

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

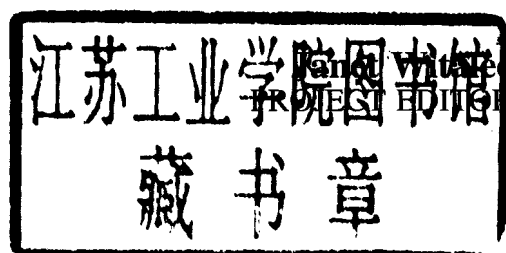
CLC

179

Volume 179

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by the Gale Group, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Jane Hamilton

1957-

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Hamilton's career through 2001.

INTRODUCTION

After winning the PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award for best first novel with *The Book of Ruth* (1988), Hamilton continued to attract both critical and popular attention for her series of novels, including *A Map of the World* (1994), *The Short History of a Prince* (1998), and *Disobedience* (2000). With astute psychological insight, Hamilton examines the subtle nuances of family dynamics in the face of tragedy, misfortune, and dysfunction, as her characters are thrust into nightmarish circumstances beyond their control. Her novels are typically set in rural or suburban areas of the American Midwest, where the claustrophobic atmosphere of family and community life often threatens to crush the spirit of the individual. In addition, much of Hamilton's fiction explores the internal lives of her characters, usually voicing their unique perspectives and personal insights through a first-person point of view. Critically acclaimed for her well-drawn characterization and evocative settings, Hamilton was widely recognized by mainstream audiences after *The Book of Ruth* and *A Map of the World* were chosen as selections for the Oprah Book Club.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The youngest of five children, Hamilton was born in 1957 in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Her father was an engineer for General Motors, and her mother was a theatre critic for the *Chicago Daily News*. From an early age, Hamilton's passion for reading and writing were encouraged by her grandmother—a former journalist—and her mother, whose notable poem “A Song for a Fifth Child” appeared in *Ladies Home Journal*. In 1979 Hamilton graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, with a B.A. in English. While at Carleton, she won the Class of 1885 Prose Award in 1977 and 1979. After graduation, Hamilton accepted an entry-level editorial job at a New York publishing company. Before she moved to New York, however, she stopped to visit a friend who was working

at an apple orchard in Rochester, Wisconsin, and eventually decided to stay at the orchard rather than travel to New York. Hamilton later married Robert Willard, one of the orchards' owners, in 1982. In 1983 her first short story, “My Own Earth,” was published in *Harper's* magazine. The December 1983 issue of *Harper's* published her story “Aunt Marji's Happy Ending,” which was later cited as a Distinguished Short Story of 1984 and recognized in *The Best American Short Stories, 1984*. Hamilton's first novel, *The Book of Ruth*, has been awarded the PEN/Hemingway Award, the 1989 Banta Award, and the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award. When Oprah Winfrey, the popular American television talk-show host, launched her book club in 1997, she chose *The Book of Ruth* and *A Map of the World* as early selections. Subsequently, both novels became international best-sellers. A film adaptation of *A Map of the World* was released in 1999.

MAJOR WORKS

Typically set in the Midwest, Hamilton's novels address the suffering, redemption, and resilience of the human spirit often found in contemporary American families. Inspired by a series of homicides in rural Wisconsin in 1983 when several men killed their mothers-in-law, *The Book of Ruth* is set in the fictional town of Honey Creek, Illinois. Ruth, the protagonist, is a sensitive and creative young woman who struggles to survive in her emotionally isolated and poverty-stricken community. While recounting her childhood experiences—marred by an emotionally abusive mother and a largely absent father—Ruth falls in love with and marries Ruby, an emotionally unstable man. The couple moves into Ruth's mother's small house, where the ensuing conflict between son-in-law and mother-in-law violently escalates to an inevitable conclusion. Set in the fictional town of Prairie Center, Wisconsin, which is slowly changing from a rural to a suburban area, *A Map of the World* tells the stories of Alice and Howard Goodwin and their young daughters. The local community has continued to treat the family as outsiders despite their six years of residency in Prairie Center running a dairy farm. Divided into three parts alternately narrated by Alice and Howard, the novel opens with the accidental drowning death of a neighbor's two-year-old daughter whom Alice agreed to baby-sit. Underscoring the town's suspicions of Alice's character, the tragedy snowballs into a series of false accusations that Alice has also

