

and society rewards us with a higher status. Later, getting older means looking forward to retirement. And then? That's where aging seems to begin and suddenly, we are staring at the end of life. Contemporary societies, messages are no longer positive. Aging is treated as if it were a series of diseases, each one needing medical intervention.

This is where Linda Gannon, a psychology professor at Southern Illinois University, begins. Reviewing the literature, she challenges the traditional assumptions about aging and highlights physical competence, social skills, and economic independence as determinants of well-being in aging women.

Gannon, using feminist analysis, studies sexism in every aspect of her exploration of aging. Her view is that nature and nurture are interdependent. She looks at osteoporosis and cardiovascular disorders as well as menopause, castration of women by removal of ovaries, and hormone therapy. She finds a strong interdependence between physical and psychological well being.

As we know, social skills and support, control over one's life, and socio-economic roles are major determinants of physical well being. Physical well being is discussed in terms of diet, exercise, substance abuse, and obesity. In turn, physical health is the strongest predictor of psychological well being.

Gannon opposes androcentrism and biology as ideology because they legitimize inequality. She wants to free us from the medical concept that in any biological phase in which women are free from reproductive concerns, they are considered ill. In her introduction she says,

Normality is routinely invoked in order to pathologize certain people who fail to conform to the dominant ideology. Women are not normal because they are not men, elderly women are not normal because they are not fertile, women who are not moth-

ers or not heterosexual are not normal because they have failed to follow the normal life course dictated by a patriarchal culture, and normal aging for women is dismissed as unimportant or uninteresting, exploited and pathologized in order to make a profit, or assumed to be similar to that of men.

Gannon's central contribution to understanding women and aging is that women have experienced less control in their lives than men, so women do not get more depressed as they age. Women's control often increases as they age, when children leave home and they can determine their own schedule. This is a wise book and Gannon has a deep understanding about the differences between women and men and the ways they perceive control and conduct social relations. Women have more close friends than men do and this contributes to their lesser degrees of depression as they age. As well, women have multiple roles and so do not feel the loss of one role as acutely as men feel the loss of work with retirement. As control, social relations, and roles determine psychological health, which in turn is associated with physical health, women and men's experience of aging is quite different.

Gannon challenges the assumption that cognitive decline is inevitable with aging. If the elderly can remain physically active, they have a relatively high probability of retaining cognitive skills. Maintaining strength and aerobic capacity through exercise remains the most effective method of delaying functional incapacity.

Gannon discusses menopause not as a disease that needs treatment but as a normal life event. In non-western cultures, women report fewer hot flashes and see menopause as relief. Gannon discusses the risks and benefits of hormone replacement and thinks the risks outweigh the benefits. She concludes that there

is no evidence that natural menopause is dangerous or associated with deteriorating health.

We really know little about the sexuality of aging women as most of the research uses men as the norm. The same is true of women's cardiovascular health.

The emphasis throughout this book is on delaying disability as we age. Gannon sees the strong influence of socio-economic status on health, disability, and mortality and speaks out strongly for universal national health care systems.

Her extensive and excellent bibliography make a perfect starting point for any university student interested in learning more about this subject.

DAGMAR'S DAUGHTER

Kim Echlin.
Toronto: Penguin, 2001.

BY CLARA THOMAS

Kim Echlin's first novel, *Elephant Winter*, introduced us to a uniquely different creative imagination at work in the fiction field. Now, in her second novel, she has continued to surprise us—and enchant us. For *Dagmar's Daughter* is an enchanted tale, and must be approached as such. To truly savour the novel, we need to give our trust to its teller and allow ourselves to be led where she leads us, in the open-hearted spirit of children who are eager to be led into a fairy world. The novel unfolds a mythic tale, with ties to two ancient myths, the story of Demeter and Persephone the most often-told and familiar. Demeter is the harvest goddess and immortal. Her daughter, Persephone, is stolen by Pluto, Prince of Hades, and taken to the underworld. Demeter follows and brings her back,

but because Persephone has eaten one seed from the pomegranate she was carrying when Pluto abducted her, she is doomed forever to spend a part of every year in Hades. The book's epigraph from *The Descent Of Inanna*, a Sumerian story of 2000 B.C., opens the door to an even more ancient myth, that of the powerful goddess, Inanna, who braved the underworld to establish her power (and by her example the power of women) and succeeded.

