

# Two Lesbians, a Baby, a Butter Pat & a Body

by Laura Markowitz

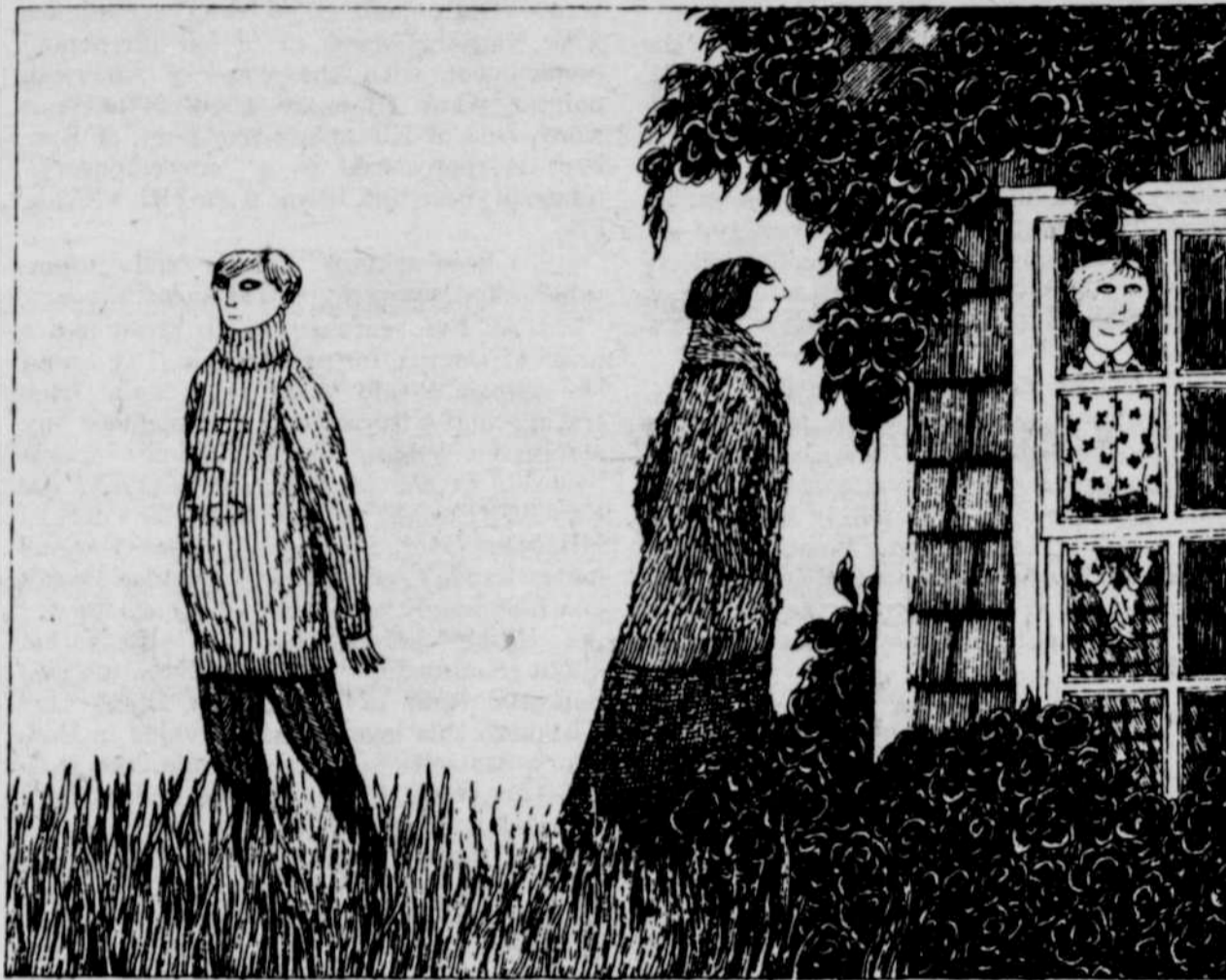
*THE GIRLS*, by John Bowen (Atlantic Monthly Press, 182 pp. \$16.95).

