

Old Woman at Play, Adele Wiseman, Toronto: Clark Irwin, 1978, 148 pp., \$14.95.

Sheila McIntyre

No book possesses something for everyone; but this book comes close. By exploring her mother's devotion, for over a quarter century, to the making of dolls, Adele Wiseman attempts to examine, articulate, celebrate and share the nature of the creative process. She achieves all of this and more — she constructs a moving and eloquent work of art which exemplifies the richness of the process she describes.

Wiseman weaves together descriptions of individual dolls, history, biography and autobiography, art criticism and her own personal moral and creative values, in order to engage us in both the mysteries and enchantments of her mother's art. In her sensitivity to these materials, her sense of relationship and her feel for verbal tailoring, she is not unlike her mother. Chaika Waisman has a reverence for all things in nature. She finds her materials everywhere, mating fishbones and detergent bottles, driftwood and onion bags, sequins and styrofoam, in creations fascinating for their individual detail and for their overall integrity.

There is no casual accident involved in her providing the mermaid's lover with dinky-toy, double-decker bus eyes, or in her hanging a medicine bottle on her tree of life.

Similarly, there is design and decorum in the way Wiseman threads memories of Depression Winnipeg, revelations about her own goals as a writer, and observations about the relationship connecting grandmother, mother and grand-daughter throughout her narrative. The structural integration of *Old Woman at Play* is astonishing.

Chaika Waisman gathers stray objects and gives them company in works of art where each button, fabric or bone sits in sympathetic relation with its companion pieces. She provides each doll, even (or especially) the hunchback, the thalidomide and the dwarf dolls with a mate or a family. The dolls are then given away so that they and their recipients each have company. The process is all of a whole. Her vision, social and artistic, is inclusive and expansive — generous in the broadest sense of the word.

To her daughter, Chaika Waisman has passed on this gift. Adele's vision, too, is all-embracing. What moves her to art and in art is the discovery of relationship, the stretching of comprehension to encompass and enlarge existing reality. Wiseman's sharing with us of the creative impulse she and her mother share, is a truly generous gift.

It is as blessed to give as to receive this book. Quite simply, *Old Woman at Play* is good company.



dolls by Chaika Waisman

Alerdita Shehu

Praxis, Fay Weldon, Toronto: Musson Books, 1978, 251 pp., \$12.95.

Doris Anderson

In Fay Weldon's earlier novels we have come to expect a rare, almost sombre insight on the female condition leavened with an ascerbic sense of humor, rinsed absolutely clean of any quality that might blur into sentimentality. Weldon women are often driven mad, raging and ridiculous but the reader is never expected to feel sorry for them. Other smug, satisfied, self-congratulatory creatures may pride themselves on their good fortune in possessing handsome, ambitious husbands, rosy-cheeked children, well-appointed urban homes. But in the next chapter these very same women might be grovelling along in solitary misery in a basement flat and cooking on a two-burner plate. None of the tragedies or accidents of luck that befall these women seems to have any connection with either flaws in their character or any particular will or endeavor on their part.

There are women who scheme in Weldon's novels. They plot to get men or money — and often men are desired only because they bring money with them. The schemers are more grasping selfish and single-minded than their sisters but usually only temporarily successful in their schemes. Weldon's heroines — if they can be called that — simply muddle through as best they can. Timid, passive creatures, they rarely raise their heads above the swampland of unwanted pregnancies, compliant sex, and myriads of drudging chores.

In her latest novel, *Praxis*, the humor abounds; the lean stripped-down prose delights; and the familiar ability to snare the exact female circumstance and thumb-tack it in place is there. But the plot-line is so loaded with so many events that the book reads almost like an allegory of Everywoman Today. So much happens to the main character, Praxis Duveen, illegitimate daughter of a drunken Jewish gambler and his pretty romantic partner, that there are enough events to provide for six novels.

We see Praxis first as a beguiling blond five-year-old on a beach with her mother and older sister Hypatia. Soon her mother is deserted and subsequently goes mad. The two little girls survive, grow up and go on repeating all the same indignities that happened to their mother in their own lives. Hypatia shuns marriage and bends her talents to a career, which is really an extension of the badge-earning she excelled at in school. Praxis keeps getting tripped up by men with a clearer idea of their own wants and ambitions. She is willingly conned into lending her body, her earning capacity and her domestic skills for male ends. But even the men are not malevolent or even masterful — just more selfish, demanding and clear-headed about their own ends. She is constantly tripped up by children generally born at inconvenient times who are lavished with care as babies and then these independent, often callous children grow up and drift away bent on their own goals. Praxis' friends also marry, get divorced or leave children for the love of another man—and rarely does life yield up any clear solutions.

The one unconvincing part of this latest Fay Weldon novel was a dollop of feminism when Praxis embraces the movement and even becomes a cult heroine toward the end. Interspersed with the narrative which runs through from Praxis playing on the beach to her middle-age, are chapters commenting on the world as middle-aged Praxis finds it today. This is a much more ambitious and difficult novel than *Female Friends* or *Remember Me*, but the message is even sharper and in among the juicy wedges of humor, few—very few—crumbs of comfort are to be found.

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