

proper in South Africa, but diverse literatures inspired by different cultures, identities, and ideologies. One important observation Hirson makes, which is also corroborated by the texts, is that black South African writing tends to abrogate the distance between the author and the work, whereas that of the whites has an opposite inclination. While it acknowledges the existence of a wrongdoing, it also distances itself from "the raw nerve of the black condition in particular, and human oppression in general" (2).

This collection of short stories, though it excludes Doris Lessing and William Plomer, two fine prose writers, remains a good introduction to contemporary South African literature. Most of the selected authors are well established as novelists and critics. Whether critiquing repressive institutions or satirizing the follies of human beings, their work truly mirrors the spirit of the time.

Margaret Atwood

The Robber Bride

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. Pp. 546. \$28.99

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

The Robber Bride is an account of three women—Tony, Charis, and Roz—friends since college days at McClung Hall, University of Toronto, in the sixties, as they try to reconstruct a view of Zenia, "*The Robber Bride*" (341) herself. "The Rubber Broad is more like it," reflects irrepressible Roz, "her and those pneumatic tits" (342). Each woman friend possesses an idiosyncratic variety of intelligence that informs her narrative—Tony intellectual, Charis intuitive, and Roz shrewd.

Antonia Fremont, *Tony*, is a historian with an obsession with war, who reconstructs mediaeval European battles in her cellar sand-table map, with cloves and beans for warriors. Tony inhabits a turreted Victorian Rosedale house, while her lover, West, creates aural mayhem in his *Headwinds* studio upstairs. Tony's quirks include a compulsion to spell words backwards: West's real name is *Stewart*, but he hates *Stew*, and so Tony reverses his name, calling him *West*, although she knows his name reversed is really *Wets* (16). "*All history is written backwards*, writes Tony, writing backwards" (127). Author of *Five Ambushes* and *Four Lost Causes*, Tony teaches "Merovingian Siege Strategy" (24) and composes *Deadly Vestments: A History of Inept Military Couture* that chronicles "Murder by designer" (28), for the button fly causes needless deaths, Tony theorizes.

Charis, pronounced with a hard *c* like *karma*, as Atwood instructs us in her Acknowledgments, is an incarnation of the sixties flower child, teaching yoga and growing an organic garden. Draped in Indian prints, she works for Shanita, queen of the Tarot cards, at *Radiance*, a shop selling crystals, reborn in the Recession as *Scrimpers*. Born *Karen*, Charis sheds her destructive self and hides Karen in a psychic suitcase after abuse by her disturbed mother damages her beyond repair.

Charis inhabits a doomed cottage on Toronto Island, from which viewpoint the city floats like a phantasm in the morning mists in some of the novel's most evocative passages: "Without such a vision of itself, of its loveliness and best possibilities, the city would decay, would crack apart, would collapse into useless rubble. It's only sustained by belief; belief, and meditation . . ." (60). So Margaret Atwood does for Toronto what James Joyce did for Dublin—she puts it on the map. From her perspective on the Island, Charis views the city as the Kingdom of God that Tony Last searches for in the jungle in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*; "on the mist the city floats" (49), just as Ambrose announces to Tony Last in his jungle hallucination, "The city is served" (*HD* 205).

Roz, Rosalind Andrews Greenwood, nee Grunwald, presides over a manufacturing company inherited from her father. Her biggest decision each morning is whether to drive the Rolls or the Benz (on which an anonymous hand inscribes *Rich Bitch* [120]) from her Forest Hills home to her converted Victorian brewery downtown, where she is blessed with an *Assistant to Ms. President* named Boyce (104), who quotes literature, adapting it to the business in hand: "My eyes, my ancient, glittering eyes, are gay," says Boyce. "Yeats" (109) means *yes*. At home, "Roz the Rock" (86) looks like a Halloween pumpkin in her orange velour bathrobe, entertained by her identical twin daughters Erin and Paula, who refer to themselves as *Erla* and gleefully insult each other as "Unshaved armpit!" and "Festering tampon!" (87) in a burlesque of contemporary teen culture. This unlikely trio meets once a month for lunch at *The Toxique*. Atwood explains the mystery: "They don't have much in common except the catastrophe that brought them together, if Zenia can be called a catastrophe; but over time they've developed a loyalty to one another, an *esprit de corps*. Tony has come to like these women; she's come to consider them close friends, or the next thing to it. They have gallantry, they have battle scars, they've been through fire: and each of them knows things about the others, by now, that nobody else does" (33).

