

## BOOK REVIEWS

Nora Foster Stovel

MARGARET DRABBLE: *SYMBOLIC MORALIST*

Mercer Island, WA: Starmont House, 1989. Pp. 224

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

This is the most recent of the ten books on Drabble—including two volumes of essays—to be published since 1974. Nora Foster Stovel is a warm admirer of Drabble's work and knows the novels intimately. Although giving little attention to the short stories, she draws on Drabble's nonfictional writing, including her biography of Arnold Bennett, her monograph on Wordsworth, lectures, interviews and even an undergraduate essay, and makes copious (if largely non-confrontational) references to the burgeoning body of Drabble criticism. Stovel's is the only book recent enough to include *The Radiant Way* (1987), the first volume of Drabble's planned trilogy. (Its sequel, *A Natural Curiosity*, appeared in 1989, too late for consideration.) One of the strengths of Stovel's study is its inclusiveness.

After a rather long introduction, Stovel devotes one chapter to each novel. Her argument is proclaimed in her title: that Drabble's moral vision makes her more than a journalistic chronicler of modern life and that this vision is articulated poetically. A corrective to the sociological approach of some earlier criticism, this book also refuses to impose an explicitly feminist perspective.

Stovel's approach to Drabble is not entirely innovative, but by applying it to each novel in turn she is able to demonstrate—often in a very satisfying way—the extent to which the moral comment of the whole corpus relies on a dense symbolic structure. She is at her best—and comes closest to fulfilling her claim (3) of providing significantly original interpretations—on *A Summer Bird Cage* and *The Garrick Year*, where the conscious artistry of these two early novels is proved—and on the questionable progress of Clara Maugham in *Jerusalem the Golden*. Stovel also establishes a valuable basis for further charting of the intricacies of *The Radiant Way*. Taken together, her chapters show clearly how constant—and constantly expansive—has been Drabble's deployment of her major symbols as she has moved from book to book—as the relatively harmless bestiary which, in *A Summer Bird Cage*, defines two sisters' private choices becomes the terrible collection of decapitated figures and monsters (Stovel analyzes these well) which populate the darkness of the sprawling public scene in *The Radiant Way*.

The strengths of the book are also, however, its weaknesses. Occasionally one feels overwhelmed by quotation and documentation: do we, for example, really need Drabble's affirmation that water is symbolic of female experience (96)? There is some repetition, not only of the argument but of its actual language. More important, there is some uncritical use of formulas, especially the art/reality dichotomy: Drabble's early heroines are said to move from the ivory tower of art to the real world of (variously) nature or humanity. Such begging of the question becomes especially problematic in the discussion of *The*

*Waterfall*, where Stovel does not fully allow for the complicated interplay between Jane Gray's artistry (as poet and as the novel's narrator) and her sexuality. Sometimes, too, the explication of a given symbolic pattern leads to reductiveness: Stovel's examination of the rock/flower opposition in *The Needles Eye* does not quite encompass the novel's moral subtleties and may be the cause of one of the few factually inaccurate statements in the book: that Simon's mother is responsible for burdening him with harsh biblical texts (116) and thus hardening his nature. Stovel's metaphors sometimes appear forced: do other readers agree that in *The Ice Age* Alison is England as a land and Anthony (before his conversion) the exploiter of that land (155)? Similarly, the excremental vision/aerial view antithesis seems too narrow to fit *The Middle Ground*; even when stretched to include amputation as a form of the excremental, it does not account for Hugo's experience, for instance, and it fails to accommodate the novel's intentional randomness and inconclusiveness.

Finally, Stovel's approach leaves little room for exploration of Drabble's postmodernism—in particular, of the extent to which her novels record the problems of narration by displaying and commenting on their own processes. And (a related issue) while it is always gratifying to see Drabble taken seriously as an artist, it is a little disappointing to find so little account taken of her sense of fun—of the playfulness of her text. Nevertheless, within its self-imposed parameters this is a painstakingly researched, thoughtful, informative study which provides ample evidence to support its claims for what the dust jacket calls "the other side" of Drabble's genius, "the [symbolic] moralist beneath the realist."

Shimon Sandbank

*AFTER KAFKA; THE INFLUENCE OF KAFKA'S FICTION*

Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1989. Pp. 182

Reviewed by Kurt Fickert

The title suggests a monumental work, not this slim (and tastefully designed) volume. Nevertheless, Shimon Sandbank does provide a trenchant, if terse, commentary on a generous number of authors who would seem to have taken a stand on the Kafka canon by either adapting it to their own purposes or rejecting its premises. At the same time, he has interpolated his own illuminating reading of Kafka's arcanelly meaningful fiction.

Sandbank pays particular attention to Kafka's influence on French novelists which manifests itself in their theorizing about the transmissibility of "truth or theme" through narrative. Sartre, to whose work (principally *Nausea*) Sandbank devotes a chapter, is represented as depicting, like Kafka, desperation as the human condition. In contrast to Kafka, however, Sartre posits that an act of consciousness—writing—can create order where there is chaos. For Sandbank, Kafka contrarily provides no way out: "Kafka, a doomed man addressing doomed men, has only one subject—doom" (28). Acknowledgment of the hopelessness of this kind of plight can also be found, so Sandbank proposes, in the novels of Camus, particularly in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which Sandbank relates to Kafka's exposition of the Prometheus legend; Camus, in contrast to Kafka, sees his mythic figure as symbolizing the triumph of the in-