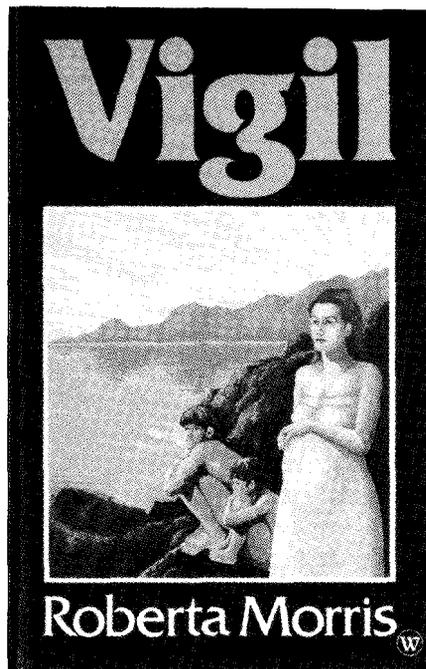


with their adopted Holstein cow; militant intellectuals holed up in a Riverdale Zoo videotape themselves and their vapid analysis of the destruction around them; an aging, bawdy street singer indulges her love of extravagant clothes and expensive liquor. As the story progresses these small worlds interact in a pageant of indifference, fear, affection and violence.

Vigil, on the other hand, is a serious, unabashedly religious allegory of spiritual survival. On a fictional Hawaiian island, a community of survivors fight to keep themselves alive in the instantly primitive conditions created by a nuclear "event." Dr. Bea Williams, a middle-aged doctor with a bent for data collection, methodically records the medical emergencies she is helpless to remedy, the efforts of a group of women to cultivate paddies of taro roots, and the growing absorption of the men in hunting and the reconstruction of machines. The story, like the community, however, ultimately revolves around the pregnancy of Jan Ito. The vigil of the book's title is the one kept through the night after Jan's two sons die from contact with contaminated muck near the taro fields and before her deformed but living child is born the next morning.

Reading these two books together, one cannot help but ask which portrayal of a post-nuclear world is the more truthful. The issue is not scientific accuracy, although in this respect Jiles gives more attention to the environmental and medical realities of a nuclear disaster, particularly the relentless stages of radiation sickness. The fundamental question raised by the juxtaposition of these two short novels is whether it is possible, or



even legitimate, to see the potential for spiritual survival, as Morris does, or whether political and moral honesty demands a chronicle of the inevitable annihilation of physical, cultural and spiritual life such as that provided with satirical humour by Jiles.

On one hand, one feels that at some fundamental level Morris simply does not accept nuclear reality. Her allegory certainly appears to deny what Jonathan Schell describes in *The Fate of the Earth* as an "absolute and eternal darkness; a darkness in which no nation, no society, no ideology, no civilization will remain; in which never again will a child be born; in which never again will human beings appear on earth, and there will be no one to remember that they ever did."

In contrast, Jiles' novel, albeit as black comedy, does capture this awful finality.

Roxana, the middle-aged street-singer, is roused from alcohol and indifference by a band of motherless children, including one with an angelic voice. But even as she and her troupe of orphans prepare to sing their way to Florida, we know just as surely as Roxana does that this late great human road show won't go on because all the performers are dying.

On the other hand, it is perhaps only the willful affirmation of life in the face of death which enables us to fight against Schell's "awful darkness," while such a fight is still possible. From this perspective, Morris' novel suggests that the denial of the finality of biological destruction is ironically the key to preserving it, and with it some hope of spiritual continuity.

Although the faith in the human spirit and its will to survive which informs *Vigil* seems resolutely pre-nuclear, the lives of her characters, like those of Jiles, are filled with the fragmented images of contemporary life. The ritualistic game in which Jan and her family and friends recite the gratifications of life before the catastrophe — "frozen pizza, creamsicles, sterile gauze" — exemplifies the absence of meaning which Robert Jay Lifton in *Indefensible Weapons* associates with "extinction by technology," as opposed to extinction by a vengeful god for a spiritual purpose.

Whatever their limitations, both of these novels are attempts to "imagine the real," to use Martin Buber's phrase, to give a time and place to the unthinkable. In that respect they both contribute to the acknowledgment of post-nuclear absurdity which is critical if we are to survive it.

GONE TO SOLDIERS

Marge Piercy. New York: Summit Books, 1987.

Christine St. Peter

The title of this epic novel conjures up the American anti-war song with its plaintive refrain: "when will they ever learn." But Marge Piercy's answer to that question is a long way from images of peace children planting flowers in soldiers' guns. As always in her work, struggle, even to the extent of armed violence,

emerges as a necessary and energizing activity in a world where the "End of One Set of Troubles Is But the Beginning of Another." With this epigram she closes her ambitious collage of World War II and anticipates, in the story of her most compelling character, a sequel about the post-war Zionist struggle in Palestine. Piercy regrets the brutalization of the capable and the destruction of the innocent but she also loves a battle. With considerable complexity she forces reconsideration of the argument that woman's nature is essentially peaceful and the business of war antithetical to our wishes.

The novel follows the tumultuous war-

time fortunes of eight Americans and two French — soldiers and civilians, women and men — during the period 1939 to 1946. The narrative focuses chapter by chapter on each in turn, with every chapter leaving the character, and the reader, in some desperate strait — facing Gestapo torture in the morning, discovering an unwanted pregnancy, crashing in a plane, landing at Guadalcanal, watching family members being marched off to concentration camp. Despite the chancy pyrotechnics of this narrative form, Piercy's consummate skill as storyteller and her scrupulous care over each of her ten focal characters kept me reading linearly until

page 592 where I could no longer resist the urge to jump ahead to track a particular character. This was an American woman flyer, a member of the WASPS, whose story is a magnificent bit of women's history I knew nothing about.

