

Fiction

Guardian 25/11.

Non-fiction



Doña Inés Versus Oblivion,
by Ana Teresa Torres
(Phoenix, £6.99)

This prize-winning, idiosyncratic history of Venezuela is a comfort, as well as proof that magical realism has not entirely exhausted its powers. A wrangle over a cocoa plantation is carried on by a fearsome Doña Inés across 300 years: from colonial times, through Bolívar and independence, to earthquake and oil money. In life Doña Inés chastises her husband, his bastard child by a slave who runs off with her property deeds, the kings of Spain and her lawyer. From beyond the grave, she rants against descendants and governments. Torres's sustained tirade is an original, though exhausting, literary device.



Dog Days, Glenn Miller Nights,
by Laurie Graham
(Black Swan, £6.99)

Although Graham's landscape is East End tower blocks rather than northern semis, Alan Bennett is the author cited by every other reviewer when describing her kind of whimsy. Fashioned from a situation shaded towards the improbable and replete with bathetic one-liners, her fourth novel begs for Thora Hird to star in the television adaptation. Birdie Gibbs clutches her Blitz spirit in the face of old age, truanting teenagers and bingo-doped friends. Most of the jokes derive from Birdie and her friends coming to terms with new-fangled ways, like a drugs haul. The humour may be obvious, but the charm is a nice surprise.



Wanting, by Angela Huth
(Abacus, £6.99)

Blaming the heroine may not be the author's intention, but it is difficult to resist the urge to grab Viola by a handful of silvery hair or put an arm around her "Edwardian" slender waist and shake her out of a prolonged adolescence. She never wanted to become the love of Harry Antlers's life, and it's true red roses by the lorryload are more threat than promise, but Viola is just too damned passive. Stalker Harry has a point: bubble-wrapped Viola — defended by cuddly brother, unattainable neighbour, kindly retired live-in gent and rich uncle — needs puncturing. Huth, unfortunately, spoils some brilliantly imagined moments with the bland comforts of romance and toasted tea-cakes.



Diva Book Of Short Stories, ed Helen Sandler (Diva, £8.95)

Twenty-eight stories by mostly little-known writers connected only by their sexual orientation — perhaps an offputting concept for the heterosexual unafraid of a good read. When Sandler writes an introduction about reflecting "Brit Dyke" literature or "modern lesbian" style, that sense of alienation increases: these are short stories by girls who like girls about girls who like girls. But Sandler's choice includes all sorts of stories, including love stories, funny stories about mothers and daughters, and sometimes stories where sexuality is not the issue. Though several stories reek of writing workshops, many are good and some have universal appeal.

Isobel Montgomery



The Penguin Book of 20th Century Fashion Writing
(Penguin, £8.99)

We're hanging this in our closet to read while the steam iron heats up. Barbara Pym on the pipe-smoking male models of a 1958 knitting pattern book; Jeeves remarking with suave truth that "there is no time, sir, at which a tie does not matter"; Daphne du Maurier's second Mrs de Winter as a new bride in a "tan-coloured stockinette frock" — no further backstory is required; *Vogue's* Diana Vreeland beseeching a Spanish convent in London to hand-oil her hems. As Virginia Woolf asked pertinently: "Would one have liked Keats if he had worn red socks?"



Historical Fashion in Detail
(V & A Publications, £19.95)

Real garments from the 17th and 18th centuries, with the sparest of technical comment and photographed so close-up that you might be pulling them over your head in the changing room. What do we covet most: perhaps the Jacobean gloves with silver-gilt ears of wheat embroidered on the gauntlets? The Dutch petticoat with a landscape of flowers and beasts knitted in its two-ply cream wool, fine as copperplate lines (cast on 2,650 stitches)? Nothing in Harvey Nicks has the wit of that 1630 undersmock stem-stitched with snails and peapods.

Vera Rule

Montagu, 25 years too late



OFF TO JAIL:
 Lord Montagu in 1954

LORD Montagu of Beaulieu has been beaten to the draw in his bid to tell his side of a sensational story involving charges of indecency with two airmen. Montagu, 73, currently scribbling his memoirs, hoped to comment on the notorious 1954 case when, aged 27, he was found guilty of indecency and sentenced to 12 months. But now interest in the case, said to have led to a change in the law governing homosexuality, has been revived by the

republishing this week of an account of the scandal to coincide with the 50th anniversary of Lord Weidenfeld's publishing company. Against *The Law* was written by journalist Peter Wildeblood, who has just died in Vancouver. He was Montagu's co-defendant who went down for 18 months. "It was a very significant and well-reviewed book," says car enthusiast Lord Montagu whose autobiography will appear next year. "It's all fact and published over 25 years ago, so that's all I have to say."

