

Not, that is, if you wanted a future" (323). Martin Anton, too, in Tyler's *Amateur Marriage*, "began to walk faster, hurrying around the bend" (306).

These two veteran novelists, American and British, are adept at capturing family life in their two disparate locales, and both write with a consummate skill that makes them each a delightful read.

Margaret Drabble

The Red Queen

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2005. Pp. 334. \$32.99 \$20.00

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

The Red Queen, the sixteenth novel by Margaret Drabble, marks a postmodernist departure for this popular writer. Clues are in the subtitle, "A Transcultural Tragicomedy," in the epigraph from *The Russian Ark* by Alexander Sokorov—"The dead weep with joy when their books are reprinted"—and in the prologue, which begins, "This book was inspired by a volume of court memoirs written in Korea more than two centuries ago" (ix). Drabble's claim is reinforced by the bibliography, note on sources and acknowledgments that conclude the text. Like *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) by Arthur Golden, *The Red Queen* is based on an ancient Asian account, but, unlike the fictional basis of Golden's narrative, Drabble's source is factual and exists in four translations. This does not make Drabble's novel any less postmodernist, however.

The Red Queen is divided into "Ancient Times" and "Modern Times," with the latter section ending in "Postmodern Times"—appropriate for a postmodernist, metafictional novel. "Ancient Times" is the memoir of Lady Hong, Crown Princess of Korea two centuries ago, recounted in her voice to an unidentified envoy, or ghostwriter. She was married at age ten to Prince Sado, the Crown Prince, known as "the Coffin Prince"—a schizophrenic psychotic who was persuaded by his father, King Yongjo, to climb into a rice chest, where he took eight days to die.

"Modern Times" is more typical of Drabble. Set in the present, it focuses on Barbara Halliwell, an academic who reads the memoir 35,000 feet above the air en route from Heathrow to Korea, where she is to attend a conference on globalization and medicine to be held at the Pagoda Hotel in Seoul—just as Drabble attended a conference on multicultural literature in Seoul in 2000—starring the international celebrity Jan Van Jost. Barbara, or Babs as she is known to friends—just as Margaret Drabble is known as "Maggie"—is at work on a book on triage for the National Health Service. But her attention is caught by Lady Hong's memoir. The parallels are striking: like the Crown Princess, Babs lost her firstborn child, Benedict, and her husband, Peter, went mad. She is

haunted, virtually possessed, by Lady Hong's powerful persona and persuasive voice.

Drabble herself appears to be, like her fictional protagonist, possessed by the Crown Princess. This is doubly ironic because the scholarly underpinnings of her novel echo those found in A. S. Byatt's 1990 masterpiece, *Possession*, in which two present-day scholars research the correspondence between two Victorian poets. Drabble, impressed by Lady Hong's narrative, explores issues of selfhood, questions the "doubts about universalism and essentialism" in our "postmodern age of cultural relativism," and asks questions "about the nature of survival, and about the possibility of the existence of universal transcultural human characteristics" (xi).

Dr. Barbara Halliwell, with her tragic parallels to Lady Hong, may also suggest an alter ego to her author, embodying the academic career that Drabble could have enjoyed if she had chosen research over writing following her brilliant degree at Cambridge. Instead, she married right after graduation, joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, and soon became a mother and a novelist. Her editing of *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (1985) clearly demonstrates her academic acumen.

Following a mishap involving an exchange of identical Samsonite suitcases, Dr. Halliwell meets Dr. Oo, a delegate at a conference on stroke patients being held at the Pagoda Hotel in an eerily coincidental echo of Carol Shields's 1982 novel *A Fairly Conventional Woman*. Oo offers to take Babs to visit the palace where the Crown Princess lived her peculiar and precarious life.

Ironically, Lady Hong, known as the Red Queen, since her husband died before he could ascend the throne, never did become Queen, but only, ultimately, Queen Mother. Red was her favorite color, and she begins her memoir by confiding that as a child she longed for a red silk skirt. Babs too loves red and lets her lover buy her red socks ornamented with little gold butterflies. In an afterword to the novel, Drabble acknowledges that she had a red dress as a child that led her to identify with the Crown Princess. She adds that she is wearing a red dress while writing the note.

A virtual butterfly settles on Bab's shoulder during a three-dimensional video display, and Jan Van Jost attempts to touch it, thereby touching Babs. Thus, a love affair, spanning the three days of the conference, springs up between the handsome but aging international celebrity and the middle-aged Babs. On their third and last night, he succumbs to a heart attack and dies.

Van Jost was in the process of putting a deposit on a Chinese orphan to pacify his "mad" wife, Viveca, who wants to adopt a child. Babs, who lost her only child when he was the same age as the Chinese orphan, feels impelled to

carry out Jost's wishes. The child appears fated to become the Red Queen's new envoy. Curiously, whereas Drabble's novel concludes with the adoption of an Asian child, Anne Tyler's latest novel, *Digging to America* (2006), begins with it.

In "Postmodern Times" Drabble extends the metafictionality by writing herself into a final scene where Barbara Halliwell and her best friend, Polly Usher, who met when they found each other reading the same (unnamed) Drabble novel, meet the novelist herself at a launch—recalling John Fowles's innovative metafictional 1969 novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*—bringing the novel full circle. The various levels of Drabble's narrative certainly make for intriguing reading.

Paul Comeau

Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination

Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005. Pp. xviii + 144. \$34.95

Reviewed by Laura Strong Davis

Paul Comeau's *Margaret Laurence's Epic Imagination* (2005) is a welcome addition to the corpus of criticism on the renowned Canadian writer. The book is the first full-length study to address Laurence's work as "epic" literature. Comeau seeks to challenge the notion that Canadian literary icons are still minor writers by exemplifying how Laurence's work adheres to Giltrow and Stouck's definition of that which is written in the "epic mode"—that which involves a monumental struggle of people to survive. While Laurence's African writing is not epic in itself, the Manawaka cycle, Comeau maintains, follows the epic pattern of Dante's *Commedia*: Laurence's characters go through three stages, "an infernal state of self-destructive pride," "a purgatorial condition of self-doubt," and "a paradisaic fulfillment in self-knowledge" (xvii). Comeau not only draws upon epic mode as exemplified by Dante, but also, admirably, as it is demonstrated in the Bible, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Homer's *The Odyssey*.

Comeau discusses Laurence's African writing in light of C. S. Lewis's theory of the epic, as outlined in Lewis's *Preface to Paradise Lost*. Comeau astutely demonstrates how the character of Nathaniel Amegbe, in *This Side Jordan*, embodies the tensions, as outlined by Lewis, between primary and secondary epic. For Lewis, primary epic is concerned with the individual, whereas secondary epic is concerned with a "momentous event"—such as the fall of Rome (5). Nathaniel Amegbe, Comeau asserts, is affected both by personal, individual issues (such as his lack of qualifications as a school teacher) and larger, "momentous," and political ones (such as "the transition of power from colonial rule to self-government") (6). Comeau also points out that Nathaniel is the "antithesis" of a traditional epic hero, but that his qualities, "(sincerity, diligence, honesty), are among the heroic virtues endorsed in Christian epic" (6). Such an analysis of Nathaniel in light of Lewis's theory of epic is excellent, and it