

The Orchard

Drusilla Modjeska

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With the gradual and gaining clarity of Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard* comes the artfully honed definition of what a woman must risk in her pursuit of self. This restless need to grow into herself as she bears the compounding delicate demands of her environment, and of her own design, is ever present. Its realization may, however, lie dormant within... "To some it is made young, to others it comes late."

Previously published in Australia (1994) where the author resides, the novel has gleaned the accolades of critics—three literary awards to date and rightfully so. A complex tapestry of both narrative and essay, *The Orchard* is told in candid first person by a female narrator. Herein lie parallels between her own life (as well as the lives of close friends and acquaintances) and a traditional Eastern European parable. It is this, the legend of "The Handless Maiden," which provides a common thread throughout the novel. The style, warm in imagery yet retaining the coolness of an elusively private memoir, effectively leads the reader onward.

Ettie, in her eighties, recounts the tale to 26-year-old Clara after recruiting her youthful hands for orchard work one afternoon. Her aged voice rises and falls just out of our earshot, as the narrator, already knowing the tale, limits us to the shaded lounge of the farmhouse verandah. Their figures eclipse the sun while, under the guise of pruning, it is a wisdom instead that is trimmed and gathered.

The narrative is quickly launched into an unorthodox succession of three essays, which form the center of the book, rich with insight and flawlessly composed. The novel strands the present-day affairs of the characters for the amalgams of personal insight and other literary voices (footnoted). Doubts, fears, personal tragedies and compromised self-worth anchored in adultery-tainted relationships weigh upon the women whom the essays are centered. In this manner, the novel freely incorporates past and present events, fiction and non-fiction, blending seamlessly and serving to ease the reality-bound reader into the allegorical undertow.

KAREN WYCKOFF (July / August 1998)

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