molested local schoolchildren. Alice is subsequently arrested and sent to jail to await trial. At this point, Howard's narration begins, recounting his struggles to keep his family intact and the events of his wife's trial. Exonerated after the trial, Alice resumes her story, which includes her reconciliation with the dead two-year-old's mother and the family's eventual decision to leave the farm. In a marked departure from Hamilton's usual protagonists and themes, *The Short History of a Prince* is a coming-of-age story about a gay man who struggles to reconcile his high school fantasies with the realities of his adult life. A third-person narrative, the novel concerns Walter McCloud, whose story alternates between events during the 1970s and 1990s. The first section features fifteen-year-old Walter studying ballet—and dreaming of performing the role of Prince Siegfried in the *Nutcracker*—at the same time that his older brother is dying of Hodgkin's disease. The second section follows thirty-eight-year-old Walter as he returns to the Midwest to teach high school English and attempts to come to terms with his homosexuality after spending the intervening years working at a Manhattan dollhouse factory. Narrated in the first person, *Disobedience* centers around Henry Shaw as he remembers his coming-of-age at the age of seventeen. After prying into his mother's e-mail account, Henry discovers that she is having an extramarital affair. The rest of the narrative focuses on the effects and implications that this discovery brings to bear on Henry's relationships, particularly with his mother.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have widely praised Hamilton for her insight into the human psyche and her effective treatment of such themes as forgiveness and suffering, often favorably comparing her novels to the works of Jane Smiley and Sue Miller. Reviewers have also lauded her efforts to create characters endowed with sensitivity and endurance, particularly the protagonists of *The Book of Ruth* and *A Map of the World*. Although commentators have frequently noted the realistic portraits and evocative atmospheres of everyday Midwestern life in her novels, especially as experienced by women, some have argued that the plotting of *A Map of the World* is both predictable and mechanical. Some critics have also complained that Hamilton's novels tend to be overly sentimental and melodramatic, sometimes comparing her plots to those of television soap operas. However, Hamilton's supporters have asserted that her distinctive authorial voice, precise language, and subtly nuanced characterizations greatly outweigh any perceptions of formulaic plotting. Reviewers have also remarked that, despite the dominantly feminine perspectives of her early novels, Hamilton constructed a striking and believable male point of view in *The Short History of a Prince*. Commentators have additionally compared the stream of

consciousness narration of the male protagonist in *Disobedience* to that of Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Book of Ruth (novel) 1988; published in Great Britain as *The Frogs are Still Singing*, 1989
A Map of the World (novel) 1994
The Short History of a Prince: A Novel (novel) 1998
Disobedience (novel) 2000

CRITICISM

Suzanne Berne (review date fall 1988)

SOURCE: Berne, Suzanne. "Dreams of Love." *Belles Lettres* 4, no. 1 (fall 1988): 13.

[In the following review, Berne outlines the plot of *The Book of Ruth*, highlighting its central themes in contrast with those of Elizabeth Benedict's *The Beginner's Book of Dreams*.]

You would miss Honey Creek, Illinois, if you were driving through "listening to your favorite song on the radio or telling a story about your neighbor." It is one of those small, depressed towns that flick by your car window, just another collection of houses needing paint and a cow pasture. But in this town lives Ruth, a luminous spirit encased in a homely child, waiting for someone to stop and discover her.

