

# BOOKS

Review:

## Big book features heroine up to life's challenges

**Maia**

By Richard Adams, published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.

British writer Richard Adams' first book *Watership Down* about a bunch of rabbits on the run made it to the top of bestsellerdom. *Maia*, his latest, reminds us of the Tolkien series and it's complete with a map of the many-hued Belkan Empire. The plot twists and turns like the many rivers that figure so importantly in it. This is time before time—there are no dates given. This is once upon a time when. The story of *Maia Serralinda* contains elements both old-fashioned and nouveau chic. If you're squeamish about explicit sex, this book isn't for you. Orgies, plainly piggish and downright dirty sex are part of the panoramic picture.

The sheer size of the book is extraordinary. Not just that it runs 891 pages but that it covers such a vast landscape and gives us such exquisitely detailed tapestries of each part of it. There is Bekla, powerful and divided—upper city and lower city with guards and walls between haves and have nots; Bekla, decadent as ancient Rome and money-minded as New York today; Bekla, social, sophisticated, luxurious, corrupt, ruled by a fearless and cruel queen with Amazonian inclinations. Bekla, where *Maia*, as a beautiful teenager from the far provinces, is sold to slavetraders, and becomes

the property of Sencho, head of the Beklan FBI and CIA. He has become so corpulent he can no longer walk. He must be carried on a litter by slaves. He is so obese he can hardly lift himself to a sitting position against the cushions on which he reclines. He eats the finest food exquisitely prepared. Food, gorging on food, is his passion. Food and sex, although his body is too big for sex in its most usual variations. He knows everything, or almost, and he knows everyone. The portrait of this immense mass of flesh of a man, half naked and bigger than Sidney Greenstreet ever was, remains in the mind.

How *Maia*, the peasant girl from Tonilda, becomes a courtesan and then heroine of the realm, how her fate moves her from simple beginnings, through wealth, to rugged adventuring keeps us fascinated through hairsbreadth escapes, through treachery, through false accusations, through love gone terribly wrong, from triumph to chasm to triumph again and then plunged again into utter danger, until she finally reaches that place where she decides to live her life. This decision baffles her best friend Occula, the lithe young black woman, *Maia*'s protector and friend.

*Maia* is one death-defying heroine. She is changed by her experience, pushed forward by it, and we see how she uses power when she gets it, how she is tested by its

loss. And yet we're never completely convinced of her reality just as we're never convinced of the everyday reality of Snow White or Cinderella. We know more about *Maia* and she is capable of so much more than either the girl who hung out with those dwarfs or that goody goody whose foot fit the shoe. *Maia* is really more of a modern girl, she's got a mind of her own as well as a beautiful body. She outgrows her smaller lesser self and learns to recognize what she herself most truly desires and then she works toward that. She's self-possessed from the start but by the end of this book she's smarter about herself; she's become a woman grown and she's to be reckoned with.

This is a fun book to immerse yourself in if you like the idea of a strong heroine equal to every challenge life gives her.

It's perfect summertime reading: *Maia* takes you to another place, shows you the sights, including the seamy undersides that ordinary tourists never get to see, introduces you to the most remarkable people, nothing like anybody in your town, takes you on a wild ride down the river to beat any roller coaster terror, points to unexplainable mysteries, and then moves on; and besides horror and terror, there's contentment too!

It's such a full, big book it reminds me of my friend's five-year-old son asking for more mashed potatoes on his plate. "But that would be too much," his mother protested. "But Mom," he insisted, "I want too much." Author Richard Adams is obviously of the same mind and shares it with us with greatest gusto. —M. Penfold

Review:

## Novel chronicles family through turmoil of 60's

**Machine Dreams**

By Jayne Anne Phillips, published by Dutton Laurence, 1984.

Jayne Anne Phillips recreates the mood and flavor of small town family life in her first novel, *Machine Dreams*. We're talking about the traditional American family of the era: Mom, Dad, Sis and brother. Jean and Mitch, the parents, evoke a much slower, less sophisticated world. For them, their youth was troubled by World War II, but life remained fundamentally stable. Not so for the kids, Danner and Billy, who were born after the war and came of age in the late sixties. Their young lives were deeply disturbed by the Vietnam War, and their world was never the same again. They lost Billy in Southeast Asia when he was just 20.

*Machine Dreams* begins slowly; it is evocative, dream-like, comprised of recollection of events long past and well digested. It's like talking with relatives at a family gathering, where the events recalled are somewhat sentimentalized and sanitized. *Machine Dreams* really has no plot, it just

intimately chronicles events and what the characters think and feel about what happens to them. When the story moves into the late 60s, that period when communication between the generations reached a new low, the reader expects some action, some tension and conflict. Here the author lets us down. Even the breakup of the parents' marriage (privately agonized over) is quietly accepted.

This tone of resignation and loss subtly textures the story, merely becoming more obvious when Billy is listed as missing in action. I feel the story contains more emotional content than many works of fiction, that perhaps the identification between the author and Danner is pretty intense. Maybe she has to tell this family story to bring her brother back. And perhaps it's not only that Danner wants Billy back, but that the author, speaking for her generation, wants all of them back. *Machine Dreams* captures the grief and frustration of a generation who sacrificed the precious and irreplaceable for nothing, not even honest answers. —Lois Wadsworth

## Summer Haiku

by Tom Lynch

After the flowers have fallen  
the rhododendron's  
beautiful leaves.

As I cut the grass  
a snake crawls away:  
the mower roars.

Thunder  
wakes the dog—  
he growls.

Under the blue street lamp  
roses  
until dawn.

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