



Unsafe haven in the West

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

Under Angela Carter's imaginative Scrutiny, America is well and truly elucidated. Not only does she know and note the different textures of light and sky that distinguish the Southwest from Hollywood and the smell of the soil in Boston that makes it a world apart from the feel of the vast prairies of the Midwest; but she also knows what it is, primarily, that distinguishes the New World from the Old. Her collection of short stories (her last work of fiction before her death a year ago) achieves this remarkable feat with the first five stories, which span not just the geographical "islands" within America, but the myths that segregate the Puritan settlers of the east coast from the movie worshippers of California.

Carter sees America as a hiding ground, an unsafe haven for people fleeing their past, a vast expanse of anonymity where the refugee is always destined to meet all he has fled from. In her short story, *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*, brother and sister commit incest in the illusory secrecy of the empty prairie. The landscape is the pretext; the loneliness of empty space, the excuse. "They had the silence and space and an unimaginable freedom which they dare not imagine." America is the new world, providing them with a new backdrop; but the drama is the same, the passions identical to those felt by Annabella and Giovanni in the play of the same name by the 17th-century dramatist, John Ford.

Carter disputes the notion that the New World can break free from the Old. Thus she juxtaposes quotes from the play against an imaginary movie script by the American film-maker John Ford. She tells simultaneously the stories of an identical incest; same ecstasy, same names and same tragic deaths. Annabella and Giovanni in the dramatist John Ford's play and Annie-Belle and Johnny in the American filmmaker's movie.

What distinguishes the modern incest from the old? What has changed within the human soul since John Ford wrote his play and John Ford made his movies? Has mankind changed his heart and mind, improved himself?

In each and every story, Carter ponders on the unchanging heart of mankind and the recurrent myths that seem to shape each generation's destiny. And yet, in changing narrative fashions, she sees hope. For Carter, narrative is the key: the new way we may tell the same recurrent myth can change our way of looking at the world. And in that new awareness lies the possibility of a changed heart. In the con-

cluding stories, she tries her hand at refashioning new narrative interpretations of old myths, rewriting the Asputtle fairy story with a psychoanalytical and feminist twist.

Carter knows that, whether we like it or not, Freud has insinuated himself into every modern narrative. He has become a part of the way we read. His vision defines, in part, that of the New World; his views on sexuality will always be that double-entendre within a story we can choose to hear or silence. And she shows us, too, that movies make the New World what it is and hold authorial power, changing the way we see ourselves: John Ford the film-maker tells the incest story to us now; John Ford, the dramatist defunct.

Carter is thoroughly at ease with, and adept at, the narratives of both the New and Old World. In this collection, she revels in the arts of the screenplay, alternating prose poem with movie dialogue, structural analysis with camera directions. Her imagination is cinematographic and many of the short stories are eminently translatable into film. Her intellect defies nostalgia: she does not lament the days when poetry was the first art and when those who could read books did so. Her temperament is robust, energetic and endlessly inventive, using every form of narrative for her own ends. Though Carter Sometimes turns to modernist structural and psychoanalytical theories, her intuitive, poetic powers are always her guide.

In a wonderfully funny story set in Hollywood, she describes the encounter between a geriatric star and a research student whose doctoral thesis is on the star's deceased film-maker husband. The young man finally understands that he is no match for the demonic daughter of the movie cameras.

"I was trapped helpless among these beings who could only exist in California, where the light made movies and madness. And one of them had just arbitrarily drowned the poor little tools of my parasitic trade (his tape recorder), leaving me naked and at their mercy." The terrified academic wilts in the presence of the Hollywood legend. Carter heeds the lessons of her Hollywood cautionary tale, always leaving the reins in the hands of her novelist's imagination, not her academic skills.

Though she has chosen America, in the main part, to posit her questions on the perfectibility of man, Carter teaches us that the New World can be anywhere. Those in her stories who hope to find it in America, and who flee their past, never really make it to the New World: the old tragedies follow them to a new backdrop.

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