Jane Hamilton's first novel, *The Book of Ruth*, is about the dream of happiness. It is also about the nightmare of deprivation. Ruth's favorite recollection is of the time her father, scooping ice cream at the dinner table, missed her dish and the ice cream landed on Ruth's head instead. Everyone became hilarious. "I wanted to preserve the scene," she tells us, "just as fossils do, keeping rare animals so still in stone . . .; on that July night we were actually experiencing the gladness some people feel every day, not just once in a summer." That "gladness," which many of us take for granted, is like a starving child's vivid memory of a lollipop: Insubstantial but intoxicating, the memory itself measures the depth of the craving.

Ruth was ten when her father ran away to Texas to escape the frustration and rage of her mother, May (who looks "like she went and slept face down on an oven

rack”), and the drabness of Honey Creek in general. “I couldn’t stand the thought of him being happier there,” says Ruth of her father in Texas, “but I had sense enough to know it was true.” Ruth’s brother, Matt, also leaves the first chance he gets. A math whiz, as adored as Ruth is ignored, Matt goes off to MIT, becomes a scientist, gets written up in *Time*, and abandons Ruth and May to each other.

They are not a well-matched pair. Embittered by an early disappointment, May is addicted to suffering. She devotes herself to making life harsher than it already is for a family trying to get through Midwestern winters selling eggs. The only person who ever makes Ruth feel special is her Aunt Sid; they correspond throughout her childhood, allowing Ruth the tenuous pleasure of writing made-up stories about her happy family. Aunt Sid tells her she’s resilient—“I liked being resilient,” says Ruth, “because it sounded like a jewel glittering in the light.” As life gets grimmer, she clings to the notion that “the meek are going to inherit the earth,” convinced her time is coming.

It is not surprising that Ruth falls in love with someone even more deprived and dismissed than herself. It is also not surprising that the marriage is a disaster. Two famished people cannot feed each other. For a while they subsist on fantasies about independence from baleful May—with whom they live—and the perfect lives they will have someday. Ruth is waiting for her inheritance, and all the while her jewel-like resilience is ground down.

Finally, after a devastating tragedy, she realizes how she has wasted her time. “No one inherits one single thing,” she says. “We’re only passers-by, and all you can do is love what you have in your life. A person has to fight the meanness that sometimes comes with you when you’re born.” Dreams, she decides, are only useful if they foment change; and “meanness” does not have to be a birth-right.

Hamilton has written a breathtaking book, precise and beautiful in its language, full of sharp wisdom, and permeated by an appreciation of the world’s ironies even in the midst of great pain. Hamilton handles incongruities like a snake charmer, coaxing all kinds of shimmies out of a sentence. May, for instance, wears an “extra-large fuzzy green sweater that looked like a bloated zucchini consuming her.” A neighbor has the “shortest fattest legs in the state of Illinois. If she wasn’t a person you’d laugh at the shape you saw out there in nature.” And describing her cruel father-in-law, Ruth says: “He’s the kind of person you could imagine biting the heads off of game birds.”

The Book of Ruth is the story of poetry trapped inside ugliness, and of the spirit’s revenge when love is denied. It began with a girl who was waiting to be discovered;

it ends with a young woman beginning to discover herself. Along the way, the splendor of the telling illuminates the desperate story being told.

Love is not denied in *The Beginner’s Book of Dreams* but it comes hobbling along, moaning and asking for handouts. Elizabeth Benedict’s second novel opens with eight-year-old Esme Singer lighting candles in St. Patrick’s Cathedral with her beautiful mother, Georgia. Esme is trying to decide what to pray for. Her father? “That when he comes to New York he will take her skating?” Or something with long-term benefits: “That she will not be fat?” Or with immediate benefits: “That her mother will not get drunk again the way she did last week?” By the time Esme finishes her wish list, the sad infirmities of her life have been revealed.