*THE GIRLS* is a refreshing change from lesbian Amazonian Utopia novels or depressingly realistic tales of heartache and oppression. If you like a lighthearted tone and suspenseful plot. *THE GIRLS* is a satisfying, enjoyable read.

Starting off a bit slowly, the plot comes together neatly. Susan discovers that she is bored and dissatisfied in the near-idyllic life with Janet. The two have a small farm and craft shop in a sleepy village of rural England. Susan is not actually certain of the nature of her feelings. "She was going nowhere...they were a refuge for each other, she and Janet...their whole life was not more than a retreat from life. The had made a Wendy House together, and hid in it." Bowen justifies Susan's impression with prosaic descriptions of the lovely coziness of their life. Susan feels stifled by it. She goes off to Greece for three weeks on a package tour to sort things out. Meanwhile, Janet undergoes severe bouts of jealousy and pain and winds up becoming pregnant (inadvertently, although not in any unpleasant way). Susan returns, relieved to be back to their self-created little paradise. The baby adds a new dimension of activity to their lives and things roll along smoothly.

Conflict arrives in the person of the uninformed father. The closer he comes to realizing the parentage of the child, the more nervous Susan becomes. "Susan's instinct told her that society would destroy the admirable arrangement if it could...[their family] unit survived by being private and self-contained." Susan's instincts for self-preservation take hold. She hits him over the head with a butter pat. "...She had not meant to hurt him anymore than one means to hurt a fly...One wishes only to be rid of the flies." Stated in these terms, with no hyperbole, the accidental murder makes perfect sense to the reader, is really very convenient. Now life can continue on in the same unexceptional way. But of course, there is the body to contend with.

The remainder of the novel describes the cover-up and investigation. Bowen characterizes everyone's feelings about the crime but he (via the girls) avoids overin-



(Dust jacket illustration by Edward Gorey)

dulging in emotionality. Sprinkled in alongside the question of the murder are various village personalities from the gossip to the eccentric pig farmer to the semi-corrupt constable. Bowen balances the potentially serious storyline with colorful descriptions of craft fairs, flower shows, and the village itself. He even goes so far as to tell the reader, in great detail, the process of goat cheese making, and birthing a baby.

While the success of *THE GIRLS* is in its credibility, the weakness of the novel lies in its failure to resolve most of the gay issues which it raises. Janet and her mother confront

one another in a bewilderingly hurtful way that never works out satisfactorily. Attempting to get through to her disappointed mother, Janet yells: "Sexual orientation, mother, is not whom you fuck, its whom you love" and then drives off in anger. That is the last interaction they have. Susan's initial doubts about her life are not trivial yet nothing comes of them. She has a lousy holiday, comes home, they have a baby. It's almost too neat. Of course, it isn't so neat since her total dependence on the relationship becomes evident in the necessity for murder. The issue surrounding the women's intimacy, the mean-

ing of their life together, is not addressed. It is understandable; Bowen keeps to the suspenseful theme. Everything is presented casually. The reader can think about it if so inclined. *THE GIRLS* is entertaining in some ways just because it does not engage these concerns.

As far as *THE GIRLS* is a rendering of a lesbian relationship from a male perspective, it is not offensive. Aside from the stereotype he chooses (of the wholesome, homesteading lesbians) he leaves "the girls" their private life. Happily, there is no voyeurism in these passages, although he sacrifices any descriptions of physical loving between them altogether. Bowen gets away without being disagreeable because the book is not trying to discuss lesbianism.

In fact, the women themselves don't go into much analysis about it. "The girls were an old fashioned couple as the still are. They had come together in the days when the Women's Movement was at its most militant and many wife and mother was led into lesbianism by having her consciousness raised, but Susan had never heard of the Women's Movement and Janet was not sure that she approved of what she had heard. Instead, they fell innocently in love." Bowen makes it seem as if the characters in his story just happen to be lesbians, and he is skillful in having us believe it while confidently playing on it throughout the plot. One tactic is his language. The voice is recognizable. It combines playful and distinctly British prose in the style of Sayers or Wodehouse with very untraditional subject matter. We are reassured and have confidence in it. Assuming the unconventional to be commonplace is a wonderful tactic for creating a society where gay relationships simply are accepted and take for granted.

