

“God, Hell, Sex and Tobacco” (February 1989, p. 30); review of *Collaborators* by Janet Kauffman

Janet Kauffman’s first novel is an exercise text for creative writing classes and little else. While it possesses craftsmanship it has no vitality. Its carefully wrought images litter the page, sometimes so profusely that one wonders if the writer shouldn’t abandon the novel form to concentrate on poems, songs, or greeting cards complete with requisite misty pictures of landscapes. It may seem odd to state that in so short a book she has written a novel which needs pruning, yet within *Collaborators* there is a fair but smothered short story struggling to breathe.

Smothering (and mothering) is integral to the book. The plot is simple: the daughter of a strong, domineering mother is, as she says from the first page, continually subjected to her mother’s suffocating talk about God, Hell, Sex and Tobacco. The daughter is overwhelmed by her mother, whose elemental nature embodies Earth, Air, Fire and Water, particularly the latter. As a child the narrator is frightened of water, appropriately so since she has been named after the infamous ship ‘Andrea Doria.’ Andrea grows up inundated by her mother’s words and deeds, helpless and virtually without any personality of her own, until Mom (as she has no name I propose Gaia) has a stroke and for a time at least is silent.

At this high and dry point of the book, Andrea starts to become her own person, primarily by looking after her mother. Mom improves but comes through her ordeal greatly changed – no more pleasant to live with, just different. Now obsessed by groundhogs, she buys a rifle to rid the farm of them; anticipating a swift denouement through suicide, I was disappointed as the last fifty pages dragged on through mainly inconsequential events. Although the mother makes a slight recovery, mercifully she soon falls over and dies, and the book ends rather quickly.

The symbolism of *Collaborators* provides the structure: the mother represents elemental woman, earth mother, water goddess. Andrea Doria’s struggle to stay separate from her mother’s identity – not to drown in her ocean of words – represents her need to find completion with her opposing elements, Air and Fire. This illuminates a small shift late in the novel when Andrea becomes more interested in her nameless father whose qualities are antithetical and complementary to her mother’s and her own. That Jonas (read Jonah) is the one who encourages his mother to talk more indicates how he, being a man, needs the very things from his mother that Andrea fears. Set up against a flimsy Mennonite background (one would presume from Kauffman’s handling of Mennonites that they do little else than go to Bible class and talk dress sense) the symbols form a rough triad of myth, psychological archetypes and family relationships, held in place by a Jungian view of the world. Given that, it is not surprising that dreams figure prominently, nor that segments appear disconnected from one another, as if each was a brief sleep.

Such patterning of material around obvious stereotypes does not guarantee that a book will be good. *Collaborators* fails because of the weak writing where cautious words and images are used in place of startling revelations and visions. Throughout *Collaborators* I hoped that Kauffman would become, at least once, overwrought and out of control, if only to instil vigour into her prose, but this never happens. Whether she will be forever grounded by her narrative construction, Kauffman is on the ebb of the minimalist tide which has washed more notable writers than she on to the beach. They will stay, and I think she will be swept back into the sea with the out-going flotsam, though unlike Andrea Doria, incapable of eternally sinking and rising.