Georgia Singer is a woman who runs through husbands like panty-hose. “You pulled too hard, put them on in a hurry, sat too far back on a bench . . . you didn’t even have to move and they ran.” A tall Lauren Bacall look-alike from Redondo Beach, Georgia is also a hopeless, helpless lush who waits for a “knight in shining armor” to wake her out of sodden bad dreams. She is looking for the Holy Grail but keeps settling for glasses of Scotch and for men she does not love. “The worst thing,” she tells herself, “is not having anyone to kiss on New Year’s Eve.”

Her ballast in life is Esme. Prematurely old, Esme is there through all the husbands, boyfriends, apartments, fights—nothing everything. Georgia is forever falling on Esme, telling her how much she loves her as she tries to walk up the stairs. Esme is determined not to be like her mother. Instead she comforts herself by imagining the time when her father, Meyer, will send her an airplane ticket to California, where he is always about to become rich. The book’s title is derived from one of Meyer’s schemes, a manual on how to prepare to be a winner: “A Quitter Never Wins And A Winner Never Quits,” he proclaims. “Dreams are not born of indifference, laziness, or lack of ambition.” Alas, dreams are not realized by schlemiels and alcoholics either.

Although Meyer sends Esme letters special delivery, the promised visits never materialize. Eventually Esme realizes her father is as much of a sham as her mother, who could have been a Hollywood starlet but is now a cosmetics saleswoman at Bonwit Teller. With energetic disgust, Esme sets about making a different life for herself.

Benedict has written a book full of the dreads and passions of childhood. We follow Esme into adulthood, watch her grow up from a dumpy, self-conscious child into a stunning, self-conscious young woman. Along the way, Benedict provides a sassy commentary on the world of New York intellectual “wannabes” of the 1960s

and early 1970s. Esme's dream is to be one of them, someone who has read all the "right" books, knows the names of the right artists and photographers, has the right blend of shabby, erudite elegance in her apartment. Her dream is a world where she will never have to feel embarrassed, where her parents' irresponsibility and abandonment will never be obvious. In the attempt to keep life's humiliations at bay, Esme falls in love with her fantasy of love, rejecting the love that is actually offered to her, flawed and human though it may be. Gradually she realizes that love is what she was wishing for in St. Patrick's Cathedral so many years before, and that accepting crippled love does not have to make her a cripple.

Love and dreams are intertwined, both of these novels seem to be saying. All of us have our "book of dreams." To dream, one has to have ambition, faith, a personal definition of perfection. The belief in life's possibilities, in life's beauty, is finally the dream of love.

Judith Paterson (review date 5 February 1989)

SOURCE: Paterson, Judith. "Labors of Love and Loss." *Washington Post Book World*, 19, no. 6 (5 February 1989): 6.

[In the following review, Paterson examines the elements of classical tragedy in *The Book of Ruth*.]

In a return to be welcomed, love and God seem to be making their way back into fiction. Jane Hamilton's passionate and adroit first novel, *The Book of Ruth*, seldom shows the hand of the beginner as she unravels the tragedy of a young woman's inability to reconcile her love for her sweet, slightly deranged husband, Ruby, and her loyalty to her mother, May, a mean-spirited woman driven half-mad by a lifetime of emotional deprivation.

Ruth Dahl's troubles begin long before she is born. May's first husband dies in World War II, leaving his bride without hope of happiness. Fifteen years later she marries Ruth's father, Elmer, in as joyless a coupling as you are likely to find in fiction. Elmer stays until Ruth is 10 years old and her science-wizard brother is 12. As the dumb kid sister of the brother May worships in a kind of parody of her feelings for her lost love, the girl becomes little more than a servant and emotional punching bag in her mother's house.

Ruth is saved from the semi-literate banality of her peers by a librarian aunt and a blind woman who teaches her the classics of literature on tape, and by her own sacramental view of nature and human existence. Thus she gropes toward adulthood, a passive and incho-

ate young woman torn between her mother's warped views and a growing sense of herself as someone who deserves better. The internal conflict finally erupts in violence between May and Ruby—each spellbound by the evil in the other.

