MY HUSBAND'S WEDDING

Patricia Watson
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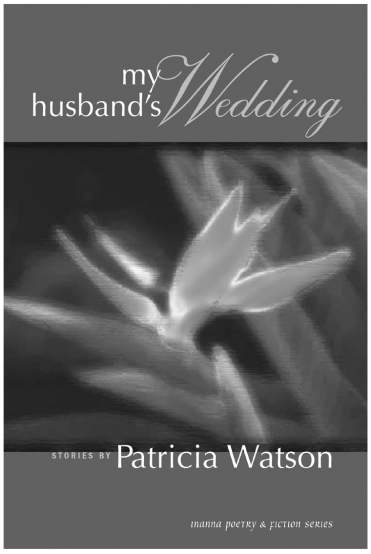
REVIEWED BY JUDY STEED



Like Alice Munro's short stories, Patricia Watson's collection of tales in *My Husband's Wedding* are linked by time, place and characters: the early 1980s in Toronto's Cabbagetown neighborhood, recently gentrified, home to three apparently happily-married couples who've raised their children and shared domestic pleasures together. Who are about to become statistics in the surging divorce rate that results from the liberalization of Canada's divorce laws in that period.

Watson's territory is the transitional time between the pre-feminist era when women's identities were securely—they thought—anchored in being wives and mothers, and the burgeoning so-called second (or is that third?) wave of feminism that brought women's aspirations to the fore.

As their children grow, Watson's main characters—Liz, Caroline and Jo-Anne—feel the creative itch. They want to get out of the house, into the broader world, do things apart from their families. Their focus shifts from their men, and their lives implode.

Watson's touch is deft, her pace unhurried, her capacity to expose pain, vulnerability and sudden bursts of joy quite breathtaking. There's a lack of apparent effort to her writing that is pleasing, yet she cracks the whip of insight sharply.

Here's Liz, having stayed at home with her children, now 14 and 12, venturing back to school, art school, discovering her creativity. Her husband Brian, an architect whose business is in a slump, pretends to be supportive while sabotaging her efforts. He calls her repeatedly at art school, interrupting her work. "My life doesn't have any meaning," he announces. The counter is stacked with dishes. The dishwasher needs emptying. "What are you going to do about this mess?" Brian says as Liz rushes off to school. His response to "the mess" is to seduce a young art student almost 30 years his junior whom Liz has befriended. Despite the betrayal, Liz wants her husband back, but is forced to move forward on her own.

Watson's women don't get stuck: Caroline escapes a childhood landscape littered by the wreckage of an alcoholic father who sank to the depths of stealing Caroline's precious $50 bursary toward university fees. Typical of children of alcoholic parents, Caroline feels more affection for her rabble-rousing father than for her long-suffering mother, who struggled to raise a brood of kids with a husband who drank his (intermittent) pay cheques, forcing the family to move constantly. Caroline can't remember a time in her childhood when she felt safe. She marries an alcoholic, eventually leaves him and realizes she "attracts the wrong kind of man."

Jo-Anne deals with the grief of an ectopic pregnancy and the realization that she will never be able to have children. With an unflinching gaze, Watson explores Jo-Anne's feelings about "the shame of infertility," about being "defective, a failed woman."

There are wonderful moments of reconciliation—between aging mother and middle-aged daughter, between parents and children—and compassion for our limitations, of ways we hurt each other without meaning to. Jo-Anne asks her pious mother, "Do you love me?" Her mother responds, "Of course I love you … I wasn't a very good mother … I didn't show affection."

This is a marvelous book, filled with miraculous moments of vulnerability, resilience and growth. As I wrote in a brief quote for the jacket copy of *My Husband's Wedding*, Watson's "great gift is that her characters breathe on the page."

After I finished the book, I kept thinking about it. Something was puzzling me. I think this is part of it (does one ever truly solve puzzlies?): Pat Watson is writing about a time that in a way feels like ancient history to me. A time when women stayed at home with their children and were not responsible for their families' economic fates. When women were incredibly vulnerable to their husbands' changing needs. I am the child of a mother who was "trapped" at home with four children, in an unhappy marriage. The (unspoken) message I got from my mother was "Don't live like me." My feminism was shaped by my mother's plight. My generation wanted independence and careers first; we wanted to tell the truth, expose the myths, the violence, the despair. We were driven by economic necessity and, certainly in my case, less interested in "family." For me and many others, "family" was not a happy concept. Now my daughter's generation seems to be finding a more comfortable balance between the desire for children and family and interesting work. Yet my daughter's friends—women in their late 30s—are as vulnerable as Watson's women to issues of fertil-

ity, the pain of not being able to conceive (often because they left it too late) and the vulnerability of depending on men, who are much more involved in family life now than they were back then. These are the kinds of things you might think about when you read this engrossing book. Things change, and some things don't.

