

Margaret Drabble

*THE GATES OF IVORY*

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1991. Pp. 464. \$27.95

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

Margaret Drabble's latest novel, *The Gates of Ivory*, completes the trilogy that began with *The Radiant Way* (1987), followed by *A Natural Curiosity* (1989). Interestingly, Drabble's elder sister, novelist A.S. Byatt, launched a trilogy that was to capture three decades of English social history, from 1950 to 1980, beginning with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), a novel involving two sisters, and *Still Life* (1985). Byatt's masterpiece, *Possession* (1990; see *IFR* 18.1 [1991]: 66-67), which won the Booker Prize last year, is not part of this unfinished trilogy. Coincidentally, the central character of Drabble's new novel, Stephen Cox, is a writer who has recently won the Booker Prize—an honor that has not yet been accorded to Margaret Drabble.

Drabble's new novel invites further comparison with Byatt's *Possession*. *The Gates of Ivory* opens with Liz Headleand, a psychiatrist, receiving in the mail a package posted in Kampuchea containing fragments of manuscripts and diaries apparently written by Stephen Cox himself and, startlingly, two finger bones. This parcel, known as "The package" or "The Text," must be decoded and interpreted in the interests of saving Stephen (if he is still alive) or (if he is dead) discovering his cause of death. Whereas Byatt's drama of literary detection in *Possession* aims at multilayered depth, Drabble's aims at many-sided breadth. Her novels have developed from a claustrophobic domestic sphere to range wider over contemporary British society. *The Gates of Ivory* extends this range geographically by following Stephen Cox from England into the heart of the Indonesian darkness. Drabble's state-of-the-nation novel has become a way-of-the-world saga. Perhaps Drabble's experience editing *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985), a formidable task of coordination, has influenced the recent scope of her fiction.

This trilogy represents Drabble's first attempt at connected novels with common characters, inviting the label "soap opera." *The Radiant Way* introduced three women friends—psychiatrist Liz Headleand, social worker Alix Bowen, and art historian Esther Breuer, as well as Liz's sister, Northam housewife Shirley Harper—following their careers from fifties Cambridge to contemporary London, culminating in the capture of serial murderer Paul Whitmore, a specialist in severed heads.

After completing *The Radiant Way*, Drabble determined that Alix Bowen, the social worker, would be bound, by "a natural curiosity," to follow Paul Whitmore to his Yorkshire prison to try to discover what formative influences led him to a career of decapitations. And she does, in the person of an estranged abusive mother. Even before publishing *A Natural Curiosity*, Drabble said she had already begun a novel that would take Stephen Cox (a minor character in *The Radiant Way*) to Indonesia.

Initially, Drabble did not intend a trilogy. Her 1988 "Author's Note" states: "A *Natural Curiosity* is a sequel to *The Radiant Way*, and picks up some of the characters and stories, while adding others. I had not intended to write a sequel, but felt that the earlier novel was in some way unfinished, that it had asked questions it had not answered, and introduced people who has hardly been allowed to speak. At the moment of writing this, I intend to write a third but very different volume, which will follow the adventures of Stephen Cox in Kampuchea." And it does. Liz Headleand also follows Stephen to Kampuchea, questing the quester.

Drabble's trilogy is a thematic and artistic unit that also shares parallel concepts and similar techniques of symbolism and narrative structure. The theme of human evil possesses her—*la bête humaine*, capable of atrocities that Drabble seems to delight in recounting. Just as Titus Andronicus and Lucan presided over *A Natural Curiosity*, so Tamburlaine and Mistah Kurtz loom large in *The Gates of Ivory*, as prototypes for Stephen Cox's target, Cambodian demagogue Pol Pot, about whom he plans to write a play. Monstrous creatures, such as the werewolf and minotaur, with the head of a human and body of a beast, symbolize the divided nature of *la bête humaine*. Severed heads punctuate the pages of *The Radiant Way* and *The Gates of Ivory*, as mountains of skulls in Cambodia mock poor Yorick.