*Laura Markowitz, young as she is, has already lived a full life. Her scholarship won her a fellowship for which she lived in various women's spiritual communities in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. She also took an aboriginal life skills course and can survive in the desert using aboriginal techniques. She speaks French, Hebrew and Sinhalese.*

## Tea, Sympathy & Coming of Age - a Reprise

by David Perry

*THE HUMAN SEASON*, by Sarah Rossiter (Little, Brown & Company, 276 pp. \$16.95).

Sarah Rossiter's first novel is highly evocative and mysterious, redolent of that highly emotional autumnal memory that seems so much a part of America's collegiate consciousness. *THE HUMAN SEASON*, is one of those cherished books to be read on a rainy afternoon, bouillon at the ready. Its strength lies in its sheer, almost poetic beauty and economy of its writing. It's weakness in the fact that we seem to have read this story before.

*CATCHER IN THE RYE* is the quintessential novel of the boarding school experience. Indeed, of adolescence itself. Like a great fulcrum, it demands balancing comparison from all that has come before and after. *CATCHER IN THE RYE* seems always to have been. Authors diving into that vast and oh so tempting pool of innocence lost, do so at risk of this most tempting of comparisons. *THE HUMAN SEASON* is no different. It is no *CATCHER IN THE RYE*, though it often rings of it, as well as of other similar treatments. Although, Rossiter's lyrical prose is more akin to the silken ease of Edmund White than that of Salinger's rough hewn reality.

Rossiter's hero, Peter Spaulding, is a Holden Caulfield for the eighties. His fears, his doubts, his sexual awakening are no different from the eons of other boys before him. They merely come in an age when it is no longer taboo to speak of them. Excepting, of course, at Dunster-as ivy covered a school as any conceived--to where Peter was shipped off four years ago by a new stepfather and care-

less mother. His father, also remarried, appears equally as uninterested. Peter's sole familial bond is in that of his new, chain-smoking stepmother, Judith.

Like Salinger's Holden Caulfield, Peter Spaulding speaks to us directly. Rossiter's first person is cleverly handled, easily slipping into reverie and flashback without noticeable distraction. The novel opens with Peter in his room, pondering where to begin his tale:

"First there was Manning. Then there was his wife. He called her Cate. I called her Mrs. Manning. Mrs. Oliver Austin Manning III. We met two years ago when she was twenty, and I was almost seventeen. Yesterday she was twenty-two."

Also yesterday, the reader soon learns through Mrs. MacQuire, a befriending

faculty wife, Cate committed suicide. No sooner has the triangle been established than it is dashed, along with Peter's illusions. The remainder of the novel will be Peter's attempt to sort out the mystery, for he is convinced that Manning actually killed his young wife.

However, this is no murder mystery. Nor is it the byzantine machinations of an overly romantic juvenile. Without destroying the story, it is safe to divulge that soon (had you not already guessed it) we learn of Peter's divided loyalties. There has been a tryst with Cate, and one assumes also a homosexual experience with Manning. Even the "regal" Mrs. MacQuire carries a secret; and a plotting school chum, Edwards, who would be in good company with Salinger's Stradlater, adds complications.

In less skillful hands, these twisted plot lines would appear lugubrious, even trite. However, Rossiter handles her subject and her prose with a steady and deft narration. "People are like onions," Judith tells her stepson Peter early on. "They've got layers. Peel one off, there's another underneath. The older you get, the more there are."

And fulfilling her own metaphor, Rossiter peels away her story like a diaphanous onion skin. Many times the flesh is sweet like a vidalia, but at others, it is pungent, making our eyes moist with the steadily increasing pile of secrets laid bare--the incessantly revealed truth at the core. And, it is this peeling away by which *THE HUMAN SEASON* gives the most pleasure--the simple elegance of Rossiter's style. The anticipated den-

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