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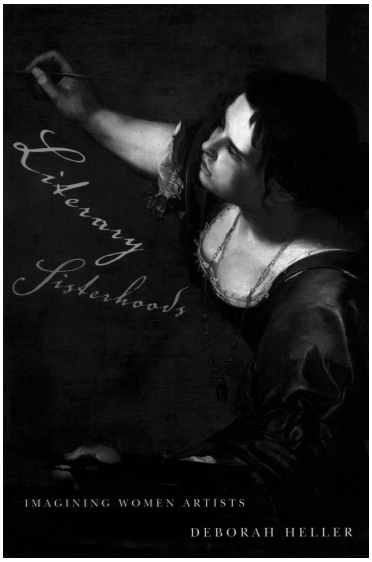
LITERARY SISTERHOODS: IMAGINING WOMEN ARTISTS

Deborah Heller
Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005

REVIEWED BY GISELA ARGYLE

"'I have often felt…that most of our lives would look much uglier and more bungling than the pictures, if they could be put on the wall.'" This insight of George Eliot's heroine Dorothea, in *Middlemarch*, is not only a step in her own *Bildung* (self-culture) but also one of many authorial pointers to Eliot's linking, among others, the genres of the *Bildungsroman*—apprenticeship novel—and the artist novel, *Künstlerrroman*. The connection between the two genres existed from their start, in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-6), and as soon as the protagonist of such a novel was imagined as a woman, as for instance in Johanna Schopen-hauer's *Gabriele* (1819), this new subgenre was classified as the novel of renunciation—*Entsagungsroman*. Deborah Heller



discusses a group of major works of fiction by women authors that portray a female protagonist's development as both a woman and an artist in her social, political, and cultural milieu: Germaine de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Anna Banti's *Artemisia* (1947), Alice Munro's short-story collection *Friend of My Youth* (1990), and Grace Paley's collections *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959) and *Enormous Changes at the Last Moment* (1974). "Sisterhood" in this study is three-fold: intertextually, the heroines form a genealogy of the fictional woman artist; intratextually, they serve in the earlier works as exemplary figures of the constraints that the ideology of separate spheres imposes on their more conventional sisters; and metatextually, their dialogic relationship with their (female) author reflects the challenge, pride, and cost of an artistic vocation.

A modern, feminist reading of *Corinne* leads Heller to disagree with both Mme de Staël's implied reader and with most critics. She sees the celebrated lyrical singer's conflict between her vocation and love not as tragic but merely pathetic, the result of her poor choice in love. More congenial to a modern sensibility is a generally neglected secondary character, Mme d'Arbigny, who appears only as mediated in the hero's narrative. She exhibits the unchaste and resilient life that her author was famous for, whereas the chaste and despairing Corinne obeys the implicit rules of the genre. Heller finds similar authorial ambivalence in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, where Eliot treats the gendered difference in the characters' "horizons" of education, vocation, and experience at most with irony when not uncritically, while voicing denunciation only through a minor character, in a short episode, further softening the impact by making the explicit target Jewish rather than English patriarchy. However, by having Deronda's mother, the Alcharisi, defend her choice of a career as an opera singer over her motherly duties, Eliot exposes the heroine Gwendolen's genteel amateurish "bungling"; and she questions the idealization of Gwendolen's foil, Mirah's modest and less public, that is, more feminine, career as a drawing-room singer. Much more thoroughly than George Eliot, Anna Banti enters into and sustains an explicit dialogue and imaginary reciprocal support with the famous seventeenth-century painter Artemisia Gentileschi—creating a post-modern hybrid that is part realistic psychological fiction, part art history, and part life-writing. Banti starts with the traumatic destruction of Florence in World War Two and the consequent destruction of her first version of a historical novel on the painter; she connects her experience of political violence with the sexual violence and professional obstacles experienced by her heroine, on occasion distorting the historical record in order to increase the shared sense of female vulnerability.

As a result of their "foremothers'" struggles, Alice Munro and Grace Paley can treat their heroines' literary vocation "with less fanfare," frequently revealing it only implicitly or late in the text. In her discussion of their collections of short stories, the main genre of both authors, Heller