REVIEWS

Carmichael, Virginia. *Framing History. The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War.* American Culture 6. Minneapolis, MN.: U of Minnesota P, 1993. 299 pp. $17.95. paper.

Ever since the early publication of Leslie Fiedler's polemical pieces about it, the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in June 1953 for "conspiracy to commit espionage" has stirred a great deal of controversy in the United States. The case is still very much alive: at the end of Tony Kushner's highly successful play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1993) the specter of Ethel Rosenberg haunts Roy Cohn, in August 1993 the American Bar Association Litigation Section staged a mock-trial in which the original verdict was reversed, and in 1994 a lengthy reedition of *The Rosenberg Letters* has been published. *Framing History* adds to this new avalanche of retrospectives of recent years, not only about the Rosenbergs, but about postwar anticommunism in general.

Making an extensive use of theories of feminism, materialism, and especially postmodern views of history, narration and representation, the book offers an insightful approach to the Rosenberg affair from both a historical and an artistic perspective. Although she never conceals her belief in the couple's innocence, Carmichael still manages to present the case under a challenging and thought-provoking light, in which even the U.S. Left is criticized. As the prologue states, any current study of the Rosenberg case must ultimately concentrate on "the politics of writing and reading" (xiv), especially when problematic events such as the Gulf War are still taking place.

In the first part of the study, after a review of the social and historical circumstances that led to the new witch-hunt, the framing of the Rosenbergs is interpreted as a necessary "narrative", invented by the U.S. government to appease the tense political postwar climate. Although she rightly claims that, even after the end of the cold war, it is still nearly impossible to collect all the pieces of such a complex puzzle, Carmichael supports her view on the innocence of the Rosenbergs by making a detailed enumeration of major inconsistencies surrounding the case, such as the lack of any real atomic secrets to give away, or the contradictory and changing testimonies of crucial witnesses of the prosecution like David Greenglass or Harry Gold. By means of this careful analysis, she tries to prove how the U.S. government, namely through Hoover's agency, managed to "write" the Rosenberg story in its entirety.

Given her feminist stand, Carmichael is especially concerned about the role played by Ethel Rosenberg in this invented "narrative", so that in 'Ethel as Lever' (95-107), one of the most engaging sections, she argues that, although at first Ethel Rosenberg was simply arrested to make her husband confess since there was no evidence against her, she was finally executed too because her image of a determined

and independent female opposed the dominant domestic ideology about women of the period. This image of Ethel Rosenberg as a victim of not only political, but also sexual repression, is central in Adrienne Rich's poem "For Ethel Rosenberg" (1980), and even more in Thema Nason's powerful novel *Ethel* (1990), two works that could have been of great relevance to Carmichael's enterprise, especially the latter, which she just mentions.

This absence is even more remarkable since the second half of the book is an interdisciplinary reading of several works dealing with the Rosenbergs, all of which are interpreted as powerful postmodernist critiques of the establishment. E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971) is seen as an attempt to bring together two different political mentalities, those of the Old and the New Left, with Daniel as the link that connects them through his narrative. Special attention is obviously paid to the role his suicidal sister Susan plays in the novel.

The other major literary treatment of the Rosenbergs, Robert Coover's massive *The Public Burning* (1977), is defined as a powerful "comedy of the masculist state" (185) of evident Swiftian and Rabelaisian overtones, in which all sorts of design—mainly symmetrical and mathematical—are central at both linguistic and dramatic levels. Nixon's perfect status as protagonist of the story and his many contradictions are analyzed, as well as the relevance of issues of class and gender, namely the peculiar relation of Nixon with his wife Pat on one hand, and with Ethel Rosenberg on the other. Finally, Carmichael sees the grotesque ending of the novel as the ultimate confirmation of her daring theory that "[m]isogyny, gynophobic homosocial bonding, and narcissistic anal aggression are predominant in *Public Burning* [sic] as figures for U.S. cold war states of mind" (187).

