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"Novas Cartas Portuguesas"

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Senhor Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros

Excelência:

Tenho a honra de junto enviar a V.Exa. cópia da critica publicada na revista Newsweek de 27 de Janeiro de 1975, da autoria de Peter Prescott sobre o livro "As Três Marias: Novas Cartas Portuguesas".

Como V.Exa. terá ocasião de ver a critica é extraordinariamente favorável--"It is simply the best book on the feminine condition that I have read".

O livro mencionado é publicado nos E.U. na sua tradição em Inglês, pela firma editora "Doubleday".

Com os melhores cumprimentos.

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**The Nun's Story**

**THE THREE MARIAS: NEW PORTUGUESE LETTERS.** By Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa. 432 pages. Doubleday. \$10.

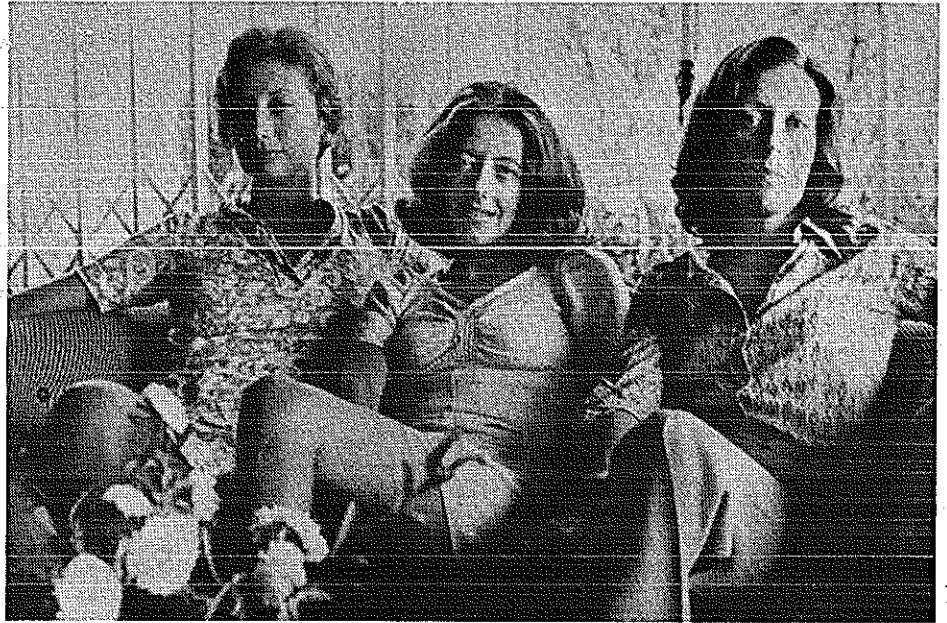
This is that rarest of events: a work of art created by a committee. Sensuous and intelligent, anguished and self-assured, it is simply the best book on the feminine condition that I have read—and now that I have finished it I realize how long we have waited for it, stumbling as we have among the vulgar novels, dogmatic tracts and strident manifestoes.

The authors—three Portuguese women, mothers and published writers in their 30s—agreed to meet twice a week for discussions and to exchange essays, poems and meditations on woman's lot. More precisely, they addressed themselves to the passions and exercises by which women may break from "custom and tradition, wild fears: habits of the uterus and the convent." These brief, unsigned pieces became a book that draws its unifying metaphor from the celebrated seventeenth-century "Portuguese Letters"—letters allegedly written from a convent near Lisbon by a nun, Mariana, to her lover, a French soldier who abandoned her.

**Passion:** Briefly stated, the book's theme is the exploration of what it means to break out of the convent. "For it is through passion that the nun escapes the cloister," writes one of this sisterhood, three women who share the same first name. The three ring changes and variations on the characters and situations established in the original letters. Mariana, one suggests, may love her letters more than the vanished chevalier. Perhaps, says another, the knight meant no more to her than "the attraction of rebellion and gay abandon."

