

# Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?

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*What's the Matter, Girl?*, Elizabeth Brochmann. Harper & Row, 1980. 121 pp. \$11.75 hardcover. ISBN 0-06-020677-2.

The beloved young man goes to war and returns a lunatic, a shambling shadow of himself – this powerful subject of many stories, including D.H. Lawrence's masterful "Shadow in the Rose Garden," is taken up by a young B.C. writer, Elizabeth Brochmann, in her first novel, described on the jacket as for "ages 12 and up." The subject certainly aligns her with those current writers of fiction for adolescents who seem to be competing to choose the most gruesome or grotesque situations to present to young readers as *The Truth about Real Life*. Unlike the mature woman through whose perceptions Lawrence reveals what has happened to the soldier/lover, Brochmann's narrator is thirteen, and perceives her sexual attraction to the soldier (a young male) and the horror of his fate from the vulnerable vantage point of early adolescence. Anna's feelings are evoked with some power, and one never senses, as in some novels of Paul Zindel, for example, that the unpleasantness is being exploited for sensational effect. We are given all the grisly details – physical, emotional or linguistic – but these details are appropriate to the subject and tone, not merely lurid decorations, and the realism of the novel is genuine, not Gothic melodrama masquerading as social relevance. The unpleasantness is, however, almost unrelieved, and the atmosphere of the novel is highly oppressive. My reaction to the novel is thus an uncomfortable mixture of admiration and revulsion.

The novel is set in the Alberni Valley on Vancouver Island, just after the Second World War. Seven chapters relate, in the present tense, Anna's thoughts and feelings on the six days leading up to the return of her Uncle Arion, a day referred to as Homecoming until it actually arrives and is retitled Doomsday. Anna keeps vigil on the porch of her grandparents' farmhouse, making potato figures to represent events in Arion's life as he recounted them in a series of letters to her from the Front. The present-tense narrative is interspersed with Anna's passionate recollections of earlier times with her uncle, also given in the present tense, and with observations about the family members who notice her vigil and attempt in their various ways to warn her. Arion is to be not only her Prince Charming but the one to perceive and appreciate her true nature, her secret and budding beauty. From the oblique comments of the family, however, and from

the increasing wildness and violence in the subject and tone of the letters which Anna is reading over, we realize that four years will have drastically changed Arion from the golden-haired hero prince of Anna's memories. Many passages in the letters are horrifying.

I froze for a second – then I ran for him – there was this Kraut standing over him, grinning with his bayonet red and Bart's eyes wide in surprise and his mouth openin' and shuttin' – I never made it – one of our guys brought me down with a tackle . . . only six inches from where I turned to run. I saw Bart fall and the Kraut, walking backward, roll this grenade between Bart's legs, aimin' for the crotch. Bart couldn't have noticed, he was too busy with both hands trying to stuff his intestines back inside himself.

Eventually Anna's week-long vigil is rewarded by the arrival of Arion – gaunt, shuffling, looking at no one and speaking in painfully drawn-out monosyllables.

Although some of the tension built up through the first part of the book is released with his return, the central interest of the novel remains with Anna's feelings and responses. In the final three chapters she removes to the porch steps of her own house, down the road from her grandparents' home where Arion now sits staring at nothing. The adult world has failed to live up to the emotional needs and expectations of the young adolescent. "I've been tricked," says Anna, bitterly, to an aunt who tries to persuade her to accept and respond to the new, damaged Arion. Painful and frequently irritating as it is to read about, Anna's moping rings true, as does the author's refusal to provide a comfortable solution to the situation. In the friendship and understanding of her brother, whom Anna had previously slighted, there is suggested a replacement for Arion. Although she rejects most of their overtures, Anna comes to realize something of the sorrow of the other family members as well, and to perceive the reality of other people's feelings and behaviour which earlier had seemed to her merely risible or annoying. There are no happy endings – just the possibility for Anna of eventual acceptance. "Someday I guess I'll go back . . . But not yet. I can't go there. Yet."

Brochmann's writing is honest, and sometimes compelling. The absorption of the thirteen-year-old narrator in her own emotional state, in the unfairness of life, and in the absurdity of her omnipresent family is convincingly evoked. What the novel fails to do, however, is to transcend the personality and situation it describes. Really good fiction can manage to give us a sense of claustrophobic, stifling environment, or a brooding narrator, without the book's becoming itself stifling and miserable. What is needed is some sort of larger air, or perspective. Brochmann might offer us a chance to see beyond the

narrator and to accept her weaknesses in some wider context, without necessarily aligning ourselves with the unsympathetic adult world. Given such a perspective, we might find it easier to like Anna. *What's the Matter, Girl?* is certainly more than just another teenage problem book, but its author has not overcome the limitations of the genre – the self-absorbed narrator, the limited and often trivializing adolescent perception, and the tendency to overindulge in the garish and morbid.

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