All three women are obsessed with Zenia, another denizen of McClung Hall. As Atwood notes at the outset of her narrative, "The story of Zenia ought to begin when Zenia began" (3), but Zenia's tortured roots are buried in Europe's war-ravaged history. The epigraph to the novel from Günter Grass is accounted for: "Only what is entirely lost demands to be endlessly named: there is a mania to call the lost thing until it returns." Another epigraph, this one from Jessamyn West, is more ominous: "A rattlesnake that doesn't bite teaches you nothing." Zenia was a bad business," as Tony realizes; "Why try to decode her motives?" (4). "But Zenia is also a puzzle, a knot: if Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free. . . . She has a historian's belief in the salutary power of explanations" (4). So *The Robber Bride* is a study of history. The metaphor is one of weaving—Woolf's everlasting web, the warp and woof.

The Robber Bride is structured in seven parts. The framing chapters that introduce and conclude the theory of history and the metaphor of weaving are called "Onset" and "Outcome." The secondary, literal framing chapters are both called "The Toxique": these chapters dramatize the conversations of the three friends as they plot to put an end to Zenia. The bulk of the novel is composed of the narrative of each of the friends, chronicling their own lives from flashbacks to their families and formative years to their disastrous encounters with the Robber Bride herself.

"Black Enamel," Tony's narrative, comes first, followed by "Weasel Nights," the story of Charis, and "The Robber Bride," the life story of Roz, perhaps the most entertaining of all, comes last. *The Robber Bride* opens in 1990, as Atwood reconstructs the context and sets the scene: "An arbitrary choice then, a definitive moment: October 23, 1990. It's a bright clear day, unseasonably warm. It's a Tuesday. The Soviet bloc is crumbling, the old maps are dissolving, the Eastern tribes are on the move again across the shifting borders. There's trouble in the Gulf, the real estate market is crashing, and a large hole has developed in the ozone layer. The sun moves into Scorpio, Tony has lunch at the Toxique with her two friends Roz and Charis, a slight breeze blows in over Lake Ontario, and Zenia returns from the dead" (4).

The novel that ensues makes entertaining reading of the first order, with the narratives of the three women friends complementing each other. The conclusion, however, is a little disappointing, for the ending, like the beginning, is arbitrary: "Every ending is arbitrary" (540), Atwood rationalizes: "An ending, then. November 11, 1991, at eleven o'clock in the morning, the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It's a Monday. The Recession is thickening, there are rumours of big-company bankruptcies, famine is rolling over Africa; in what was once Yugoslavia there is ethnic feuding. Atrocities multiply, leaderships teeter, car factories grind to a halt. The war in the Gulf is over and the desert sands are spackled with bombs; the oil fields still burn, clouds of black smoke roiling out over the greasy sea. Both sides claim to have won, both sides have lost. It's a dim day, wreathed in mist" (540).

So *The Robber Bride* dramatizes the sex war: "The personal is not political, thinks Tony: the personal is military. War is what happens when language fails" (45), as public parallels private. But Atwood's novel leaves the reader wondering whether Zenia is primarily warrior or victim. If *The Robber Bride* does not leave the reader with something as lasting as *Cat's Eye* did, it certainly is an enjoyable read while it lasts. And it lasts for 546 pages. After all, as the quotation from Oscar Wilde, which forms the final of Atwood's three epigraphs to the novel, states, "Illusion is the first of all pleasures." And Atwood remains a mistress of that particular brand of pleasure.

A.S. Byatt

The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye

London: Chatto and Windus, 1994. Pp. 280

Reviewed by Jane Campbell

Through the voice of the narrator of "The Threshold," one of the stories written by her Victorian character Christabel in *Possession* (1990), Byatt points to "the power of necessity in tales" and the predetermined endings established by traditional "wisdom" (155). However, she adds, "one day we will write it otherwise" (155). In the five stories in her latest collection Byatt uses that most fixed of forms, the fairy tale, to "write it otherwise"—and especially to subvert narrative necessity by inserting freedom into plots about women. Two of these adult fairy stories