

convincingly their important functions in the fiction, and never—or almost never—seems fanciful in his arguments.

An argument which some readers may resist as fanciful is one of the most interesting segments of the book. Watson suggests that the letters of Eloise to Abelard may have been a model for those of Temple Drake to Alabama Red (and Eloise an inspiration for Temple). At first glance the contrast between the two women and situations is so great that fanciful seems an understatement for the suggestion. But Watson very sensibly qualifies his suggestion while making such fascinating points about parallels between the two women that the argument becomes rewarding whether one agrees with it or not.

It would be hard to argue that this book deals with more than a peripheral aspect of Faulkner's work (though what is left to deal with inside the periphery?), but it is a deeply informed, sanely argued, often intellectually challenging study.

Flora Alexander

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN NOVELISTS

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Reviewed by Jane Campbell

In this volume, part of Edward Arnold's *Modern Fiction* series under the general editorship of Robin Gilmour, Flora Alexander provides a readable and extremely useful survey of British women novelists born between 1931 and 1950. The oldest writer included is Fay Weldon and the youngest is Sara Maitland; Alexander's parameters exclude not only the well-known women of the earlier generation—Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark—but also those older writers who, like Penelope Fitzgerald and Christine Brooke-Rose, have less established reputations. Novelists who, like Lisa St. Aubin de Terin and Jeanette Winterson, have begun to publish only in the 1980s, are likewise necessarily excluded. Less easily understandable—and, in light of Alexander's critical acuity, regrettable—is her unspoken decision to omit the promising young writer Rose Tremain (born in 1943, she began to publish fiction in the mid-seventies) and—most puzzling of all—Penelope Lively, who, born in 1933, had already produced six substantial novels before *Moon Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 1987. Nevertheless, Alexander accomplishes very well what she sets out to do: provide studies of ten authors, separately and in relation to one another, which manage to combine intelligent introductions, for readers for whom a given author is entirely unfamiliar, with provocative analysis—all within constraints which allow only a few pages for each writer discussed.

The book has four main sections. The introduction gives a skilled and economical account of the approaches and issues of feminist theory, together with a brief overview of fiction by women. In the second, longer chapter, "Versions of the Real," Alexander examines three writers—Margaret Drabble, A.S. Byatt,

and Anita Brookner—who belong, with whatever individual differences (Alexander defines these clearly) within the realist tradition, and who are wary of being labeled feminists. In her third chapter, "Fiction and Sexual Politics" (Zoe Fairbairns, Pat Barker, and Fay Weldon), and her fourth, "Myths, Dreams and Nightmares" (Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, Sara Maitland, and Alice Thomas Ellis) Alexander moves into less familiar territory to explore the work of authors who are, as a group, both less rooted in realism and more explicitly feminist. A brief conclusion is followed by a selective bibliography (on Contemporary Women Novelists, Feminism, Women/Feminism and Literature, and, of the ten individual authors, Carter, Drabble, and Fairbairns) and by biographical notes on each author.

In the second section Alexander gives Drabble the most attention, focusing on an earlier book, *The Waterfall* (1969), which she (rightly, I think) sees as a turning point in Drabble's development, and *The Middle Ground* (1980), but touching on all the novels up to 1987; her grasp of the critical response to Drabble—the only one of the ten for whom a substantial body of criticism exists—is informed and intelligent. Brookner and Byatt are less fully discussed, but their distinctive qualities are clearly indicated; Alexander is especially illuminating on the relation of theory to practice in Byatt's *Still Life*.

The third section offers a helpful account of the interplay of art and ideology in three authors who approach feminist issues from different directions: Fairbairns in a visionary dystopia, Barker through a modification of realism which stresses the degrading consequences of poverty, and Weldon by use of "exaggeration' and caricature . . . the preposterous and ridiculous" to report "things about women's lives which required to be said" (52). In the fourth part, Carter and Tennant are paired as writers whose work "slides easily between the mimetic and the marvelous" (60); for Carter, as for Drabble and Weldon, Alexander's discussion encompasses earlier and later developments. These two authors recount dreams and nightmares; the last two, Maitland and Ellis, while resembling them in incorporating nonrealistic strategies of narration, differ in being Christian writers who undertake explorations of myth and symbol in relation to women's spirituality. In these two later chapters Alexander breaks new critical ground, for little beyond brief reviews has been published on any of the seven novelists included.

Alexander's critical judgments are sound, and her use of critical material and interviews is balanced and discriminating. One might occasionally wish for amplification—for example, for more account to be taken of Ellis's barbed social comedy, or of Maitland's accommodation of agonized intellectual probing within the stream of a character's consciousness. But this deceptively modest, attractively produced book will be welcomed by all those who want a guide through the burgeoning growth of fiction by British women in the late twentieth century.