'Doña Inez Versus Oblivion'

Ana Teresea Torres
 Weidenfeld & Nicolson £16.99

Ana Teresea Torres' novel opens early in the eighteenth century and sweeps the reader through 300 years of one Venezuelan family's history. It's a story narrated through the intense and powerful voice of their matriarch, Doña Inez, mother of 15 children, ten of whom live. Even after death, she continues a running conversation with her deceased husband Alejandro, while she mounts a perpetual watch over the fate of their family line.

Through her use of Doña Inez as this constant presence, Torres successfully inverts the normal procedure of the historical family saga, whereby each succeeding generation is given the space to be its own voice. Instead it is Doña Inez, an often unlikeable autocratic blueblood, who unflinchingly conveys the desperations and fears of her descendants, amid the confusion and corpse-stench that accompanies the change and flux of a developing country. And it is she who relates the fight for control of a plantation that her husband has left to his illegitimate son, Juan del Rosario, born of a black slave. It is in these remorseless descriptions of the class struggle between landowners and freed slaves that Torres' narrator is at her most shockingly vivid.

This novel was originally published in Venezuela in 1992, and it is only because it won the 1998 Pegasus Prize for Literature, which allows for an English translation, that it is finally available here. A worthy prize for a worthy book? Much more than that. Torres' book transcends the baroque fantasy of magical realism usually associated with Latin American writers and instead creates a world that seems pungently real.

LE Usher

Love Ow (Book Review)



Author: John Naughton
 Publisher: Weidenfeld & Nicolson
 ISBN: 0 297 64330 4

Edge

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

With the number of books discussing the place and importance of the Internet currently reaching gut-sized proportions, here at last is one that treats the phenomenon in a humane and reasonable manner. Part social history, part layman's journey of amazement, *A Brief History of the Future* particularly focuses on the role of information in the development of the Internet.

Starting with post-war mechanical filing systems and early computer networks, Observer columnist John Naughton stresses the social aspects of the evolving technology. Pioneers such as Tim Berners-Lee are well known for their contributions, whereas the likes of Douglas Engelbert and Paul Baran have fallen by the wayside. Yet, as Naughton stresses, from TCP/IP to email and HTML, it's been a combined effort.

Pennies less

AT a party to celebrate the 50 years of his publishing house, Lord Weidenfeld confessed to having turned down an author who could have made him fortunes overnight.

"It was the worst business decision I ever made," he con-

fided to Mandrake. "My friend Jonathan Aitken introduced me to Jeffery Archer, who had recently run into financial difficulties. He had this idea about writing a novel about the horrors of financial ruin and asked me to take him on and give him an advance.

"I didn't think it was a very good idea so I told him to write a factual account of his experience and sent him packing. The next thing I knew, he had a contract with Penguin for *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less*."

Despite costing him dearly, Weidenfeld clearly has no great love for the author. "I could never bring myself to regret the decision entirely," he mused last week. After yesterday's news of Archer's fall, how much more prescient was the great publisher.

Sunday Telegraph 21/11/99

Using an invented family biography to explore a country's history is a familiar device in Latin American fiction; with *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez set the standard for historical novelists, followed by Isabel Allende's dramatic Chilean story, *The House of the Spirits*. In *Eccentric Neighborhoods*, her second novel written in English, the Puerto Rican author Rosario Ferré uses a similar scope and structure to bring the island's complex past to life.

The novel begins with the narrator, Elvira Vernet, relating an episode from her childhood when her family drove to visit her grandmother. Crossing the flooded Río Loco, the Pontiac stalls, and their chauffeur is unable to move it. Only with the help of some "barefoot peasants" who tow the vehicle with their oxen does the car emerge from the muddy current; as thanks, Elvira's mother Clarissa slips the peasants a dollar through the narrowly opened window, and the car continues on its way.