Tragic in the classical sense, the book leaves the heroine standing upright in a fallen world. She has lost the two people she thought she couldn't live without and gained the right to her own life and the love of her infant son.

Jane Hamilton's ambitious and satisfying first novel asks one of literature's biggest questions: what is the meaning of human suffering? In the end, she gives the old answer—to expose the truth and teach forgiveness.

Jay Parini (review date 24 November 1989)

SOURCE: Parini, Jay. "Into the Nether Regions." *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4521 (24 November 1989): 1313.

[In the following review, Parini focuses on Hamilton's characterization in *The Frogs are Still Singing*, the title under which *The Book of Ruth* was published in Great Britain. He compares the novel's preoccupation with poverty and isolation to Carolyn Chute's Letourneau's *Used Auto Parts* and Susan Richards Shreve's *A Country of Strangers*.]

Perhaps because of the obvious and painful contrast between the rich and poor of their country, American writers from Steinbeck and James T. Farrell to Raymond Carver and Bobbie Ann Mason have been drawn to the nether regions of poverty and isolation. This vein—which contrasts with the flashier school of Yuppy fiction that has had more attention recently—continues to draw younger writers, with varying results. Carolyn Chute arrived on the scene with a bestselling first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, casting the coldest possible eye on a small New England town where incest and other kinds of family violence occurred with chilling matter-of-factness. The veracity of her portrait was reinforced by an astonishing grasp of the local dialect. She returns to rural Maine with her second novel, *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*. It is as depressing as one might expect, though a streak of optimism tints her portrait of Big Lucien Letourneau, himself the "miracle" of Miracle City. He is one of those men who "always lets his heart of gold get the better of him"; girlfriends, runaways, wives and ex-wives, hippies and ex-hippies, dogs, small children and miscellaneous hangers-on cling to Big Lucien, who has mastered Freud's art of "polymorphous perversity". He runs the Used Auto Parts Business of the title, and it is about the only successful operation in town; indeed, everything and everyone else is a failure.

Chute is an acute sociologist, supplying an up-to-date anthology of slang words, brand names and lower class-specific habits:

Lillian and Junie both fix their hair the modern way . . . root and perms, they are called, the shaggy raggedy look . . . and both use gold clips or old bandannas to tie up their shaggy raggedy hair into frenzied ponytails. The bandannas are often red to match their lookalike red sweaters with white lambs across the chest.

She writes with off-hand poetic grace ("It is a warm mint-color evening which smells of wet streets and wet brakes"), though she occasionally strains for effect ("The moon rises before dark, a moon you can see through, like Kleenex"). For the most part, *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts* confirms the high promise of *The Beans*.

"What it begins with, I know finally, is the kernel of meanness in people's hearts", says Ruth Dahl, the perceptive and subtle narrator of Jane Hamilton's first novel, *The Frogs are Still Singing*, in which Ruth explores the full-blown "meanness" lurking in the soul of Honey Creek, a town that straddles the lonely border region of northern Illinois and Wisconsin. "I want to be like Charles Dickens and write about all the good and strange people", Ruth says at one point. She also wants to write a "fiction book" in which the characters and events in her life meet with better ends than reality is willing to provide. Life, so far, has gone rather badly for Ruth.

Deeply tangled in a family web only partially self-spun, she is seen by everyone around her as a failure, especially compared to her brilliant older brother, Matt, who is able to use his intelligence to contrive a way out of the circle of poverty. Ruth cannot separate from Honey Creek; she clings pathetically to her unstable, bitter, and often cruel mother, May (a Dickensian figure, to be sure); later, she cannot separate from Ruby, her idle and abusive husband.

