

edged as a fine anthologist – and anthologizing is a creative craft that scarcely ever gets the recognition it deserves. I hope that neither Fitzhenry and Whiteside's price nor their decision to classify it as text rather than trade inhibit its wide dispersal and use in classrooms and for personal enjoyment.

Margaret Atwood: Visions and Forms is distinguished by several unique inclusions: an autobiographical Foreword by Margaret Atwood; a Margaret Atwood chronology; a final "Works Cited" section that provides a good working Atwood bibliography; a lengthy interview, done in 1983, by Jan Garden Castro at Washington University, St. Louis; "Conversation," an exchange between Atwood and students at the University of Tampa in 1987; and, most intriguing of all, an eight page series of full-colour reproductions of Atwood's own water-colours with accompanying commentary by Sharon Wilson. These features, together with an unusually superior design format, featuring, for instance, a striking title page complete with a beguiling, sculpturesque portrait of the author, make this an especially desirable book.

To collectors and feminists, the brief initial note by Sandra M. Gilbert, "*Ad Feminam: Women and Literature*," will be a feature of added attraction, situating this book, as it does, within a feminist series.

Reason tells us, after all, that if, transcending prejudice and special pleading, we speak to, and focus on, the woman as well as the man – if we think ad feminam as well as ad hominem – we will have a better chance of understanding what constitutes the human.

Kathryn Van Spanckeren's editorial introduction is a valuable overview of the entire volume, stressing particularly Atwood's feminism and the political and didactic strains in both her writings and her in-person commentaries. Perhaps the role of teacher and mentor is expected of her when she meets student audiences in the States: at any rate to this Canadian reader her strictures on political and personal responsibility are right on target, though I should think they'd be far less appreciated here than they obviously are there.

The essays themselves cover Atwood's

novels from *The Edible Woman* to *The Handmaid's Tale*: though one might think that enough had long since been said about the early works, particularly about *Surfacing*, there is nothing tired about their treatments, and I know that it is unreasonable to mourn the necessary time-lag that means the omission of work on *Cat's Eye*. For me, the three on the poetry, by David Buchbinder, Judith McCombs and Kathleen Vogt, are especially valuable, providing insights into work that, compared to the novels, has suffered relative neglect. Personal preferences aside, the essays *in toto* establish a very high standard of critical commentary. If at this time I were advising students about purchasing Atwood criticism, this would certainly be the book I'd suggest. It is, I believe, by a long way, the best we've had so far.

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S FICTION: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory

Paulina Palmer. Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1989

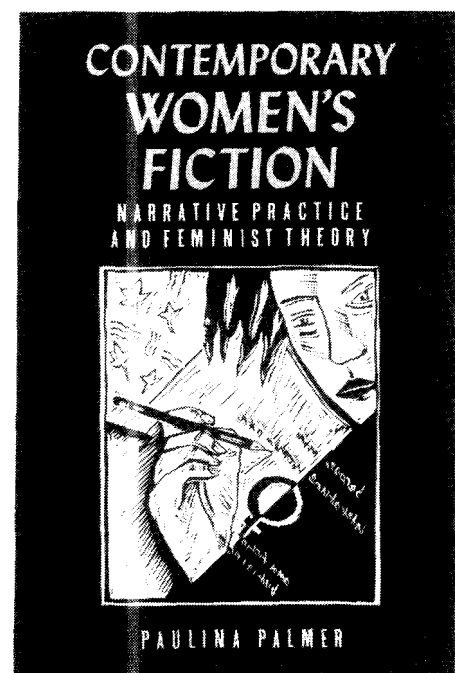
Marlene Kadar

Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory is primarily an investigation of the relation between contemporary women's fiction (Anglo-American novels) and feminist theory, political and literary. Apart from a theoretical Introduction and a Conclusion, the book is divided into seven political themes which the author, Paulina Palmer, identifies within her selections of fiction. Palmer uses British, American and Canadian literature to reveal what she considers the major precepts of the women's movement, and she is particularly considerate of the radical feminist position, which she defines – along with other feminist positions – in a useful Select Glossary at the back of the book.

Palmer herself is a British feminist who teaches in the Department of English at the University of Warwick, but, as she points out, she is not just an academic; she is active in the radical feminist movement. Palmer is also an avid reader. Thus *Contemporary Women's Fiction* is chock

full of references to novels, short stories, and movement documents, with a smattering of feminist literary theory, some of which is translated from the French (Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva). Palmer makes it quite clear that her book rests on an attempt to correlate "works of fiction with feminist literary theory," and she hopes that her study draws "attention to the variety of women's fiction today." In accomplishing the former, Palmer is most animated when she does one of two things: she locates fiction which reveals a radical feminist political theme, such as woman-identification, the norms of a feminist community, lesbian relations, and mother-daughter relations; or, she illustrates that (once again) it is an academic feminist lurking behind that socialist feminist or psychoanalytic [feminist] approach to a motif in the fiction.

On the one hand Palmer denigrates the omission of radical feminist approaches in literary criticism, yet also finds that many of the themes explored by women in the last two decades "are, as we have seen, radical feminist in tenor." Palmer looks askance at what she calls "anti-realist" fiction because she has determined that pre-oedipal and semiotic themes are generally the habit of writers concerned with the concept of "the fractured self." One exception to this trend is Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a book which succeeds, Palmer says, in combining the psychoanalytic with the political.