It is a striking detail, and it helps establish several fundamentals of Elvira's story: that we will see things from the landowners' view, and that we may not expect any magical happenings to rescue characters from their troubles. Ferré's prosaic realism is one of her many strengths, and if there are times when it lets in a sociological tone – "modern urban life permitted a great deal of socializing between peoples of different backgrounds" – it also helps lessen the distancing effect that dreamlike details sometimes produce in Latin fictions. Puerto Rico is a specific, vivid place here, rather than a territory of the imagination, and Ferré is as comfortable explaining the mixing machinery in the Vernet family's cement plant as recounting the decline of the sugar-plantation owners' fortunes.

The novel describes the contrasting arcs of the hardworking Vernets and the upper-class Rivas de Santillanas. Ferré starts with Elvira's mother's proud and privileged family, who live on a beautiful property overlooking Guayamés Bay. Valeria and Alvaro's priorities for their five daughters – named after Valeria's favourite literary figures, including Dido, Lakhmé and Clarissa – is that the girls "marry white": a penniless Spaniard is preferred to a lower-class islander. None the less, when Clarissa is wooed by Aurelio, second son of the Cuban immigrant

ROSARIO FERRÉ

Rosario Ferré

ECCENTRIC NEIGHBORHOODS

341pp. Abacus. £10.99.

0 349 11075 1

"Saguito" Vernet, the fortune Vernet is building through his iron foundry is impressive enough to permit the courtship. As the novel travels from the century's beginning through the American acquisition of Puerto Rico and post-war debates over statehood and independence, we see that the importance of hacienda owners like the Rivas de Santillanas gradually diminishes,

In *Doña Inés Versus Oblivion*, Ana Teresa Torres weaves a complicated and fractured fiction out of the documentation of a legal wrangle over the ownership of a coastal plantation in Venezuela which began in the early years of the eighteenth century and was finally resolved in the late 1980s. Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Torres shares a translator with Gabriel García Márquez), this is a novel of epic ambitions which examines the myths that construct national identity by following the fortunes of a single family across the centuries. Venezuela's tumultuous history of colonialism, slavery, civil war, immigration and capitalism is the true subject of the novel; it does not merely serve as a lurid backdrop to family melodrama.

Doña Inés, an imperious aristocrat, is the narrator of this epic. We first meet her in the early eighteenth century, after the death of her beloved husband, Alejandro, as she searches feverishly for her father's title deeds to some disputed land in Curiepe, which Alejandro has bequeathed to Juan del Rosario Villegas, his illegitimate son, born to one of the family's black slaves. When Juan establishes a village for the slaves and freed men who work on the Villegas plantation, she uses all the power within her means to destroy the village and to regain ownership of the land. Doña Inés's

Ferré does not try to integrate the two family tales; she simply presents them in blocks. In fact, the novel is curiously plotless. Elvira spills out countless stories about her grandparents and her aunts and uncles, but not in the service of any greater personal narrative. The many diversions and subplots contain their own pockets of illumination; of the foods and textures of *hacendado* life, the ways Freemasons came up against Catholics in the town of Concordia, or the differing fates of Clarissa and her sisters. *Eccentric Neighborhoods* has many epigraphs from writers such as Naguib Mahfouz and V. S. Naipaul on the nature of memory, collective and personal, but Ferré cannot unify her ambitious narrative with such resonances.

The central problem is the lack of a compel-

l- rhythm: it comes, however, at the beginning of the thirty-ninth chapter. Elvira's birth – two thirds of the way through the novel – coincides with the rise of her father's gubernatorial ambitions. Later sections incorporate intriguing explorations of Puerto Rican politics (if often from a less familiar perspective; "Organized labor was the next blight" is not the kind of sentence one expects in such sweeping social fictions). While the reader responds to the way Elvira chafes against her traditional upbringing, and welcomes the liberalizing effects of her American education, the late-developing conflicts between Elvira and her mother do not, in the end, carry the emotional weight Ferré wants them to.

Ana Teresa Torres

DOÑA INÉS VERSUS OBLIVION

Translated by Gregory Rabassa

245pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £16.99.

0 297 64374 6

adversary is as determined as she is. Juan rebuilds the village after the army raze it to the ground, thus beginning a lengthy legal battle that outlives them both. Despite the fact that she has never left Caracas, has never even seen the plantation in question, Doña Inés's passionate battle for the land even defies death. Her ghost is a vituperative witness to the ensuing paper chase through two centuries of political upheaval and natural disaster.

