugby at the boys' school where he teaches because it soils his new suits and makes him sweaty, or when he refers to his students on his first day on the job, with no provocation whatsoever, as "bastards" and "fiends." Altogether, Davey is simply not a likeable character, yet as he is presented it is apparent that Watmaugh wants the reader to sympathize with him.

The other major weakness of the novel, which might have been its strength, is the way it is narrated. At the beginning of each chapter Watmaugh includes short passages of authorial comment in which he informs us that he is, in middle age, re-creating himself in the fictional character of Davey Bryant and in which he comments from a presumably mature and detached or at least controlled perspective on Davey's development from childhood to maturity. This dual narrative perspective of the first-person presentation of Davey in the body of the book and the periodic authorial comment has the potential to add poignancy to the depiction of a character whom we respect, or irony to that of one we do not, but neither is achieved. The commentary is so embarrassingly self-indulgent in its sympathy for Davey and so trite in its content that the reader is repelled: "In the unreality of mental illness, Davey, you could find delay but no solution. But in the respectable role of the parson, did you think the wounds would heal? The scar tissue at least grow strong? Did you ache to yield to the heresy that there was salvation in the strength and protection of another? I let you learn, as I have not, that the pain of the past cannot be rolled away and a route back to the longed-for garden discovered through the invocation of childhood's nursery" (p. 36).

Joan Barfoot's *Abra* employs the garden not to represent a mythical state of innocence but the need for and possibility of an alternative world far from the madding crowd of modern urban society. While this aspect of the novel is universal, Barfoot also joins the ranks of such women writers as Ethel Wilson, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, and Marian Engel (to name the Canadian variants) who explore the limitations of traditional women's roles and the need among women for self-knowledge and identity. Ultimately the garden comes to represent the selfhood quested by contemporary woman.

The novel covers about two months in the life of the middle-aged Abra Philips who lives alone in a cabin on a seventy-acre piece of land two hundred miles north of Toronto. The character of Abra is strongly and credibly portrayed. She is a woman who finds strength and meaning in the simple day-to-day tasks she performs in maintaining herself modestly in this setting. She is a sensitive character who responds with love to the land and whose perception of order and meaning in life is revealed in her sketches and journals. Her northern home, her garden, is her own, a world in which she has independence and control and in which she is not an extension of someone. It represents self-respect, self.

The tranquility of Abra's life is disrupted and the plot of the novel set in motion when a young woman, her daughter, comes to visit. We learn that nine years ago Abra walked out on a comfortable suburban home and family and started life again, alone, in this northern setting. The unhappiness and lack of dignity of her former life in which she conformed unquestioningly to society's expectations of her as wife and mother and in which she finally saw herself as an expendable accoutrement to her family are revealed through the flood of memory which is triggered by the arrival of Katie. Not only does Abra relive those now distant years of her marriage during Katie's visit but she experiences the need for self-assessment. There is the moral question of her desertion of her family which of course has had repercussions on the lives of others, particularly the children. Abra admits that she behaved selfishly, but that this was her only course, given her extreme unhappiness in the marriage. Ultimately it was for the good of all that she left. This is a conclusion Abra can share with her daughter, a gift of self-knowledge she can impart as Katie enters that time in her life when she is making decisions about her direction. Whether Katie understands this gift at present is doubtful. However, the two part with the promise of Katie's visits and there is the hope that Katie has learned something from her mother's experience, particularly the necessity of individual identity, respect, and freedom.

Abra is a promising first novel. For one thing, Barfoot has managed to take what has almost become a cliché in Canadian women's fiction (the heroine who "discovers" herself in nature; one thinks of Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Marian Engel's *Bear*, and Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*) and provided a version that slowly and irresistibly wins one over, largely because of the attractiveness of Abra's character. Also, Barfoot convincingly describes the development of the relationship between Abra and Katie, a mother and daughter who have not seen each other for nine years and must reestablish their relationship on the basis of their changed ages and circumstances. She explores Katie's hurt and anger, Abra's self-assessment, the tension between the two women, and the necessity for individual freedom and integrity. Lastly, Abra is of interest for her place in the long tradition of independent-minded women in Canadian literature from Susanna Moodie to Morag Gunn.

No More Into the Garden and *Abra* confirm a theme one finds with increasing frequency in contemporary literature, the alienation of the sexes. It is a disturbing commentary on our times that society's forms and conventions appear to make it difficult or impossible for men and women to find fulfillment in each other and frequently necessitate the need to retreat into the garden.

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