

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

the morality of his faculty by having their wastebaskets checked for Coke cans. The broadcaster of the church television station is Orson Spencer Knurd (silent K); wayward youth and other hardies are sent on "wild survival;" and C. Carey Lambert has a popular book out called *I Raise You/ I Call You*, half of which is written on the right-hand side of the page, and the other half of which is upside down on the left-hand side of the page. One needs only a little exposure to Utah Mormon culture to see the reality behind this fiction.

As Fred seeks Flossie's killer among the Fidel-inspired Cubans of Havana (all of whom, interestingly, lack the hostility towards the United States and its citizens that I expected), he is reminded of Utah. The author's device is to have Fred compare the politically-converted Cubans, who are euphoric in their praise of Castro and post-revolution Cuba, with the religiously-converted Mormons who are just as zealous and singleminded in the defense of their faith. This comparison enables Fred to resolve his animosity toward the Mormons in his home town and leave Peadillo forever. The story is finally Fred's.

The book does have some problems. One of them is the way Fred tells the story. Another is the overall scheme. The attempt to join an in-depth look at Fred and Flossie with a lightweight murder mystery is not entirely successful. Molen can do either type of fiction well, as is evident from her serious stories "Skim Milk," "Mormon Miracle Pageant," and "Always the Nazi War Criminal," and her three-part murder mystery in *Utah Holiday* magazine. But the two types of material just do not come together well in the same piece.

It is my opinion that Patricia Hart Molen is one of our most gifted young writers and that she has a great deal to contribute to our literature. She is very skilled at development, at balance—the structure beneath the work—and she certainly knows how to tell a good story. I would hope, personally, that in the future she will turn more of her attention to her deeper material. Although, in the short run, serious fiction may be more difficult to publish, in the long run it will be of most value to us and to her as well.

Not Quite a Butterfly

The Cocoon by Cheryl Ann Baxter, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1980, 90 pp., \$4.95.

Reviewed by GLADYS C. FARMER who is an author, teacher, musician, mother of five and occasional housewife living in Provo, Utah.

A book as personal as Cheryl Baxter's *The Cocoon* can't help but evoke a very personal response. I share with the main characters of the book a career as a teacher, an abiding interest in French and an unforgettable experience while doing temple work for a relative. As a result, I related to this short and simple book with much emotion.

Most well-read church members shy away from books that even hint of preach-

iness or schmaltz. Ordinarily I would not have read a Deseret Book publication catalogued under "genealogy." *The Cocoon*, however, was a pleasant surprise: the moral was clear, it was generally well written, the tears occasionally flowed freely and only the most cynical reader would be "put off" by its contents.

The personal interplay between Carrie Langué, a young, empathetic student who craves love, and Marjorie Thorpe, her demanding, emotionally scarred French teacher, is a sensitive drama of communication. In fact, one could eliminate the last thirty pages and market the book nationally as a poignant short story of a human relationship.

The last third of the book, a report of Carrie's conversion and her subsequent genealogical research and temple work for