Torres documents the labyrinthine court case in meticulous detail, but the narrative thread is sometimes hard to follow. Perhaps inevitably, since this is the monologue of a demented dead woman, there is a lack of emotional engagement with the large and diverse cast of characters, who are part of the intricate fabric of the story. Doña Inés is driven by a grim determinism, certain that her descendants, as well as her enemies, are racing towards death. Caracas is ruined, then built again, generations are born and die, but the wrath of Doña Inés lives beyond the grave.

The historical novelist is torn by opposing allegiances: a writer's need to embroider the truth, to fictionalize the past, and a historian's desire to establish the facts. Although she uses a ghost in a black silk nightgown as her narrator, Torres is more of a historian than a magic realist. She is driven by the desire to trace the course of the power struggles inscribed in the legal, ecclesiastical and political documents which the case leaves in its wake. As the briefs fly back and forth from the magistrate of the council, the governors, the High Courts of Sante Fé and Santo Domingo, from the viceroy of the New Kingdom of Granada and the Council of the Indies to the King of Spain, the reader must work hard to make sense of the tidal wave of fragments; these seem in turn to be the key to a fascinating perspective on the history of Venezuela and an overwhelming plenitude of facts and documentary detail.

As the novel reaches the twentieth century, Torres allow us a little more intimacy with the characters, and we witness the loveless and barren marriage of Belen, Doña Inés's great-great-granddaughter, and Domingo Sanchez, the descendant of a black overseer. Nevertheless, it is Ana Teresa Torres's talent as a researcher, rather than as a storyteller, that makes this book memorable.

ALEV ADIL

environmental destruction. In contrast, Isis of "In the Upper Reaches, Isis" floats through a flowery, futuristic otherworld dressed in bridal white, dreamily recounting her sensual encounter with the pollinator. Here, opulent language and present-tense verbs create a sense of magic, almost transcending the physical world and smoothing over the damaging presence of humans, while "Extinct Species" reminds us of the all too human mistakes we have made in this world:

Day six. Let me admit it: the children had got out of hand. They required speeded-up production of diapers and Nikes. Their popsicle sticks alone used up New Guinea's rain forest, and their Big Macs took down the one in Brazil. In spite of this, I thought of each birth as a triumph for us both, but your mouth tightened like a vice. You started staying late at the lab, inventing new uses for little known metals.

An interesting counterpart is "Glamourpuss," in which the ironic voice seems to transform itself gradually into the sensual allegorical voice of "Isis" to haunting, confrontational effect. This time, the earth goddess acts as both creator and destroyer; in the end, she finds that she, too, must die. By bringing into direct juxtaposition the tensions of life and death, Krysl shows she understands the complex nature of woman's power of creation. She does not underestimate its flip side, destruction, an awareness that runs like a thread throughout the book, weaving its diversity of styles and characters into a unified tapestry of voices.

Krysl's scope is vast, the beauty and precision of her language always working to direct and honest effect. Near the end of "The Girls of Fortress America," in which American Midwestern schoolgirls grapple with the real and imagined threat of nuclear war in the 1950s, the narrator recognizes the danger that, as an adult living in a future in which the barbarians will reign, she may be coerced

into taking part in the destruction: *I knew I had some strengths, and some brokenness.* While acknowledging that we must deal with what has been broken, Krysl holds out hope for the possibility of healing, and the necessity of calling upon our strengths to sustain us.

Marianna Wright

TEMPEST RISING. Diane McKinney-Whetstone, Quill/William Morrow & Co., 1350 Ave. of the Americas, New York, NY 10019, 1998, 300 pages, \$12 paper.

In her second novel, *Tempest Rising*, Diane McKinney-Whetstone, author of the best-selling novel *Timbling* and a regular contributor to *Philadelphia* magazine, offers a rich depiction of the experience of two black families in Philadelphia in 1965. McKinney-Whetstone, a Philadelphia native, recalls her memories of West Philly in a fictional story that hinges on the political interrelatedness of race and gender.

In a time when Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act, and the last bastions of Jim Crow had buckled everywhere, the novelist introduces themes illustrating the complexities of black experience. Racism reveals itself both externally and internally. For example, when Clarise, her husband, and three daughters move into an upper-class white neighborhood, the residents snub them because of their color. However, when their girls leave the house to attend school or church in carefully chosen fancy dresses, Clarise presses their hair until it is fully straightened by the hot comb. As a black woman, I remember enduring many hot combs and relaxers in the hopes of straightening my kinky roots.