The trilogy's narrative methods are very similar also: each novel features multiple viewpoints with dramatic vignettes connected by montage. As the narrator observes, arbitrariness governs the selection of characters. Drabble suggests an infinitely expanding social network, conveying Woolf's web of relationship, until the web threatens to thin into nothingness. In *The Gates of Ivory* postmodern fragmentation becomes an intellectual concept, as Stephen Cox's personality is reconstructed from the fragments of his package, as well as fragments of narrative.

The trilogy's titles symbolize central concepts. *The Radiant Way* is an ironic title, for the aureate image is ambiguous, suggesting a sun that could be either rising or setting. Drabble refused to interpret the book's logo of a sun on the horizon, preferring to retain its ambiguity. Similarly, the title of *The Gates of Ivory* is ironic. Referring to a speech about dreams delivered by Penelope to Odysseus disguised as a goatherd in book XIX of *The Odyssey*, the figure refers to the gates through which dreams come to us—the illusory through the gates of ivory and the possible through the gates of horn. Communism may be the impossible dream that has finally died in Kampuchea, where Stephen Cox travels to quest its corpse. The dream that Penelope recounts to Odysseus, however, predicts Odysseus's return to vanquish the suitors, a dream that is already on its way to being realized. Indeed, Penelope's conversation with the disguised Odysseus serves to demonstrate to him not only that she recognizes his identity, but that she has also devised the strategy whereby he can vanquish the suitors. Does this irony, hardly likely to have escaped this literary novelist, suggest that Communism is not an impossible dream after all? Does the radiant way lead to the Orient through the gates of ivory?

Does Drabble's three-volume saga impel us to consider the trilogy as a new artistic unit, rather than as three autonomous texts? Just as Drabble's postmodern playfulness in employing Trollopean authorial intrusions in recent novels appears a retrospective technique, so her trilogy may echo the three-volume novel of past centuries. Is Drabble's trilogy saga or soap opera, as some critics have claimed? Tune in next year when perhaps another sequel may render this trilogy a tetralogy.

Hans Robert Jauss

*QUESTION AND ANSWER: FORMS OF DIALOGIC UNDERSTANDING*

Edited, translated and with a foreword by Michael Hays

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. Pp. x + 283. \$16.95 & \$45.00

Reviewed by Jerry A. Varsava

The five essays of *Question and Answer* are drawn from a longer collection, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik* (1982), and much of the material appears here in English translation for the first time. *Question and Answer* is an amalgam of theoretical inquiry and practical criticism, with the opening and closing essays devoted to theory and the others to close critical readings.

The first essay contests the traditional separation of fiction and reality advanced, variously, by Plato, the Old Testament and its exegetes, and nineteenth-century historicism. In its stead, Jauss promotes the triadic model of Wolfgang Iser, his colleague at the University of Constance, that adds the category of the *imaginary* to the traditional reality-fiction binarism. The *imaginary* names the relationship between the real and the fictive that readers experience in textual appropriation. Over the last quarter-century, Jauss and other members of the "Constance School" have been developing theoretical refinements in the area of reception studies, and the notion of the imaginary marks a late stage in this process. (Iser's major work on theorizing the imaginary is in press in Germany and scheduled for English-language release by Johns Hopkins University Press in the near future.) Jauss goes on to demonstrate both the rhetorical biases of Ranke's purportedly "objective" historicism and the real-world referentiality of Hebbel's "unscientific," seemingly casual comments on historical events, and in so doing confirms the legitimacy of his interpretive model.

The practical implications of Jauss's conflation of the real and the fictive become apparent in the next three essays, where he considers the heuristic function of question-and-answer in textual interpretation. In analyses supported by both Bakhtin's variegated work on dialogicality and the privileging of open dialogue operating in *Truth and Method*, the magnum opus of his mentor Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jauss investigates the function of questions in a variety of Western canonical works, from Genesis to Rousseau and Goethe.