**Dona 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 Dona Inés across 300 years: from colonial times, through Bolivar and independence, to earthquake and oil money. In life Dona 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 trade is an original, though exhausting, literary device.

**Wanting**

by Angela Huth

*(Abacus, £6.99)*

Banning 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 Aitken's life, and it's true red noses 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.

**Dog Days, Glenn Miller Nights**

by Laurie Graham

*(Black Swan, £6.99)*

Although Graham's landscape is East End tower blocks rather than northern semia, Alan Bennett is the author cited by every reviewer when describing what her kind of whimsy. Fashioned from a situation skewed towards the improbable and repulsed with pathetic one-liners, her fourth novel begs for Thora Hird to star in the television adaptation. Birdie Gibbs duplicates 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.

**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.

**Historical Fashion in Detail**

*(V & A Publications, £19.95)*

Real garments from the 17th and 18th centuries, with the sparsest 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 breasts knitted in its two-ply cream wool, fine as copperplate line (cast on 2,650 stitches)? Nothing in Harvey Nichols has the wit of that 1620 undersock stem-stitched with snails and peacocks. **Vera Rule**
Montagu, 25 years too late

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 1854 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 republication 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."

A Brief History of the Future

With the number of books discussing the place and importance of the internet currently reaching Glut-sized proportions, here is a list of one that reads 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 traces the social aspects of the evolving technology. Pioneers such as Tim Berners-Lee are well known for their contributions, whereas the likes of Douglas Engelbart and Paul Baran have been relegated to the sidelines. 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 fortune overnight.

"It was the worst business decision I ever made," he confided to Mandrake. "My friend Jonathan Aitken introduced me to Jeffrey 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 had 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.
Ferré does not try to integrate the two narrative threads; 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 Neighbors 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 compelling 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 fiction). 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.

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 Elners fly back and forth from the magistrate of the council, the governors, the High Courts of Santa 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 allows 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 Sánchez, 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
A Journal of Art & Lit. by Women


In a time when Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act, and the last bastions of Jim Crow had crumbled everywhere, the novel introduces themes and issues that are both externally and internally. For example, when Clarise, her husband, and three daughters move into an upper-class white neighborhood, the residents suspect 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 matrilineal, while Mae is a selfless, 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 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 hard- and weak-willed 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 characters 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 passive, over-emotional, unintelligent.

As for her male characters, they are killed off or missing, fickle or reduced to flimsy occupants. 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 in men in minor characters like Clarise's emotionally vulnerable uncle, I'm not sure she's successful.

The central characters in Tempered Risings are well-rounded black women doing whatever they must to survive minority status in a white male-dominated world. The shackles of domesticity and racism are as smothering 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 multivalent 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

DONA INES VS. OBILIVION, 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: on the one hand they happen to send us a decent govern- nor, on the other they saddle us with the Guipuzcoano Company, which bleeds us dry, when there are no heavy rains to ruin the harvest, there's an earthquake, and hones 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 Doña Inés 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 quotidians, 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 unhappy 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 panorama 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 Liner, 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 inspired from France, waiting for the ladies to arrive and then for the slave girls to take their clothes in the encampment, 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 know.

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. Redolent 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 chuecos 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.

Robert 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.


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 figure 'image,' transformed by this or that historical circumstance, but as a complex, mercurial, and problematic signifier, mixed in its message, resisting fixed interpretations 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
Novelists Bring Energy to Explorations of Cultures

LATIN-AMERICAN FICTION

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 magico-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 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 unstrained 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. Harper's 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 enterla), 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 brutal 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