

THE RADIANT WAY

Margaret Drabble. Toronto: A Douglas Gibson Book, McClelland and Stewart, 1987. Reissued in paper by Collins, 1988.

Janet E. Lewis

Visiting in Toronto in 1986, Margaret Drabble told interviewer Ken Adachi: "I am interested in the state-of-England novel, in depicting where people stand in certain social moments. As I grow older, I've less sense of the uniqueness of the individual and more awareness of my characters as being part of a larger order or process." As evidence of her concern, Drabble's tenth novel, *The Radiant Way*, tells the story of three women in their mid forties caught up in the turmoil of Thatcher's England in the 1980s.

The novel begins on New Year's Eve, 1979: "the end of a decade. A portentous moment for those who pay attention to portents." Liz Headleand, successful Harley Street psychiatrist and wife of a well-to-do television producer, uses the few minutes before her guests arrive to stare into her mirror, contemplate past and future, and to avoid telephoning her mother, an elderly recluse in the distant industrial city of Northam. Among the guests at her party will be Alix Bowen and Esther Breuer, her close friends since their Cambridge days. The party will also serve as a farewell for her husband, Charles, soon to leave for an important position in New York. "She is glad he is going, she thinks. The strain of living up to the lofty concept of marriage that they have invented is tiring, at times, and she is a busy woman. A year off will not come amiss. It will give her peace, privacy." After twenty-one years of marriage, Liz, 45, feels that the party will celebrate their domestic and professional achievements, "proof that two disparate spirits can wrestle and diverge and mingle and separate and remain distinct." It will be "a sign that they had weathered so much, and were now entering a new phase? A phase of tranquility and knowledge, of acceptance and harmony, when jealousies and rivalries would drop from them like dead leaves? ... There is a symmetry about this, about their relationship with the clock of

the century, that calls for celebration."

The question marks that seem to reflect Liz's confident self-assessment are among Drabble's ironic clues that this serene image is about to be shattered. During the party, Liz discovers that Charles plans to divorce her and marry a cold, vacuous and boring socialite. Liz's reactions, understandably, are those of rage and hurt, incredulity and self-pity. What will become of her own image, so painfully earned after her fatherless childhood, her youth spent studying for scholarships, her hectic married life juggling the demands of her career, of her daughters, of Charles's three sons from his first marriage, and her own escape and transformation from her mother's austere life into the comfort and graciousness of the upper-middle class?

As in her earlier novels, Drabble takes the stuff of soap operas and makes it into a profound, sensitive and often funny rendering of women's crises and their everyday coping, their fears, discouragements and perseverance. Liz and her friends, Alix, a part time English instructor at a women's prison and Esther, a freelance lecturer on Renaissance art, are "among the *crème de la crème*" of their generation:

opportunity was certainly offered to them, they had choices, at eighteen the world opened up to them and displayed its riches, the brave new world of Welfare State and County Scholarships, of equality for women,



they were the élite, the chosen, the garlanded of the great social dream. Adventure and possibility lay before them, as they had not lain before Liz's sister Shirley, who married at nineteen and stayed on in Northam, or before Dora Sutcliffe who left school at fifteen and sold sweets in Woolworth's until she married Shirley's husband's brother Steve.

These distinctions offer, in miniature, the scope and structure of the novel.

The first impression suggests a slow-moving narrative. The reader seems to be expected to master not only Liz's background and her family and in-laws, her patients and acquaintances, but all the connections and interests of Alix and Esther as well. The three women are held together by their sense of being outsiders, on the margins of English life "removed from the mainstream by a mad mother, by a deviant ideology, by refugee status" respectively. They also represent a carefully distinguishable set of goals. As an applicant to Cambridge, Liz wanted

'to make sense of things. To understand.' By things, she meant herself. Or she thought she meant herself. 'I would like' said Alix, 'to change things.' By things, she did not mean herself. Or thought she did not mean herself. 'You reach too high,' said Esther. 'I wish to acquire interesting information. That is all.'

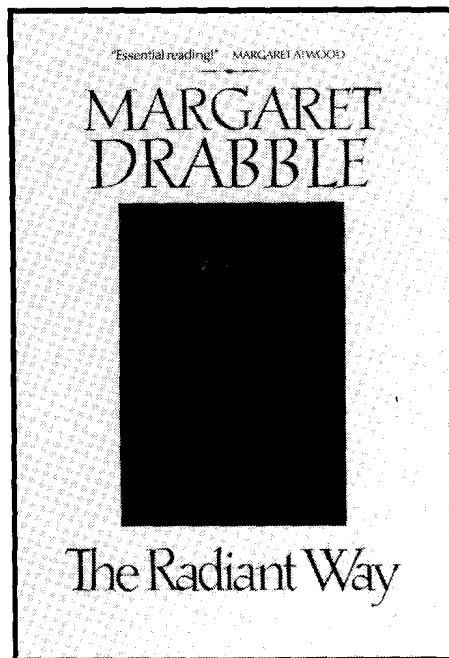
The ironical comically-lofty tone seems to inflate the three into almost choric figures but they are, simultaneously, caught in closely-documented time and space. Government cuts, the miners' strike, the Falklands war, all the griefs of the nation and the age reflect and intrude on the lives and families of the central characters.