In her "After Words" Piercy describes the ten years of research that went into the book. The novel chronicles a huge array of recorded wartime activities, working these imaginatively into the lives of her characters. This allows her to claim the license of fiction in her historical reconstructions; it also permits her to create at least four characters with unrealistically comprehensive perceptions of global events and motivations — an awareness available only to the student of world history, forty years after the events. This anachronistic authority creates some odd effects as she manoeuvres her people into all the most interesting spots of the war and has localized intelligence units comprehending the shape and purpose of chaotic events a continent away. But it also has the advantage of allowing her to depict such things as the cryptanalysis of fleet movements, the creation of American public policy and war profiteering, the industry of propaganda-making, and most horribly and graphically, the systematic destruction of European Jews.

This last element is the heart of the book and the creation of Jacqueline Lévy-Monet, Sorbonne student turned Jewish freedom fighter, is the book's triumph. Jacqueline's wartime development seems intended as a parallel to, and a commentary on, the development of Jewish consciousness during the same years. The brutal treatment of French Jews, her work in the French Resistance Army, and her incarceration in both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, force her to abandon her dreams of universal humanism in favour of armed combat and Zionist ideology. My summary here suggests that Piercy's novelistic motor is fuelled by ideas and I think this is not inaccurate. But her genius lies in her ability to wrest from these programmatic ideas flesh-and-blood characters propelled by passionate energy for useful work, for intelligent discussion, for enlivening sexual relations, for positive communal living and even for (exquisitely described) food.

Whenever Piercy publishes a novel, reviewers set about belittling her accomplishment, usually on stylistic grounds. As Joanna Russ angrily noted in a recent letter in the *Women's Review of Books*, Piercy never receives unqualified praise; even the people who insist that she is one of her country's finest writers

complain that she has never produced a satisfactory work. Like Russ I am impatient of the critical condescension. *Gone to Soldiers* is a remarkable achievement both formally and thematically. As in all her novels, she is here examining the nature of community and the mechanisms by which it coheres. Her formal structure insists that we note the interconnections among widely dispersed people, even those who never meet. But in this war novel she devises a new metaphor for community that she borrows from combat practice. This is the convoy of ships passing through alien waters, subject to relentless if random violence, the destiny of the oddly assorted and unevenly equipped ships depending entirely on their ability to move together. This image she expands in a description of the characters' emotional and familial lives, particularly those of the Jewish community which is at one point described as a "convoy, a mass, a herd of relationships." As Piercy eloquently demonstrates, in moments of extreme, usually arbitrary, danger one relinquishes naive notions of individuality for the greater human good of community. In Piercy's world, one is most alive in company, finding ways together, as Jacqueline would have it, to "be of use."

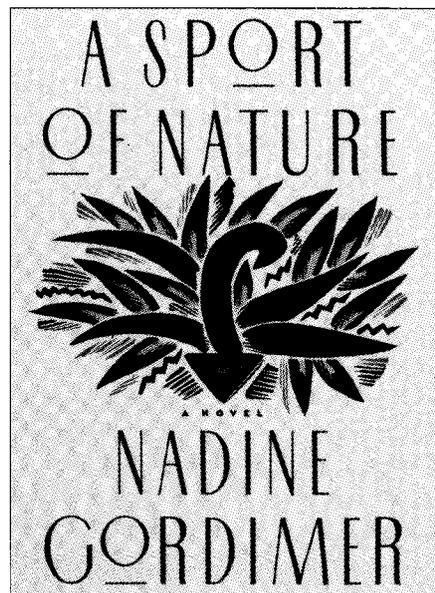
A SPORT OF NATURE

Nadine Gordimer. New York: Viking, 1987.

Elspeith Heyworth and Marjorie Moulton

A sport of nature is a plant or animal which "exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type." Hillela is the sport of nature in Gordimer's latest and longest novel, and the whole drama revolves around her. She is a beautiful girl but naively unaware of the reactions of those around her to her powerful presence: she is a Jewish White South African (with perhaps some Portuguese blood?) whose "spontaneous mutation" causes her to break the taboos of her tribe. She is expelled from her Rhodesian boarding school. She expels herself from the loving family of her aunt in Johannesburg for she cannot stay to embarrass and endanger them. After various other ex-

periments she is abandoned by the friend she trusted and she becomes a "beach girl" in Tamarisk Beach. This is where the exiles from apartheid live and build together their threadbare, caring community.



But as we are watching Hillela grow and mature, we are also seeing the many-sided life of Johannesburg: the rich who dare not know too much; those sympathetic to the black community who live in anxiety and fear; the warm family relationship of white boss and black servants; the prisons. We follow her into exile, to the countries that share South Africa's frontiers. Then to England and America, to Germany and Communist countries of Europe, and back again into Africa. As always, Gordimer brings delight into the narrative with her generous crowd of characters, interesting in themselves and vital to the development of Hillela's personality and to the history of Southern Africa being made before our very eyes.

Hillela's marriage to the black revolutionary is the centre, the pivot of her life, the cause which her fine intelligence serves, bringing her fulfillment and joy and tragedy.

The drama is over but there is still half the book to read. It is easy to think of the novel as two volumes. The second loses