McKinney-Whetstone moves beyond racial conflict to family disintegration by showing how Clarise's family comes apart. The author focuses on the disruption of physical and

emotional bonds between mothers and daughters. After her husband's death, Clarise attempts suicide by slashing her wrists with her knitting shears, and her girls are temporarily placed in foster care with strangers, Ramona and Mae. Emotionally battered by her separation from her girls, Clarise clings to the hope of a reunion when the mental haze of her grief lifts. The reader knows that Clarise's love is unconditional because of the attention and love she lavishes on her children. In contrast, Ramona and her mother, Mae, struggle with a relationship that leaves them at odds with each other. These central female characters, while quite distinct from each other, depict many forms of mother-daughter conflict.

In her fragile mental state, Clarise dismantles the image of the unbreakable black matriarch, while Mae is a selfish, uncaring portrayal of black motherhood. Clarise has nurtured her daughters, while Mae has shunned Ramona. We feel Ramona's pain in the following paragraph:

She wondered how it must feel to be loved. She felt a stirring in her chest, as if she had known that kind of motherly love once, a long time ago; every now and then she would get such a stirring, try to figure out what it meant, but then a block of granite would come up in her chest and make her feel like she was suffocating.

In her vivid prose, McKinney-Whetstone captures the world of her childhood with realistic portraits of women both hardened and weakened by a cycle of domesticity. Through a strong narrative voice, McKinney-Whetstone evokes a lyrical setting with fast-paced prose. The dialogue, believable in its representation of black vernacular speech, intermingles with powerful characterizations of these women. The reader is able to see multiple dimensions as the mothers weave in and out of stereotypes of older black women as overtly sexual, decorative, and/or stone-hearted housewives, and their daughters defy

the categorization of young black women as naïve, over-emotional, unintelligent.

As for her male characters, they are killed off or missing, fickle or reduced to flimsy doormats. This theme of inadequate black male figures echoes novels by other black women such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Terry Macmillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. Although McKinney-Whetstone attempts to challenge gender stereotypes of men in minor characters like Clarise's emotionally vulnerable uncles, I'm not sure she's successful.

The central characters in *Tempest Rising* are well-rounded black women doing whatever they must to survive minority status in a white male dominant world. The shackles of domesticity and racism are just as scarring as the loss of love between mothers and daughters who act as both victimizer and victimized.

McKinney-Whetstone's cultural and political lens succeeds in revealing the black woman as a multidimensional figure, with all of her strengths and weaknesses. Her focus on the love between family members illuminates the cycles of disillusionment and self-awareness, family conflict and mending that are crucial to forming an honest and mature identity.

Jo-Ann Reid

DOÑA INÉS VS. OBLIVION. Ana Teresa Torres, Louisiana State University Press, PO Box 25053, Baton Rouge, LA 70894-5053, 1999, 243 pages, \$27.50 cloth. Translated by Gregory Rabassa.

Ana Teresa Torres blends historical fiction and magical realism in a vivid account of an authentic legal battle in the history of Venezuela. Her protagonist is the once vibrant but now deceased Doña Inés Villegas y Solórzano, who speaks to the reader from

beyond the grave. History becomes personal through Doña Inés' reactions:

If it isn't one thing it's another: if on the one hand they happen to send us a decent governor, on the other they saddle us with the Guipuzcoana Company, which bleeds us dry; when there are no heavy rains to ruin the harvest, there's an earthquake, and houses come tumbling down; if the pirates stop laying waste to us, the English bombard us; the year when there's no typhoid, smallpox and yellow fever plague us; and when everything seems peaceful, some blacks revolt and burn a plantation.

Beginning in 1715, *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion* details the fight for clear title to the family's cacao plantation in a struggle that lasts for centuries. The fact that the other party to this lawsuit is Juan del Rosario Villegas, the illegitimate son of her dead husband, Don Alejandro, and a black slave, sets the stage for conflicts of race, class, and gender. Torres draws the reader into a complicated web of familial relationships that reflects the events of the day and eventually focuses on Inés' great-granddaughter Isabel who is reared in the shade of cacao, the lifeblood of the region. The courageous actions of Isabel's black nanny Daría during the bloody War of Independence shows the positive side of black/white relationships: the woman carries the child to safety as they flee the victorious Spanish troops. Before Isabel eventually claims her inheritance, she is raised by former slaves still loyal to her family.