We follow Ruth's own story in clear, almost heart-breaking hopefulness as she marries Ruby (whose main interest is smoking marijuana while he watches the re-runs of old television comedies) and occupies her days at the Trim 'N Tidy Dry Cleaners. Much of the plot turns on Ruth's role as ineffectual mediator between May and Ruby, who seem to have been predestined to hate each other. *The Frogs are Still Singing* is a well drawn, often tender portrait of a young woman caught in a situation of bleak cultural and material deprivation.

Susan Richards Shreve's sixth novel, *A Country of Strangers*, follows quickly on *Queen of Hearts*, which was widely admired for its lyrical style and copiously peopled story: qualities apparent here as well. Set in desolate farm country on the swamplands outside Washington DC, the novel recreates the dismal aura of hatred and anger that marked post-slavery southern life

in the not-so-deep south just after the Depression. The story centres on Charley Fletcher, a young journalist who takes a job in the Office of Censorship established in the wake of Pearl Harbor. A determined liberal, he finds himself in a situation that tests his loudly professed idealism when he buys a small farm with an imposing Palladian manor house called Elm Grove, unwittingly dispossessing a powerful and extremely bitter black man called Moses Bellows, who may (we soon learn) have killed the previous owner before simply moving into Elm Grove himself—a bold move for a black man in the days when Klan violence was often unchecked.

The novel moves through the spring of 1942 into the winter of 1943, the plot turning through cycles of violence towards a sensitively and imaginatively conceived climax. A key figure in the plot is Bellows's niece, who bears the unlikely name of Prudential Dargon (she was named after the insurance company); she "was thirteen, high-tempered and bone-thin with a gentle round belly that was a baby growing into its sixth month of incubation". Her mother has sent her to be "tamed" by her strong uncle and affectionate aunt; as it happens, it is Prudential who tames everyone else. By the end of the novel, she has taught everyone under the aegis of Elm Grove a lesson in humanity.

Suzanne L. MacLachlan (review date 3 June 1994)

SOURCE: MacLachlan, Suzanne L. "One Woman's Map of a Troubled World." *Christian Science Monitor* 86, no. 133 (3 June 1994): 13.

[In the following review, MacLachlan assesses the themes and plot of *A Map of the World*.]

Jane Hamilton, author of *The Book of Ruth*, for which she received the PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award for best first novel, has written another engrossing, powerful book that should attract some much-deserved attention.

A Map of the World is not an easy or light read; indeed, it takes on some of the toughest issues of modern life. But the writer's skill in describing a community and a way of life, as well as her insight into the hearts of her characters, render this story difficult to forget.

The title refers to a map of the world that the main character labored over after the death of her mother. As a girl, she would sit before the map, imagining herself "in an ideal country, alone and at peace."

By tackling such major themes as motherhood, death, love, and child abuse, Hamilton draws us her own map of the world, one devoid of safe havens. What we are left with, however, is a better understanding of the strength of the human heart and the power to rise above calamity.

Alice and Howard Goodwin live and work with their two young daughters. Emma and Claire, on the last dairy farm in Prairie Center, Wis., on the outskirts of Racine. Most of the tightknit community keeps its distance from the family, regarding them as displaced urban hippies.

Although he suspects that the family farm will soon be obsolete, Howard is unable to imagine any other way of life. "I had wanted to spend my life caring for land, being a steward, and raising food. . . . Alice once said that most men must secretly want a barn, even city-dwelling men."

Alice, who strives to be a proper farm wife and live up to Howard's expectations, constantly fears that she doesn't have the right instincts to be a good mother. Sometimes, when she leaves the girls with her best friend, Theresa, she runs home, ignores the ruin of her housekeeping and Howard's calls for assistance, and dances with abandon to Hungarian music in her bedroom with the shades drawn. Afterward, she can peacefully go out to pull weeds, drive the tractor, or make the family dinner.

One hot summer day, when it is Alice's turn to baby-sit for Theresa's two daughters, she becomes distracted looking over her map of the world. She is upstairs just long enough for Theresa's youngest child, Lizzy, to wander out to the farm's pond and drown.