In her early books, Drabble concentrates on the choices facing educated young women, — career, marriage, child-bearing and rearing. Here, Drabble explores the dilemmas of middle-aged women, — children grown, marriages dissolving or suffering from unexpected financial reverses, the worry and guilt about aging parents, the disappearance of time-honoured jobs and customs, the narrowing options and reduced aspirations of growing older. Alix worries

about a vulnerable young woman released on parole, and about giving up her job if her husband, declared redundant, must find employment outside of London. Esther knows that she will never write an important monograph on Crivelli; instead, she fusses about her potted palm. Liz consoles herself with a tabby cat. A gruesome series of murders preoccupies all three friends.

Margaret Atwood has compared *The Radiant Way* to *Middlemarch* in its scope and sympathy and, in many respects, the resemblance is powerful. On a second reading, the welter of information Drabble provides is more obviously unified and structured. Not only does Drabble interlace the stories of the three women, but she also roots them specifically in the political, moral and social setting. Drabble has praised George Eliot's ability to combine social situations with individual passion and here she attempts the same sort of vast integration.

The construction of the novel parallels its subject matter. Instead of being divided into conventional chapters, the book consists of two huge central portions, the second of them taking place three and a half years after the first. These two "mega-chapters" are bracketed by the introduction which describes the New Year's Eve events and by a short epilogue. Drabble has described her usual narrator as "slightly bewildered;" the



self-conscious voice of this narrative does not claim omniscience, but appears to have a considerable access to her characters. Sometimes she curtails her insights firmly, if a bit whimsically. In the midst of providing background information about Alix's husband, the narrator interrupts herself and her reader:

But that is another part of this story, and not to be pursued here, for Brian is not a woman and reflections on his prospects or lack of prospects in 1952 would at this juncture muddy the narrative tendency. Forget I mentioned

him. Let us return to Liz, Alix and Esther.

The Radiant Way ends in June 1985 on Esther's fiftieth birthday. The chain of horrible murders has ended with a psychopath's arrest. Liz, her mother dead at last, has uncovered the mystery of her father's disappearance. In the process she discovers her own childhood copy of *The Radiant Way*, the school primer which Charles used for the title of his challenging TV series, now long abandoned for less controversial work. On the book jacket are "a boy and a girl running gaily down (not up) a hill, against a background of radiant thirties sunburst." The same sunburst-behind-the-clouds illustration decorates the opening of each of the four movements of the novel. It also provides the tranquil, quite unsentimental atmosphere of the novel's conclusion. As Liz looks at the little book:

the children aged, slowly. They skipped down hill for ever, along the radiant way, and behind them burned for ever that great dark dull sun. Liz shook her head, slowly, smiled to herself, slowly. It was beautiful, it was necessary, she said to herself. She touched her locket, she laid her fingers on the images in the book. She had been very near to knowledge. She would go no further, today she would nurse her strength, for the next encounter.

THE GROUNDING OF MODERN FEMINISM

Nancy F. Cott. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Deborah Jurdjevic

Nancy Cott, in *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, argues for a plurality of feminist causes, recognizes that *feminism* allows "a range of possible relations between belief and action, a range of possible denotations of ideology or movement." Cott's book is an important one, not only for the sake of historical accuracy and for the sense of perspective that it brings to women's causes, but also for its sensitivity to the truth-telling properties of language.

Her thesis is that the new language of feminism marked the end of the 'woman' movement (the nineteenth-century phenomena which resulted in women getting the vote), and marked specifically the emergence of a modern political idea of woman. Feminists of our century, recognizing individuality and heterogeneity among their members, affirm their collective identity by their opposition to sex-hierarchy, by their recognition that women's condition is socially constructed (neither God nor Nature is responsible), and by their shared sense of identity (gender grouping) which itself is the basis for social change. Cott's study focuses on the years 1910 to 1930 and intends national scope for the struggle to discover "language, organization, and goals adequate to the paradoxical situ-

ation of modern women."

With an historian's appreciation for detail, Cott refuses to generalize, believing that summary betrays the truth of things. But while the poet and the historian may be at one in this faith in synecdoche, the general reader is somewhat numbed by the variety of causes, movements, ideologies to which women paid allegiance in the early decades of this century. (The introduction thoughtfully carries an alphabetized list of no fewer than thirty-two acronyms.) While there is, in some cases, an overlap of interests among these distinct groups, there is more often an indication of conflict along class or racial lines. Cott's study recognizes and affirms 'difference.' When 'difference' threatens to overwhelm her study, Cott reverts to metaphor. Nineteenth-