Doña Inés' first-person narrative jumps back and forth in time from 1663 to the present as she describes her life of privilege and depicts the struggle between races, classes, and sexes, focusing on the tremendous gulf separating members of Venezuelan society. Her personal experiences uncover the quotidian rituals and routines of women's lives, the births of their numerous children, and the tragic deaths of these children from disease,

drowning, and political discord. Torres sharply criticizes social mores, especially the treatment of marginalized women and blacks, and the sexual double standard. For women of the upper class, death is the punishment for infidelity, while for men the freedom to enjoy sexual relationships with slaves or to frequent brothels is simply a fact of life. Nevertheless, Doña Inés reflects the prejudices of her background as she labels Juan an uppity little black boy and considers it a major offense for him to think you were white, revealing the pervasive racism that dominates her world.

Torres spares no one her close scrutiny, from the wealthiest nobles and aristocrats to the ordinary mulattos and mestizos who comprise most of Venezuela. In an ironic and sarcastic tone, she characterizes Joaquín Crespo, the peasant who becomes a general, as *master of the great plantation called Venezuela*. A panoply of colorful characters inhabits the novel, from Doña Inés herself, obsessed with her legal quest, and her husband whom we know only through her imagined dialogues with him, to numerous blacks, Indians, and a few Jews. Marching through the pages of the book is a seemingly endless succession of Spanish kings who rule Venezuela as well as the Great Liberator, Simón Bolívar, hero of the War of Independence, a struggle for freedom from Spain and basic human rights for blacks.

As history unfolds in the novel, we witness natural disasters and man-made calamities—earthquakes, epidemics, battles with pirates, and civil wars and revolutions. Federalists wage war against conservative oligarchs attempting to maintain their wealth and position. Vivid descriptions of local customs reveal the dichotomy between past and future, colonialism versus independence, a fading aristocracy and *people of color*. Doña Inés remembers with nostalgia *sleeping an unhurried siesta later when the heat grew stronger and preparing myself for the gracious reception*

of visitors, giving orders and overseeing the preparation of sweetmeats and teas served on the porcelain plates and gilded glasses that I had had imported from France, waiting for the ladies to arrive and then for the slave girls to take their cloaks in the entranceway, sitting in the parlor with my daughters, conversing.... At the end of the novel, Doña Inés questions her husband, *You ask who died? The world, Alejandro, the world we used to have.*

The novel is a metaphor for contemporary Venezuela. Doña Inés, in her fall from the wealthy landowning aristocracy to financial bankruptcy, represents the demise of the great world power that was Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Just as she is forced to confront the reality of freedom for slaves and the recognition of their rights as human beings, Spain too must recognize the independence of its colony Venezuela and its right to exist as an independent nation. Although the nation and its slaves have achieved freedom, the social turmoil of Venezuela's colonial period remains a reality of twentieth-century life where poverty prevails among most Venezuelans and the color of one's skin determines the life one leads. In unforgettable images of a world in chaos, *Doña Inés vs. Oblivion* reminds us that discrimination based on race and class has been an ever-present part of Venezuela's history.

Winner of the prestigious 1998 Mobil Pegasus Prize for Literature, Torres' prose flows smoothly and compellingly through the great Gregory Rabassa's seamless translation. Reckless with the sounds, sights, and smells of daily life—when Ferdinand VI becomes king, Alejandro provides *a banquet on the main square, with a rich display of hams, cheeses, and cassavas so the crowd can eat its fill....* Even *a statue that poured wine out of its breasts, to the consternation of churchmen who saw in it the work of the devil to get the people drunk*—this splendid stream-of-consciousness novel is on

a par with the best of Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende.

Roberta Gordenstein

Editors' note: Ana Teresa Torres is only the second woman to win the Mobil Pegasus Prize since its inception in 1977. Keri Hulme of New Zealand won for The Bone People in 1985.

REPRESENTING WOMEN. Linda Nochlin, Thames and Hudson, 500 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10110, 1999, 272 pages, \$24.95 paper.