Under a heading which returns to the central motif of the study, 'Framed Art', three more works are analyzed, too briefly perhaps. The first is Donald Freed's play *Inquest* (1969), an example of theatre of fact with an open self-referential nature, which for Carmichael fails as cultural critique because it reproduces media stereotypes of the 1950's about the Rosenbergs, and does not manage to evoke a critical response on the part of the audience. The last two works are Martha Rosler's installation *Unknown Secrets* (1987-88), and Peter Saul's painting *Ethel Rosenberg in Electric Chair* (1987), both part of the "Unknown Secrets" exhibit of fifty-seven works that toured the U.S. from 1988 to 1991, and which George Will saw as a combination of "lugubrious martyrology . . . and loathing for America" (207). A very interesting companion volume, called *The Rosenbergs: Collected Visions of Artists and Writers* and including reproductions of all the works and of literary pieces on the case, was published simultaneously in 1988. Mosler and Saul in their pieces, the most disturbing of the exhibit for Carmichael, focus on Ethel Rosenberg, trying at the same time and through different means to oppose the monolithic negative image provided by the media, and to portray her as a full human being, as a victim, but mostly as a woman.

Despite its overt subjective stand and its at times unorthodox narrative techniques, *Framing History* reads as a lucid and penetrating interpretation of a crucial event in modern U.S. history. Its generous bibliography and documentation fully explain the impressive knowledge about topics as diverse as law, atomic research, history, philosophy, or art that Virginia Carmichael demonstrates in this useful work of cultural studies that explores the social, critical, and political possibilities of postmodernism.

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John Barth, *Once Upon a Time. A Floating Opera*. Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1994.

Once upon a time there was a postmodernist author; his name was John Barth. He wrote long novels and a couple of collections of short stories, and then more novels. He even wrote about fiction and exhaustion and how there was a new narrative of replenishment. He was called a fabulator. Now he has published his twelfth book, a novel titled *Once Upon A Time : A Floating Opera* which, one could say, closes a cycle in his thematic and narrative evolution. As we could foresee in his two previous works, *Tidewater Tales* (1987) and *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), Barth halts on the way, as a good sailor, to look back, consider where he is standing and see where he has to go now.

In this novel we can see again the subjects that are central to his work, such as narration (both oral and written), navigation, sex and the doubles among others, which are all emblematized in the presence of the main protagonist, Jack Barth. The book is an autobiography, "a memoir bottled in a novel," as the author himself says in the "Program Note." It is especially interesting for the reader who is familiar with Barth because it is a good occasion to recover characters and situations from his first novels, like Ambrose, with clearly autobiographical traits, which converge here in the figure of Barth, author, narrator and protagonist of the story.

Other characters are also incorporated, such as Jill, Barth's twin sister, midway between the fictitious and the real, or the true coprotagonist of the novel, Jerome (Jerry) Schreiber, also called Jay Wordsworth Scribner, who is Barth's companion, rival and guide. The presence of these characters serves the author to reflect on subjects such as his childhood, youth, and the discovery of sex, which runs parallel to the discovery of literature.

The novel is structured following the pattern of an opera, that is, divided in acts and meant to be represented by actors/singers, paying homage to Barth's first novel,

The Floating Opera (1966). The opera takes place on a ship, *US*, that crosses the ocean of Barth's stories and past experiences, paying special attention to those he shared with his actual wife, Sherry. The readers are therefore invited to join the crew in a voyage in time. Barth acts as director of the opera, distributing the roles of the actors in the show of his life review. He is also spectator of his past deeds, as was Perseus in "Perseid" (*Chimera*, 1972) following the model of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*.

The general tone of the novel is not, as one could infer from the title, pessimistic at all. We can rather witness a serene maturity and great commodity with language, which is already evidenced in a first page where language flows elegant and suggestive. Nevertheless, and this the fan of Barth knows well, his focus is sometimes excesively self-indulgent, as he himself admits: "In a word, if I am not selfish, I am decidedly self-centered" (163), and on occasions the text sounds a little repetitive. Notwithstanding, in general, it is easily read and although it does not seem to bring any new radical exploration either technically, as he did with *Lost in the Funhouse* (1966) or *Letters* (1979), or thematically like in *Chimera*, it continues with the author's concern for the question of narrative. R.H.Dilliard, in the review that appeared on this book in the *New York Times Book Review* points out that "*Once Upon a Time* is a celebration of the power of narrative, of the questions it must ask and can answer."

In sum, this novel was necessary for two persons: on the one hand for the author, who like Menealaus, Perseus or Bellerophon in the stories that bear their names, is searching for his identity to find that he has become the tale he tells; on the other for the reader since this book marks Barth's evolutive process, not to close definitively any circle, but to make a Moebius strip of his work, emblematic of infinity.