Echlin's homage to the myths begins with Moll, a motherless girl who bore and then drowned a dead baby, hid in a ship that was shipwrecked in the gulf of St. Lawrence and "after two days and a night she washed up a blue meagre hag on the shore of a little island" called Millstone Nether. Moll is a presiding spirit, and the character related to Inanna, for her near-drowning has been her descent to the underworld: "She was whirled and spun below and divested of what she once was ... She became in the lowest deep, a lower deep." Always hiding in the woods, she was sometimes an agent of light and healing, more often of darkness and death, but always hovering over the tale, a powerful dynamic in its telling. She found the body of Meggie Dob's mother washed up on the shore of the island that had first been settled by "merry-begots and hangashores, sleveens and slawmeens," and all of them musicians; "Millstone Nether's impractical claim for itself was music." Making their own instruments out of branches and boards, they were favoured by fate with instruments washed up on their shores, one time a barrel of fiddles and another of whistles. Moll herself drew strange music out of a bronze pot she had salvaged from the sea. The developing lineage of three generations of heroically strong women, begins with Norea Nolan in an impoverished Irish village, desperate to escape. She stole the shoes from her dead mother's feet and walked to Dublin, where she stowed away on a ship bound for the New World and

the island of Millstone Nether.

Norea was beguiled by the music made by Rory, a young man of the village, but Rory died in the great flu epidemic, and Norea gave birth to Dagmar who from the beginning had a strange gift: plants grew if she touched them, and whole orchards and gardens appeared; storms occurred if she was unhappy, and harvests were abundant if she smiled. She is the Demeter figure, and her daughter Nyssa, the Persephone, irrevocably but not permanently linked to Moll and her fearsome power.

The tale is anchored to a reality we can recognize by its music—the music of Donal Dob, the son of Meggie, and his friend, Colin Cane. In a complicated courtship dance of leaving and return, acceptance, love and loss, and always their obsessive devotion to the perfectibility of their music, they ensnare both Dagmar and Nyssa whose music is likewise magic and perfectly matched to Donal's. The end brings with it redemption as the whole village celebrates the inevitable reunion of Nyssa and Donal: "The Millstone Nether people called for more and played together the old reels and jigs and strathspeys. They were happy to hear again the playing of Nyssa, who went her own way and Donal, who went with her, to hear the sounds those two alone could wring from fiddle and double bass."

Dagmar's Daughter is anything but an easy novel to read and understand, but it rewards the effort, not only for the depth of its story and its ancient undertones, but for its grounding in an unshakeable reverence for art: "It was a young island where art and life went hand in hand.... On the island it was thought that life could not be beautiful without art, nor art flourish without life. When Norea gave her grandchild Nyssa a fiddle she said, "This little fiddle is fashioned from the suffering of the world. Are you worthy of it?" At the last, Nyssa proved herself worthy.

This book should really be read

aloud. It is a story begging to be heard, with all the variations of tone and expression that a voice could bring to it. But even experienced only as the words on the page, it is hauntingly memorable.

NEW ESSAYS ON THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Deborah Esch, Ed.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

BY SHERRILL CHEDA

"Killed by the double standard" might be an alternative title for *The House Of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. Lily Bart was nothing if not a victim of the social conventions of her time, which punished innocent women on the basis of their reputation while allowing men total freedom.

The first essay in this collection, an introduction by University of Toronto Associate Professor Deborah Esch, reviews and summarizes the autobiographical, biographical, and critical literature on novelist Edith Wharton to place her in the context of *fin de siècle* New York society. It is important to know that *The House Of Mirth*, first published in 1905, was not only a critical success but also a popular one.

The second essay "The conspicuous wasting of Lily Bart," by Ruth Yeazell of Yale University, compares *The House Of Mirth* with Veblen's *The Theory Of The Leisure Class* and finds that the novel and the sociological treatise mirror each other in their views of class in America. She points out that one of the main ironies for women like Lily Bart is that, on the one hand, they are to use their beauty as a bargaining chip for a society husband while on the other