

Contemporary
Literary Criticism

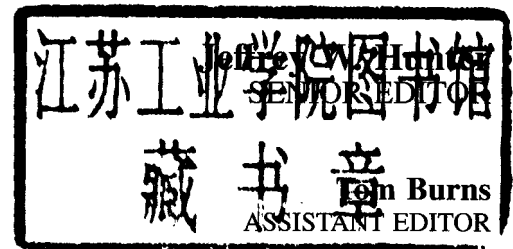
CLC

150

Volume 150

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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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 76-46132
ISBN 0-7876-5850-2
ISSN 0091-3421
Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

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.
- 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.

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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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Yvor Winters, *The Post-Symbolist Methods* (Allen Swallow, 1967), 211-51; excerpted and reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, vol. 85, ed. Christopher Giroux (Detroit: The Gale Group, 1995), 223-26.

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Andrea Barrett

1965-

American short story writer and novelist.

The following entry presents an overview of Barrett's career through 2000.

INTRODUCTION

Barrett is well regarded for her novels and short fiction that focus on the complex dynamics of family and personal relationships. Her fiction often includes female characters who are struggling to find happiness despite formidable obstacles. Barrett has also shown a recurring interest in scientific topics and the impact of science on the lives of her characters. She is best known for *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998) and her short story collection *Ship Fever and Other Stories* (1996), which received a National Book Award.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Barrett was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on July 17, 1965, to Walter Barrett and Jacquelyn Knifong. She grew up largely on Cape Cod, and her childhood there instilled in her an interest in ocean exploration, marine biology, and natural history. In 1985, she received a B.S. in biology from Union College. Barrett also pursued graduate studies in zoology as well as medieval and Reformation theological history. Those areas of interest—science and history—have become dominant themes in her novels and short stories. In 1988, she published her first novel, *Lucid Stars*. She received a National Book Award in 1996 for her short fiction collection *Ship Fever and Other Stories*. A year later, Barrett was awarded grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. In October 2001, Barrett was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Barrett is an instructor in the M.F.A. program at Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina, and resides in Rochester, New York.

MAJOR WORKS

Barrett's first novel, *Lucid Stars*, recounts the tribulations of an American family, focusing primarily on a woman named Penny and her philandering husband. Penny eventually seeks a divorce and tries to focus on finding happiness in the study of astronomy and raising her children. Barrett's second novel, *Secret Harmonies* (1989), follows



another woman's search for peace and fulfillment. The protagonist, Reba Dwyer, lives in rural Massachusetts with her meek, introspective brother, Hank, and her handicapped sister, Tonia. After a period of rebellion, Reba leaves her family and enters a conservatory for women. She eventually moves back home when she finds out that her father has abandoned the family. Several months later, Reba marries a longtime friend and is forced to examine her life, her marriage, and the elusive nature of personal contentment. In 1991, Barrett released *The Middle Kingdom*, a novel that traces the transformation of an unhappily married woman named Grace. After Grace accompanies her estranged husband to Beijing on a business trip, she falls ill with pneumonia. She slowly regains her health and her sense of independence, as she decides to remain in Beijing alone, eventually finding a job and lover. In 1993, Barrett published *The Forms of Water*, a multigenerational tale focusing on a dysfunctional family living in upstate New York. The story centers on an aging family patriarch, Brendon Auberon, who convinces his nephew, Henry, to steal a nursing-home vehicle and take him to the abbey where he

had once lived as a monk. Brendon and Henry's journey alarms the other members of the family, who unite to find Brendon and return him to his nursing home. *Ship Fever*, a collection of Barrett's short fiction, appeared in 1996 and garnered considerable critical praise for the range of stories in the volume. As in Barrett's novels, several of the stories in *Ship Fever* deal with familial relationships. "The Marburg Sisters," for example, is a tale of twin sisters, one of whom becomes a scientist while the other enters the world of drug addiction. Barrett returned to the novel form with the nineteenth-century drama *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, which follows Erasmus Darwin Wells, a young Philadelphian who signs up for a dangerous polar expedition led by a dashing but immature adventurer. The story focuses on the group's search for a team of explorers who went missing during their last voyage. Wells must come to terms with his role in the expedition and, after living through adventure and tragedy, readjust to his normal life back in Philadelphia.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Barrett has often been praised for bringing together the worlds of science and literature. Reviewers have commended her grasp of historical detail, focus on scientists and scientific concepts, and deft use of nineteenth-century settings. In particular, Barrett's short fiction has been noted for its ability to impart the excitement of scientific discovery to the reader. While reviewing Barrett's collection *Ship Fever*, Lisa Schwarzbaum noted that: "Each [story] is intricate and beautifully chiseled; taken together, the tales flow one to the other, linked by the author's fascination with and tender appreciation of science and scientists." Barrett has been consistently complimented for her clear, lyrical prose and her engaging female characters. Her exploration of feminist themes, especially the issues facing female scientists, has been noted as one of the defining characteristics of Barrett's fiction. Some critics have regarded her work as slow paced and didactic, but many have applauded Barrett's fiction for how it vividly explores complex relationships as well as the human endeavor to find peace and happiness in life.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Lucid Stars* (novel) 1988
- Secret Harmonies* (novel) 1989
- The Middle Kingdom* (novel) 1991
- The Forms of Water* (novel) 1993
- Ship Fever and Other Stories* (short stories) 1996
- The Voyage of the Narwhal* (novel) 1998

CRITICISM

Nicholas Lezard (review date 11 March 1989)

SOURCE: "First and Second Novels," in *Spectator*, March 11, 1989, p. 42.

