

Review: The War at Home

Reviewed Work(s): *If the Tiger* by Terry Farish

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Source: *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 12, No. 10/11 (Jul., 1995), p. 31

Published by: Old City Publishing, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4022176>

Accessed: 21-01-2018 17:41 UTC

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Short subjects

The war at home

by Jeanne Schinto

If the Tiger, by Terry Farish. South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1995, 222 pp., \$21.00 hardcover.

HER BLACK HAIR IS OILED AND SPIKED. She wears miniskirts and somebody's teeth in a locket around her neck. Her full lips are painted coral, and her fingernails are striped. She believes in curses and prophetic dreams, and claims a tiger led her out of the jungle to safety after her mother starved to death in Pol Pot's Cambodia.

Her name is Chanty Sun and she is Terry Farish's beguiling creation—one of the central characters in *If the Tiger*, Farish's second novel for adults (she has written two others for young adults). In *Flower Shadows* (William Morrow, 1992), she told the story of women in Vietnam's combat zones. This time her subject is war's effect on people and places far removed from the fighting. The new book is also about the human capacity to recover from horror. These are not original subjects, it's true; but the talent and depth of feeling that Farish has brought to her task certainly are.

Chanty, now in her early twenties and with a young son of her own, has ended up in a small town in New Hampshire, near Pease Air Force Base. There she meets Laurel Sullivan—the other main character of this novel and the impetuous daughter of a colonel. Born in 1970, while her father flew missions over Southeast Asia, Laurel is in flux; she has recently dropped out of college and is thinking of becoming a flier, too. But on the eve of another war—in the Persian Gulf—Laurel has a terrible accident: a child runs in front of her car and is killed.

The young victim is Cambodian. In the tragedy's aftermath, Chanty and Laurel, previously passing acquaintances, forge a bond—not because Chanty wants to help Laurel shed her guilt, but because she seems to want Laurel to feel it all the more. "She an angel on your neck," Chanty tells her, referring to the little girl Laurel killed, confident in the superstitions she lives by.

The heart of *If the Tiger* is this unlikely alliance between the two women. "Dream, it tell your future," says Chanty. "You are full of hocus-pocus," Laurel replies. But will Chanty lead Laurel to her doom or to forgiveness? The answer comes on a trip the women take to a Buddhist temple in Lowell, Massachusetts, where a large Cambodian community has flourished. While Laurel's father and his airmen bomb Baghdad, Laurel and Chanty wander the coffee shops and laundromats of the old mill city, with Chanty's toddler in tow, and Laurel comes to terms with the truth. She has taken a life; even though she later saves one, the two acts do not cancel each other out.

Kob, another Cambodian refugee who is the father of Chanty's son, lies in wait in Lowell. A venomous man, he beats Chanty brutally. Where did all his violence come from? Like Chanty, he is a casualty of war: "Laurel looked at Kob's heart. It was smashed. It had been smashed for about a decade. [His] hands, in truth, were skeleton hands controlled by wrath."

Kob is a convincing villain, but Farish is less successful conveying the reality of her male characters who aren't envenomed. Laurel's father, Billy, for example, is poorly drawn; so is her sometime lover, a photographer whose monologues clumsily provide needed exposition as well as thematic material in an overly literary way.

Certain confusing scene changes and the undeveloped relationship between Laurel and her estranged mother are also problematic—though their reunion at the end of the novel, during which they bathe together, is beautiful, memorable, unique. Still, these flaws seem insignificant when measured against the book's larger achievements:



Terry Farish.

Chanty, Laurel, Chanty's son and the ghost child in her gold-flecked sandals who will ride Laurel's shoulders forever. Laurel's sadness will never go away, but at the end, we feel sure she is strong enough to carry it.

Hopeful travelers

by Gail Pool

Debatable Land, by Candia McWilliam. New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1995, 284 pp., \$23.50 hardcover.

EVEN WITH THE BEST OF MAPS and instruments, we can never fully chart our journeys. So much depends on our goals. So much depends on our companions. So much depends on circumstance, the accidents of transport or weather. In *Debatable Land*, Candia McWilliam chronicles a voyage from Tahiti to New Zealand. But though the travelers pass through Moorea, Huahine, Nuku'alofa, Tonga, the central character spends his most intense hours in Scotland, and he arrives there not by boat but through memory.

In McWilliam's third novel, as in her previous two—*A Case of Knives* (Beech Tree/Morrow, 1988) and *A Little Stranger* (Doubleday, 1989)—this Scottish writer focuses her penetrating gaze on a small group of people who seem poised at the edge of danger. Six individuals are aboard *Ardent Spirit*, a yacht owned by a rich Scots-American and named by his wife "for the old name of the liquid that has shaped Scotland as ornamentally and destructively as seawater." From the outset, McWilliam alerts us to the risks of being on the sea, which "does not allow for mistakes," and to the differences and tensions among the six who may ultimately depend on each other to stay alive: Logan Urquhart, the macho, overbearing owner of the boat, a man who must prove himself repeatedly on the sea; his insecure, submissive Scots wife, Elspeth; a trio of sailors—two good-natured young men and a self-assured, naive young woman, Gabriel, who seems all too ready to take on Elspeth's role; and the book's central character, Alec Dundas, from Edinburgh.



