

The Unreliable Narrator: Or, A Detour Through Peadillo

Little Sins, by Patricia Hart Molen, New York City: Leisure Books, 1980, 206 pp. \$1.75 (paperback). May be ordered from the publisher, P.O. Box 270, Norwalk, CT 06852; add \$.50 for shipping costs.

Reviewed by SUSAN HOWE, editor of Exponent II. Reprinted by permission from the Newsletter of the Association for Mormon Letters.

"What was a nice girl like Florence doing in a Cuban bordello—stone cold dead?" As the question from the cover indicates, this paperback is packaged to sell as a murder mystery, the kind one picks up in the supermarket or airport. Flossie Robertson, twenty-five-year-old journalist from Peadillo, Utah, has been sent by the *New Woman* magazine to cover the 26th of July celebration in Cuba. But on the day of the festivities, which Flossie is supposed to be covering in Santiago, she is found murdered in a cheap Havana hotel that rents rooms by the hour, hit on the head with a bottle of rum. The story opens as Fred Wright, life-long friend and next-door neighbor of Flossie, is asked by the Robertson family to go to Cuba to retrieve the body. When Fred arrives in Havana, he discovers that Flossie's remains have already been cremated, so he sends home the ashes and stays to unravel the mystery of the killing. Sounds like a tidy, typical murder mystery plot.

But the book wants to be more than a typical mystery. As the author goes through the customary search-out-the-suspects-and-discover-the-murderer formula, she superimposes on this structure a gradual revelation of the relationship that has developed over the years between Flossie and Fred and a look at their experiences within juktah Mormon culture, to show its part in forming them into the individuals they have become. The second structure finally becomes more important than the first. By the end of the

novel one knows much more about Peadillo, Utah than about Havana, Cuba.

The solution to the murder is almost incidental. The parts of the plot that deal with the discovery of the murderer seem contrived and superficial, and finally are not very interesting. The value of this book is in the deeper material it offers about Fred and Flossie, an examination into the lives of two young adults of Mormon background, disillusioned with their faith and the people around them.

The juxtaposition of Cuba and Utah is possible because Fred narrates the novel and Fred is prone to reminisce. One of the book's chapters is entitled "The Unreliable Narrator, or Fred Takes a Detour." As a narrator, Fred is certainly unreliable and he is usually taking a detour. He is apt at any moment to go off on whatever subject suggests itself to his quick but unfocused mind. His allusions and asides are clever to the point of tedium and some of them just plain don't make sense. Despite those faults, however, Fred paints a fairly vivid picture of life in Peadillo.

In creating this imaginary Utah town in which one can recognize characteristics of Ogden, Provo, Logan and Salt Lake City, if not the entire state, Molen manages to satirize just about everything there is to satirize about Utah Mormon culture. For instance, Peadillo is situated on a polluted lake, across from the Moriancumer Cast-Iron Rod Company. The local newspaper is the *Peadillo Examiner* (Flossie calls it the *Substandard Examiner*). In Peadillo there are both a college and a university—the Mormon-run Andrew Young College, a two-year school, named for either a son or a grandson of Brigham Young (there is a discrepancy in the novel on this point); and University of Northern Utah, the four-year school with a half-Mormon, half-Gentile population. The president of Andrew Young is Houston Cluster, a lawyer and "local interpreter of the Constitution," who ensures