While still reeling under the weight of guilt and grief, Alice is accused by another mother of having sexually abused her son. The vindictive woman expertly takes advantage of Alice's outcast status after Lizzy's death.

Soon, events spin out of control: Alice lingers in jail awaiting trial on charges of sexual abuse because Howard cannot raise bail; he and his daughters are shunned by the townspeople and lose all sense of normalcy in their lives; Theresa, struggling to come to grips with the death of her young child, is the only one able to rally around the sinking family.

"Sometimes people get so confused by how fast everything's moving they have to throw somebody out, to make them feel better. It could have been anyone, really," Alice realizes. Although Howard was always the stronger and more stable of the two, raised to work hard and keep in motion, it is Alice who learns about the durability of the human spirit in the stillness and tedium of jail.

Hamilton writes eloquently about land, nature, and the human heart. Yet a sense of spirituality pervades *A Map of the World*. Alice and Howard found shelter, love, and benevolence in a farmhouse; when their home was gone, they had to look higher to find forgiveness and understanding.

Richard Eder (review date 5 June 1994)

SOURCE: Eder, Richard. "Some Things are Unforgivable." *Los Angeles Times Book Review* (5 June 1994): 5, 15.

[In the following review, Eder describes the principal characters of *A Map of the World* in the context of the novel's narrative structure and themes.]

In a patch of Wisconsin woods, late on a summer afternoon, two women stand a few feet apart, each leaning her back against a tree and swatting mosquitoes. They face the same direction; neither looks at the other. They were best friends but Alice had a moment of distraction while minding Theresa's baby, Lizzie, and the child wandered off and drowned in the farm pond. Now, days later, Alice is almost mute while Theresa talks wildly, trivially, unstoppably: a frozen swimmer and a thrashing swimmer in a pond of bottomless pain.

Still thrashing, Theresa relates her visit to a former priest who was her high school teacher and whom she once had a crush on. Albert—married, divorced and grown fat—took her to a luncheonette for Cherry Cokes. Insistently, he made her tell the entire story of her 2-year-old daughter's life, and write down each of the 57 words she had mastered. By the time Theresa finished, she realized that what Lizzie had was not a fragment of a life but an entire one, though short. She and Albert—now weeping for the child he has helped make real—began to rock "just hard enough so that one edge of the booth came up like a swing set will you know, that isn't grounded in cement?"

Still frozen, Alice thinks: "Theresa was going to talk at high speed through the seasons, through the rain and sleet and snow, until she was briny and then moss covered."

It is not the Job-like accumulation of scourges upon Alice Goodwin and her farmer husband, Howard, that makes Jane Hamilton's second novel [*A Map of the World*] remarkable. Not that the scourges are trivial. There could be no more terrible combination of agony and shame than to know that a moment of absent-mindedness has allowed the death of a friend's child. Or than to be arrested and charged immediately afterward—as Alice is—with sexually abusing children at the school where she works as a nurse.

Indeed, the accumulation—the neighbors turn bitterly vindictive, the Goodwins' children are traumatized and Howard loses the farm that has been his life's dream—is as melodramatic and arbitrary as a soap opera. But then, so was Job's story (*boils*, yet?). It is not the particular blows of providence that exalt the Old Testament story, but a man's voice protesting the pain of our cosmic

vulnerability. In *A Map of the World*, it is not the buildup of the two tragedies that is most distinctive—the events are told with brilliant horror but their sequence and linkages can be awkward—it is the different calligraphies they inscribe on Alice, Howard and Theresa.

Some of the same horror is at the root of Sue Miller's *The Good Mother* (a woman's lover is accused of sexually abusing her daughter) and Rosellen Brown's *Before and After* (a family is shattered when a teenage son is charged with murder). All three show how the outside world—society, the law—can make our privacies public and unrecognizable to ourselves. Or as Howard muses at one point: "I was dazed by the equation that overnight made Alice's troubles into everyone's troubles."