Candia McWilliam.

Alec, a successful artist of almost forty, has left behind a messy relationship. But of course he hasn't left it behind any more than he has left Scotland behind. From the opening pages, he immerses himself in vivid recollections: of his parents, and the fishy smell of their livelihood; of his lover; of the streets and buildings of Edinburgh; of the skies, the "argumentative air of Scotland." As he grapples with his demons, with the issues of solitude and separation, hurtfulness and goodness, he also feels the yearning for place that will ultimately draw him home.

McWilliam is a bold writer, unafraid of conspicuous intelligence and original, demanding prose. Every page of *Debatable Land* offers sharp observations about characters—of Logan, for example, Alec observes, "A man that unironic would be valuable in war." And every page offers splendidly crafted sentences that are rich, precise and at times extremely dense:

At the bow of the boat the anchor chain girmed with a faint but surprisingly serious sound, as though the stone knight on a tomb were waking and beginning heavily to stir in his burdensome carapace, the stone conjunctions of his armour beginning painfully to grate into articulation. (p.23)

Pleasurable as they are, McWilliam's astute analyses and intricate prose do not serve her novel altogether well. They tend to focus attention more on themselves than on story and characters, rendering the book more intellectually engaging than moving, and slowing down an already leisurely pace. As in her earlier novels, McWilliam has some trouble with design: although she arouses an expectation of disaster, the actual challenge comes so late that whatever momentum the story had from early warnings has already dissipated by the climax. The book creates a sense of waiting and never quite seems to arrive. But those who feel, with the great traveler Wilfred Thesiger, that "it is not the goal but the way there that matters" will find in this novel's finely-etched sights and thoughtful insights an unusual and memorable journey.



Lynne Sharon Schwartz.

Midlife crisis

by Jennifer Kornreich

The Fatigue Artist, by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. New York: Scribner's, 1995, 326 pp., \$23.00 hardcover.

AUTHORS AND their ailments. Whenever they make their characters sick—literally—you know you're in for a bedridden account of said character's (author's?) sexual exploits, career setbacks and parental longings. Thankfully, *The Fatigue Artist*, Lynne Sharon Schwartz' fifth novel (her eleventh book), is not just another female-oriented *Anatomy Lesson*, featuring illness as a Philip Roth-esque metaphor-for-Writing-and-Life. While her protagonist is indeed a novelist struggling with a vague but debilitating virus, Schwartz resuscitates the hackneyed premise with so much craft (and

craftily, too), that we not only forgive the device, but wish, at the end, to witness Laura's suffering just a bit longer.

Our patient is a respected, fortyish writer with a messy sexual history—not in number of partners, but in choice and timing. Kind-of-grieving for her kind-of-likable husband, Ev—a reporter shot in the Bronx two years ago—Laura is juggling flirtations, romantic and otherwise, to distract herself from her odd symptoms. These run the gamut from hypersensitive hearing to clumsiness, and prevent her from determining her future with an older actor she calls Q, her lover before and during her marriage. Unfortunately, Q, too, can neither commit nor bail; he is an "emotional flasher," "a giant doomed to eat damsels."

Laura seeks various "cures": tricking her Tai Chi teacher into reciting philosophical nuggets in English; fleeing to the Cape with her collegiate stepdaughter; playing guinea pig to a delightful alternative-medicine "witch" who dates a rabbi. Through it all, she analyzes her sixteen-year series of missed chances with Q, attempting to purge him from her system as well.

If the plot seems unfocused and thin, that's because it is. However, the characters and uncanny narration buoy the reader along. What a joy to read about a middle-aged woman whose middle age is a given: for once, sagging breasts and divorced, borderline-pedophilic men are non-issues. A truly complex heroine, Laura is often crass and amoral. Sardonicly explaining her relationship to her latest bedmate—a lawyer with social cachet—she quips, "What he offers me in return, aside from companionship and the usual male handyman skills, is an entrée into ordinary middle-class life, where I can carry on my researches." And she mourns not so much the loss of her husband, but her failure to demystify him between trysts with Q. Laura recalls the first time she and Ev made love, with brutal honesty untinged by guilt or bravado: naked, she says, Ev "looked like a Mannerist rendering of Jesus about to be hoisted onto the cross.... I wanted to call Q up and joke about it.... Ev was nothing like Jesus Christ." But as Schwartz reveals, Ev cheated his unfaithful wife in his own way.

Like Laura, Schwartz is a writer's writer, indulging in lavish description, then subverting clichés with succinct turns of phrase. Her dialogue is arrestingly urbane. Any patient who's ever felt patronized by a doctor will adore the scene in which Laura's physician responds to her complaints with "Have you sucked any strange penises lately?"

The flip side to Schwartz' generosity, however, is that the book is aimless and occasionally overwritten: the repository, it seems, of everything that has ever entered Schwartz' incredibly clever head. She takes too long to skewer everything, from performance art to health-food stores. Even more egregious are her grandstanding aphorisms and a recurring personification of, and paean to, her bed. The novel drifts to a close without any real resolution in either plot or psyche. Still, these problems are mere symptoms of Schwartz' own wonderful malaise: giddy passion for her fictional world.

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