Mariana writes more letters: to her lover, her mother, her friend; the knight writes to her; perhaps it is he who is the victim, and Mariana a devouring monster. The knight is changed into a husband, an émigré, a young soldier in Africa, a pleader (his role reversed with Mariana's), and the nun is metamorphosed: into a little schoolgirl, a radical student, a mother, a vengeful daughter; sometimes she is masterful, sometimes mocking, sometimes afraid.

Perhaps, suggests one of the authors, Mariana's passion, or its memory, or the invention or re-creation of her passion in the famous letters, made her loveless, isolated life endurable. The convent serves easily as a metaphor for all marriages, for society, for roles defined for women by men. Women's customary habits become the nun's habit; even words, writing love letters, can become a habit, a thing one does when she knows more about writing than passion. "What



Barreno, Horta and da Costa: 'What woman is not a nun?'

woman is not a nun," one of the Marias writes, "sacrificed, self-sacrificing, without a life of her own, sequestered from the world?"

In the process of rejecting woman's "habit"—"refusing to be shadows, a sedative, the warrior's repose"—these authors write explicitly about feminine conditions and responses: about menstruation, virginity, pregnancy, abortion, suicide, murder, anger, fear and despair. If they write much about a sense of loss, "a lament for the absence of something," so too do they offer repeated images of women who are somehow not at home as they lie with their men. "I endeavored to hollow out a shelter in your vitals," the chevalier writes to Mariana, "... thereby discovering within it only your absence as we took our pleasure."

There are also some elegant erotic scenes which I think quite marvelous—not only for their evident integrity but because most women write even about sex from a man's point of view. Women, when writing erotically for themselves, tend to emphasize not the act but the ambience of sex, a pleasure derived simply from the presence of the lover: nakedness, touch, the savoring of an intimate detail.

Reading this book was for me an experience akin to looking in on the Dionysiac rituals—with the maenads' consent. I mean to read it again. Helen R. Lane's translation, to one ignorant of the original, seems most distinguished.

—PETER S. PRESCOTT

**Opera Madness**

**MAWRDEW CZGOWCHWZ.** By James McCourt. 280 pages/Farrar, Straus and Giroux. \$7.95.

The tale of Mawrdew Czgowchwz, a Zuleika Dobson of the opera world, the ultimate diva with a working range of

three and a half octaves, is a work of *altissimo* camp. This could be suffocating. But James McCourt is an ecstatic fabulist, robustly funny and inventive, and touchingly in love with his subject. His work gives him pleasure, and so it's a pleasure to watch him work.

The extraordinary Czgowchwz voice is first heard in 1947 by Ralph, a fanatical Old Met regular, on a predawn FM transcription from Prague, singing Amneris's Judgment Scene from "Aida" in "perfect something—vaguely Slavic," with B's to sing the gums, and chest tone, as Ralph put it, "for days." Her advent at the Metropolitan dethrones the aging Morgana Neri, "La Serena," wire recordings of whose broadcast performances had heretofore "passed like transcripts of the Orphic mysteries from fool to fool." When the "nameless fiend" who assumes management of the Met in 1950 fires Czgowchwz by telegram, "distracted fans with shrieky tendencies" stage hunger strikes.

**Sun:** At her triumphant return as Violetta, "Margo Channing Sampson and her Bill were obvious" among the glittering audience. When Czgowchwz, at the end of Act I, hits a "fortissimo A natural above high C the color of the core of the sun ... many in the audience were removed to the sidewalks and fell about the pavements." Her Isolde is traumatic: she falls so deeply into the role as to sing the Liebestod not in Wagnerian German but in flawless Hibernian Gaelic, afterward suffering total breakdown and eventual return, greater than before.

McCourt is unfailingly exact about every detail of operaphilia and about such '40s esoterica as the murder of composer-conductor Alexander Hollenius by Christine Radcliffe. I noted only one infinitesimal misquotation of a Cole Porter song title. He writes a joyous canzona on the Old Met waiting line:

PD Dr. Teresa - An American