(Atwood is obviously one of Palmer's favoured feminist writers.) An English-Canadian novel which does not fare as well in Palmer's estimation is Joan Barfoot's *Gaining Ground* (1980), first published by Ryerson/McGraw-Hill in 1978 as *Abra*. Although Palmer uses deconstruction theorists sparingly, she does refer to Luce Irigaray to explicate this particular venue, though the reader can sense her disapproval of its premises. Palmer is interested in punishment and reward, and the authors most often rewarded exhibit radical feminist prejudices or intuitions, or, more importantly, treat hitherto closeted feminist themes in fiction — themes such as bisexuality, lesbian motherhood or, especially, ideas about collective feminist action.

The important question to ask here is: can literary criticism adequately service the feminist activist whose intellectual or reading quest is to find corroboration and affirmation for political ideas? My own sense is that although there is some overlap, women's literature is still just women's literature, and feminist politics is just feminist politics. Each has its own rubric and its own reason for being, and therefore can have only a limited influence on the other — a thematic and objective use. In Palmer's book there is the danger that a text is only as good as the feminist position it exhibits, or at least only gets included in the survey if it has the theme at all. I don't find this kind of criticism very satisfying, although I can understand why one would.

What is less satisfying is how judgments are made about groups of literature. For example, Palmer claims to use Canadian feminist literature in her survey, but does not qualify that it is English-Canadian, nor does she seem aware of the militant literature in Quebec — French, English or translated. This allows her to valorize Margaret Atwood — and there are many good reasons to do so — because she says she bridges the two opposing traditions (as above) in feminist writing, but this she says without having read Gail Scott. Moreover, Palmer is hard on authors who treat "Images of femininity and the dominance of the male gaze," such as Fay Weldon (in *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*, 1983), and Doris Lessing (in *The Summer Before the Dark*, 1973). She finds Weldon's solutions too "personal," and that Lessing and Weldon are devoid of erotic female relations or motifs of woman-identification. This may

be where the author finds what she has already decided she is looking for; in this instance, at least, Palmer has not used the less mainstream literatures of, say, Canada or the United States to illustrate that radical-feminist motifs do exist. I'm thinking of, for the moment, the lesbian fiction published by Women's Press in Toronto in the last decade, though other examples do exist both in Canada and the United States.

But we cannot go too far with the reviewer's celebrated bugaboo, the sin of omission, because we all omit, we must omit in order to include, and there is no doubt that Palmer has included much, perhaps too much. But we need to be vigilant about conclusions made on the basis of included primary texts because they speak to us about the interest vested in the project by the author, and literary decisions made accordingly. My own vested interest is that I want literature to guide us in establishing our critical apparatus on the basis of literature, and I want the women's movement to guide us into applying guidelines and acting on them, and not necessarily with only one feminist voice.

I am more persuaded, therefore, by a literary study (whose author I may not agree with on the true nature of feminism) which explores genres — something already essentially literary — in light of women writers or feminist political ideas, such as the new feminist interpretation of utopian narratives, Nan Bowman Albinski's *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction* (London and New York, Routledge, 1988). Albinski identifies trends in American and British utopian visions (and "nightmares"), which include the nineteenth-century proclivity for community. Albinski on the post-1960s feminist "dystopies" is highly theoretical and comparative, but, interestingly, Albinski confesses in her Introduction that she has exempted one "small, but important, group of works" — "lesbian separatist utopias." This she says as smoothly as Palmer says that she did not cover the literature of pregnancy and childbirth (neither word appears in an otherwise complete Index of Themes), although issues of class and race are revealed in both the primary texts and interpretive models of both authors. Is this feminist poetic justice? Or do we need the astute interpretive model of Albinski as much as we need the acute mimetic or representational of Palmer?

FIRST PERSON: A Biography of Cairine Wilson, Canada's First Woman Senator

Valerie Knowles. Dundurn Press, Toronto, 1988

Franca Iacovetta

When five Alberta feminists won the celebrated "person's case" in 1929 permitting the appointment of women to the Senate, few could have predicted that one year later prime minister Mackenzie King would choose Cairine McKay Wilson as the first female senator. A shy mother of eight and a devoted Liberal, Wilson came from a wealthy Scots-Canadian family with strong Liberal party connections. Among the family's friends were Wilfrid Laurier, a frequent visitor to the McKay home in Cairine's youth. In 1930 Wilson was no match for such high-profile feminists as Emily Murphy, who led the person's case and whom many expected to get the Senate nod. But Wilson proved to be an able reformer in her own right; her long career as a senator is a testimony to her dogged determination to help create a more humane world.

Until recently, little was known about Wilson, and scholars dismissed her appointment as an example of party patronage. Certainly, there was truth in this. Wilson had not actively participated in the suffrage campaign, and she was indeed King's friend. However, the neglect of Wilson also reflects the preoccupation of a generation of women's historians with detailing the rise of feminism in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Canada and its culmination (at least in English Canada) in the suffrage victory. For years the conventional wisdom had it that once the vote was won feminism went into decline. Such arguments were based in part on the disillusionment of first-wave feminists over women's failure to accomplish more in the electoral arena. Efforts to correct this view have charted the activism of radical women in the 1920s and 1930s, but this created the equally erroneous impression that the only form of feminism to emerge "after the vote" was of a left-wing variety. What both perspectives ignored were the strong continuities between the maternal femi-