[In the following excerpt, Lezard compliments the dialogue and character development in *Lucid Stars*.]

Novelists, since Flaubert I suppose, have tried conscientiously to be as true to the Inner Experience of the characters they write about as possible, and one way of doing this is to put everything into the present tense. It makes it all so much more *immediate*. So: 'she opens the fridge' instead of 'she opened the fridge.' This is certainly intimate, but in the wrong hands it can feel like the intimacy of a crowded bus. Andrea Barrett, who is not Damon Runyon and has written *Lucid Stars* uses this gimmick with a vengeance. Her story, about a succession of relationships and the pseudo-familial obligations they create, takes place over 25 years, so the historic present can be said to Have A Point. Unfortunately, she finds the fixed, arbitrary patterns stars make (hence the book's title) more interesting than the historical resonances her narrative achieves, so the Point here is like, really, you know how everything changes and yet, er, everything stays the same, you know? My point is that *Lucid Stars* wouldn't be worth mentioning if it did not also contain beautifully recorded dialogue and enough nice touches to prove that, despite the sloppy thought behind the very idea of the book, the author does know what makes her characters tick.

Margaret Bradham (review date 12 May 1989)

SOURCE: "Familial Failings," in *Times Literary Supplement*, May 12, 1989, p. 518.

[In the following excerpt, Bradham commends the engaging style and layers of detail found in *Lucid Stars*.]

Andrea Barrett's *Lucid Stars* is about the ex-wives and children of a man whose indifference alienates them all. While the motif of stars verges on the excessive and cute, Barrett surpasses those of her predecessors who have written in a similar style about similarly fragmented families. Her style is clear and well paced; the finest achievement of the novel is the portrait of the two children from the first marriage, Cass, strong-willed and independent, and her younger brother Webb, sweet, simple and uncomplicated, and the deep-rooted tenderness and comfortable affection that exist between them. Her depiction of these two as they mature from small children into young adults, as they react to the same events—their mother's departure, their parents' divorce, their father's remarriage—and develop in different ways, is consistent and convincing. Where many have written novels thick with detail and thin

on character development, Barrett, much to her credit, has reversed the emphases and has rejected the notion that if details are layered thickly enough, they can give us glimpses into the characters hearts.

Katherine A. Powers (review date 5 May 1991)

SOURCE: A review of *The Middle Kingdom*, in *Washington Post Book World*, May 5, 1991, p. 11.

[In the following review, Powers offers a positive assessment of *The Middle Kingdom*.]

Andrea Barrett's third novel, *The Middle Kingdom*, is the story of Grace Doerring (formerly Hoffmeier, formerly Martone) who grew up fat with a propensity to grow fatter. Grace is familiar to us from both life and literature. Tormented by her mother, messed with by her grandfather, married to a self-absorbed, unhinged artist, then to a self-absorbed, uptight scientist, she has always been a prop in other people's lives. She's the girl who just came along for the ride. And she feeds her empty heart with sweet things.

Things go from bad to worse for Grace until she arrives in China for a scientific conference as "an accompanying person" to her husband. Walter, the "acknowledged leader of the acid-rain world." At first she is overwhelmed by the strangeness of it. And then very quickly frustrated by the isolation imposed upon her by her status.

Her only role in the conference is to show up at banquets with Walter, from whom she is almost completely estranged. It is her lot and that of the other "accompanying persons" to be moved by bus from one sightseeing spot to another, from one shopping opportunity to another. They are allowed to speak only to each other and to their guide. They are fed sanitized food and sterilized drink.

Soon the vicariousness of her experience in this vibrant land becomes too much for one whose whole life has been lived so vicariously. Grace escapes. She is befriended by a Chinese woman scientist and through her makes her way into the world as it is really lived by the Chinese. And in the end Grace decides to stay.

Though she must eventually leave, she does not go as she came. She now has a child. And she has found the immediacy of life she lacked in her American existence.

In *The Middle Kingdom* Andrea Barrett does not, perhaps, cross new thresholds into the soul of women or the heart of China, but her novel is engaging. She writes with felicity, intelligence and humor.

Bettina Berch (review date Winter 1993)

SOURCE: A review of *The Forms of Water*, in *Belles Lettres*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Winter, 1993, p. 50.

[In the following review, Berch offers a positive assessment of *The Forms of Water*.]

A well-structured novel, like a well-designed house, can be quite pleasurable no matter how it is furnished. Whether the subject matter of *The Forms of Water*—children without parents who later become childish parents, the ways families repeat themselves, the importance of home—is of interest to all readers or not, the book is crafted with such care, it can be appreciated on that level alone.