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Goldman, Francisco. *The Long Night of White Chickens*. The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1992. 450 pp. $21.95 cloth. ISBN: 0-87113-509-4

«Guatemala no existe.» Or so says Moya, Guatemalan journalist and true patriot, early in Francisco Goldman's first novel. This enigmatic pronouncement seems mostly to indicate that humane conduct and civil society do not exist in Guatemala, that the Guatemala desired by those who think like Moya can scarcely raise its head after the events of the last fifteen years.

But Guatemala exists. It exists physically, its mountains serving as the staging ground for the nightmare guerrilla war and counterinsurgency campaign of terror pursued with such relentless vigor under the regime of Ríos Montt and carried on well

into the mid-eighties, its ferocity scarcely abating until its goal of disruption and decimation had been achieved with woeful frequency. Guatemala exists physically in the choking basin where the capital city situates itself, a city, at the time of this novel, that was home to death squads which roamed with impunity at night, and even by day, their targets most often people who dared to organize resistance to the reign of terror, or people who, like Moya, printed some truth well-known to most, but normally left unspoken by all who wished to keep breathing the foul air of *la ciudad de la patria.*

Mr. Goldman has reported this existence, described it well, made it live vividly on the page. Those unacquainted with the country will know it better after reading this novel than after reading any number of political tracts or bureaucratic reports, however accurate, fair-minded and well-intentioned these may be. Such is the power of fiction and such is Mr. Goldman's talent. But the author has not only reported, he has created. He has created Moya. He has created Roger Graetz, the underachieving narrator and erstwhile classmate and summer friend of Moya. He has created Roger's parents, the plain-speaking, straightforward Yankee Jewish father, and the nostalgic, enterprising and proud Guatemalan Catholic mother. And he has created Flor de Mayo Puac and placed her at the center of the novel.

In her short life Flor lives out both the American Dream and the Guatemalan nightmare. Brought to the Graetz's suburban Boston home as a maid, the orphaned *latina* becomes more: a sister and best-friend and an occasional object of adolescent desire for Roger; a daughter to be proud of for Mr. Graetz; a bone of contention between him and his wife, who both loves and resents Flor. Overcoming the social handicap of being so much older than her classmates, Flor becomes a star schoolgirl and eventually graduates from Wellesley College. But one of Guatemala's incarnations must be as a spiritual magnet, for Flor returns there after finishing college, drawn initially by a vague and generalized desire. Eschewing the conventional success promised by her plans for law school, she founds an orphanage and adoption agency.

Both Flor's motives for her return to her home-country and her actions once she sets up her orphanage are ambiguous. What is clear is that she is murdered, that her case becomes a brief cause celebre (with an ugly, decidedly anti-U.S. tone) in the Guatemalan press, and that both Moya and Roger are themselves compelled by Guatemala's magnet to return to Guatemala in order to discover the causes and explore the circumstances of Flor's death. Complexities and ambiguities abound in Guatemala City, and so does danger—real physical danger as well as moral.

Roger learns what Moya well knows. Guatemala exists as a nightmare. Honesty is traducted by fear. Evidence is replaced by a swirl of conflicting rumors, most of appalling ugliness. Instead of truth one finds only labyrinthine interpretations and half-informed inferences. Even if the seeker of truth finds his way out of the maze, all he has done is to make his exhausted escape. He is unlikely to know any more than when he entered, and he faces little more than the prospect of further paranoid guesswork.

This praiseworthy first novel is moderately irrealist in style and authentically multicultural in story-line and theme. A firmer editor might have advantageously convinced Mr. Goldman to shorten this long night by fifty pages. The middle section of the novel does lag, and it may be that plot (the novel must tell a story, alas) is Mr. Goldman's weakness at this stage of his career. But in all other ways, the book is done right, without any predictable, obvious and ultimately sentimental correctness of thought, and without an obvious avant-garde for avant-garde's sake approach to its story-telling. Its narrative complexities, perhaps most reminiscent of Vargas-Llosa, are earned, its thematic ambiguities justified. And because it is complex and ambiguous, it depicts a wide range of human activity, not the least of which is horrible victimization. But military-political terrorism and its victims, though a very important aspect of the work, is but one of the main themes. I urge the reader to pick up the book and discover the other, and to discover at the same time a talented new novelist.

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