

## BREAKING CYCLES OF OPPRESSION

**Taking Care of Alabama.** Elizabeth Morantz. Maxwell MacMillan Canada, 1993. 144 pp., \$14.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper. ISBN 02-954182-4, 0-02-954182-4.

*Taking Care of Alabama* is thirteen-year-old Dara's survival story. In it, Elizabeth Morantz weaves a multi-generational tale of closeted wife abuse which begins in the southern states and spreads to Nova Scotia. The first of the book's four sections tells about Dara's hospitalization due to strange symptoms that emulate post-war trauma known as "shell shock." She sorts through painful images that surface in her nightmares and trigger flashback memories of her father's violence and her mother's tragic acceptance of the abuse. In an attempt to explain the present situation, Morantz then writes the story leading up to Dara's conception.

Book two describes the "anti-courtship" of Dara's parents, Thomas and Alabama, in the United States and sets up the relationship between Alabama and her sister Alice, who compete for Thomas's attention. The sisters illustrate what Luce Irigaray calls the gendered principles of "sexual commerce": the women look to a man for recognition of their own self-worth. Their inherent value comes from physical beauty, the desire they produce in male subjects, and their abilities as domestic servants. Alabama "wins" Thomas as a husband when he claims her by brute force. She cannot identify his actions as wrong because her own father's expression of sexuality is based on violence. Dara's father and grandfather negotiate a type of social contract which reinforces colonial power dynamics, rewarding themselves for violent behaviour and oppressing all others.

In the third segment of the book Morantz sketches Dara's development from a carefree five-year-old to an anxious adolescent. Much of her insecurity stems from her fear of growing up, of being subject to the physical restrictions she associates with womanhood. This fear is paramount when she begins menstruating: "Little woman, be afraid, whispered the napkins in the drawer. Be afraid, sang the tampons in the box" (103). Dara's first close friend is Marianne, an anorexic girl she meets in hospital who is equally afraid to return home. Morantz sensitively portrays their frustration and self image problems, their lack of power, without glorifying the manifestations of their anger. She horizontally links the girls' struggle with other women in the text who, like Dara's aunt Alice, are independent and supportive of them, thereby breaking the cycle of hierarchical male domination.

*Taking Care of Alabama* tackles many disturbing themes in a manner that is politically grounded and full of startling imagery that expresses a child's perceptions of a very frightening adult world. By resisting narrative closure Morantz avoids an unrealistic, surface solution for these deeply-rooted problems; however, this open-endedness may be unsettling for young survivors.

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