The difference is the voices. Theresa's out of the circle of trees; wandering, coming apart and coming together to relate a remarkable deliverance by a fat man in a luncheonette booth; remarkable, among other things, for being both a near-miracle and entirely natural. Alice's, frozen in shame as well as grief—and in her own knotted nature—raging at Theresa's. This is only one example; throughout, *A Map of the World* will suddenly alter its light, revealing beneath the fabric of its characters' lives, thoughts and emotions a kind of X-ray of their souls.

The story is told alternately by Alice and Howard. Alice begins with an account of a precarious idyll. She and Howard, former hippies, more or less, have bought a farm in a transitional area. Suburbs are encroaching; the old-style rural community of Howard's dreams no longer quite exists. Instead of helping with the haying, the neighbors are more likely to get up petitions about the farm's noise, smells and effect on property values.

For Howard, a dairy farm is heaven, down to its most menial and exhausting jobs. "I always thought that work was as common and fine as air," he will say. Alice can't quite submerge in his Arcadian dream; there is tension under the determinedly upbeat account of their life that starts the book off. Tension becomes horror the day Theresa leaves Lizzie with her. Hamilton slows the narrative to nightmare speed: Suddenly Lizzie is no longer in the room with her older sister and Alice's two children. She thinks of the pond, runs there on suddenly heavy legs, her bare feet "like two pink erasers." A pink gingham bottom bobs on the water's surface, 15 feet out.

Days of breakdown follow. Alice's account of her paralysis—she can't take care of the children, endure the funeral, visit Theresa or do much besides sleep; and Howard's patience turns to despair—is another nightmare. It ends, oddly enough, and she goes from lethargy to hyperactivity, when the second horror falls upon the first.

The police come and arrest her. A 9-year-old schoolboy, a problem child who at one point goaded her into slapping him, has reported that she fondled him. The account seems inspired and promoted by his dysfunctional, promiscuous mother; but a communal hysteria sets in. There are other complaints, a formal charge, months in prison—until Howard sells the farm to pay the exorbitant bail—and finally a trial that frees her into a life of utterly changed and uncertain prospects.

Some of the story limps a bit. The courtroom scenes are compellingly taut, but not especially distinctive. Alice's eccentric lawyer is a grotesque that doesn't quite come off. He serves, though, to parody the processes of the law, and as part of Hamilton's questioning of the nature of present-day society. The dream of community is no longer viable; people live by fashion and slogans. The mere mention of abuse—in the absence of social ties and the ground-knowledge that they instill—is enough to set off a conflagration.

Such questions, though provocative, are no more the real heart of the book than the plot is, or the accomplished set scenes, among them a vivid account of Alice's time in jail, and of the brutal and sometimes compassionate social order set up by the inmates. Alice's harsh, illuminating vision—released from jail, she and Howard pass a wedding and she notes: "The bride had some teeth missing. Maybe she'll be covered by her husband's dental plan. Maybe she'll be able to get them fixed"—is a poetry of despair that turns, in a stunning final passage, into something like a chorale.

Howard's account of his time alone with the children as he struggles to keep his farm going, is only seemingly matter-of-fact. It is another kind of poetry, bucolic and sad. Theresa, passionate but purposeful—she and Howard fall in love and relinquish it in one single, powerfully erotic and entirely chaste movement—is a child of light. Her poetry is of a third order; like Eric Rohmer's films, its magic takes form from what is random, commonplace and disconnected.

Moureen Coulter (review date fall 1994)

SOURCE: Coulter, Moureen. "After the Fall." *Belles Lettres* 10, no. 1 (fall 1994): 25, 27.

[In the following review, Coulter summarizes the central themes of *A Map of the World*, noting that Hamilton's examination of the power of forgiveness is "remarkable."]

What does it mean to fall from grace, and where do the fallen go? Are they forever banished from their former blessedness, or can they hope to regain its heights?