Linda Nochlin puts "woman" in her place in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western painting by theorizing the impossibility of such an endeavor. The author, a leading art critic and historian, describes her approach:

Woman...cannot be seen as a fixed, pre-existing entity or frozen "image," transformed by this or that historical circumstance, but as a complex, mercurial and problematic signifier, mixed in its messages, resisting fixed interpretation or positioning despite the numerous attempts made in visual representation literally to put "woman" in her place. Like the woman warrior, the term "woman" fights back, and resists attempts to subdue its meaning or reduce it to some simple essence, universal, natural, and above all, unproblematic.

Nochlin is Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Modern Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. *Representing Women* was published in Thames and Hudson's "Interplay" series, which aims to cut across traditional disciplines. Nochlin successfully integrates art, history, and theory in this elegant and thought-provoking book. The book is essentially a collection of groundbreaking essays on the representation of women as warriors, workers, mothers, sensual beings, or absent beings in the works of

BOOKS

RICHMOND TIMES-DISPATCH

LATIN-AMERICAN FICTION

Novelists Bring Energy to Explorations of Cultures

DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE, a novel by Isabel Allende; HarperCollins, \$26.

DONA INES VS. OBLIVION, a novel by Ana Teresa Torres, translated by Gregory Rabassa; Louisiana State University, \$27.50.

I GAVE YOU ALL I HAD, a novel by Zoe Valdes; Arcade Publishing, \$24.95.

Reviewed by
JUDI GOLDENBERG

Latin American women writers are flourishing as the current literary search for fresh post-feminist voices continues. Their magic realism collides with their confessional zeal, producing imaginative works laced with personal desire and a strong sense of cultural history.

Take new works published this fall by Isabel Allende, Zoe Valdes, and newcomer (to English language audiences) Ana Teresa Torres. Each represents a different country and a different narrative style, but all three join together in bringing new energy and feminine perspective to accounts of stormy individual passion set against an even stormier national heritage.

ISABEL Allende is the most famous of the three authors. In her latest novel, *Daughter of Fortune*, the author of *House of Spirits* expands both her geographic and her emotional range tracking her heroine, Eliza, an orphaned girl of mixed origin, from her native Chile to the California Gold Rush. Eliza runs away from the aristocratic English family who raised her in order to follow her revolutionary Chilean lover seeking his fortune in the United States.

Ms. Allende presents her favorite themes, including the sensuality of both food and love, youthful passion that drives people to pioneer new areas and break hearts, families that intermingle more than they care to admit. But she also pioneers new literary territory, in the character of the Chinese doctor and the descriptions of 19th Century California. Allende fans will easily forgive her unrestrained storytelling, weaving in barely relevant myths and side plots, as she once again evokes

the Americas of the past with vivid imagery that stimulates all senses. *Harpers* publishes the novel in Spanish as well as this translation, translucent at least in part because of Ms. Allende's universal style.

CUBAN-BORN Zoe Valdes, author of *Yocandra in the Paradise of Nada*, follows up her successful debut with a novel even more impudent than the first. Originally published in Spanish (*Te di la vida entera*), her new novel is the story of Cuca Martinez, an orphan on her own at an early age. A budding beauty making her way in pre-revolutionary Havana, she meets Juan, the love of her life, at a nightclub. Juan eventually goes off to Miami, leaving her to wait for his return. With Cuca, we observe the progress of the revolution from tool of change to tool of an economic repression.

Mercilessly, Ms. Valdes dissects the pretense of pre-revolutionary Cuba, the hypocrisy of revolutionary Cuba, and the frustration of the current state of decay. The book's exuberant raunchy language does not always translate easily, but its frustrated desire for freedom and individual expression comes through loud and clear.

WINNER OF THE Pegasus Prize, *Dona Ines vs. Oblivion* introduces a new voice, Venezuelan Ana Teresa Torres. A former clinical psychologist, Ms. Torres selects for her narrator an aristocratic landowner who suffers from an obsession so strong it lives on long after she dies. Her obsession is a piece of land, awarded in colonial times, disputed over centuries between her family and the descendants of her husband's illicit affair with a slave.

Based on an actual case that was not resolved until the late 1980s, the tale of the land that evokes so much conflict reflects Venezuela's history from jungle colony to oil-rich nation. Ms. Torres' first novel to be published in English has been translated by the remarkable Gregory Rabassa, who has done more to bring Spanish American literature to English-reading authors than any other single figure.

■ Judi Goldenberg is a local free-lance writer.



Isabel Allende