The Forms of Water is the story of a family that fell apart a generation or two back, when their New England village was removed to build a reservoir, and then one son went to World War II and never got over it. Shortly thereafter, the son and his wife died in a car crash, their two orphaned children went to live with the embittered grandparents . . . and now those two children have their own dysfunctional families. The novel opens on the last surviving member of the older generation, great-uncle Brendan, who is determined to leave his nursing home for one last look at the old family land. He cons his nephew into hijacking an ambulance to take him there, which becomes the plot's vehicle for the gathering together of this disintegrated family.

Barrett's imagery is oddly memorable. She introduces Brendan in the nursing home: "He'd shriveled up so much that his skin hung on him now like a suit made for two men, one of whom had already died." His heart "stutters" when he meets a childhood friend. Her description of young Wiloma's care for her dying grandfather—how she moistened the dry pills under his tongue so he could swallow them, how she read to him from his old physics book as if it were a sort of Bible—is so moving you forgive the adult Wiloma for all her religio-psychobabble.

True, Barrett could have ended her book earlier: the nursing home "funeral" and the folklore invented around Brendan's escapades would have made a natural and satisfying closing. Instead, she loads us down with a lot of hasty, epilogue-ish detail about what happened to everyone afterwards. And since the teenagers were the weakest characters of the cast, it's tedious to have to read more about them. But that's a small flaw in an otherwise satisfying novel.

Pinckney Benedict (review date 7 June 1993)

SOURCE: "Collision of Dreams," in *Washington Post Book World*, June 7, 1993, p. D2.

[In the following positive review, Benedict calls *The Forms of Water* an "elegiac" and "intelligent" novel.]

A certain appetite for land (an appetite remarkable for its fierce, even rapacious nature) is a major constituent of the American character. It's part of our national heritage.

Historically, the United States has also provided safe haven for, and been the birthplace of, any number of utopian religions, from the Shakers to the Mormons to the Seventh-Day Adventists. These seemingly antithetical currents in American life flow powerfully together in *The Forms of Water*. Andrea Barrett's intelligent and elegiac fourth novel.

At issue in the book is the disposition of 200 acres of undeveloped woodland at the edge of a vast man-made lake. This plot of ground is all that remained to the Auberon family when, in the '30s, their home area (known, not coincidentally, as Paradise Valley) was flooded to make a reservoir for the distant city of Boston. The land belongs to 80-year-old Brendan Auberon, a former monk who resides, crippled by arthritis, at St. Benedict's nursing home. Brendan sets the narrative in motion when he tricks his nephew Henry into liberating one of the home's vans and heading out for the remnants of the homestead.

The two protagonists are embodiments of very different philosophies. Brendan is a dying mystic who pines for the solitude he found within the walls of his first beloved abbey before it vanished beneath the rising waters of the reservoir. His utopia is gone. Henry is a bankrupt real estate developer who dreams of the deal that will redeem his own imperfect past. Each savors his private vision of what awaits at the lake's edge, which neither has visited in decades.

Their departure touches off a series of confrontations among the many divisions of the extended Auberon family. Henry seeks out his estranged wife, Kitty, in order to borrow some cash to make his ill-starred trip possible. Henry's sister, Wiloma, who adheres to a bodiless religion and whose creed consists of unremarkable bromides ("There is no guilt. There is no blame. Life is what you believe it is") clashes with her daughter over her plans to bring Brendan to live in their home. And Waldo, Wiloma's ex-husband and Henry's former business partner, convinces Wiloma that he can help her find her uncle, whose cancer she hopes to heal through the power of positive thought and the cleansing diet prescribed by a priestess-like "neuro-nutritionist."

Three generations of Auberon relatives set out on their individual odysseys, until there are eight of them converging from various directions on the parcel of land: Brendan and Wiloma, whose motives derive from religious conviction; Henry and Waldo, who trail the twin scents of commerce and profit; and four members of the third generation, unconcerned with family history, following the dictates of youthful inexpressible and inchoate love.

None of which is familiar with the area, and they employ various awkward strategies to find the anonymous section of shoreline that belongs to Brendan. When they come together, the tragedy that has been looming finally breaks over them. In its aftermath, each member of the family inherits something unsettling and unforeseen. Each finds a

measure of those diametric opposites: the lightness of the transcendent and the density of earth.

Barrett is a skillful writer. She moves smoothly among the many consciousnesses that inhabit her book, giving us the clearly defined and differentiated personalities and voices of Brendan, Henry, Wiloma and Wendy, Wiloma's daughter. In addition, she includes material from a number of fictional written sources, including letters to the editor of a Paradise Valley newspaper, a textbook on the different guises that water can take, religious tracts and some wonderfully evocative passages from Brendan's father's journal. Barrett deals evenhandedly with her characters, making none of them a false hero or goat. It is clear that she has great affection for this sprawling, troubled and troublesome brood, with all their greed and utopian folly.

This winning novel is not merely the story of a family divided over its inheritance; there is far more of *Genesis* than of *King Lear* in its pages. In its contemporary retelling of the deluge story, however, the patriarch fails to heed prophecy. Rather than ensure the preservation of his kin, he grows bitter and obstinate. Consequently, his offspring and theirs are doomed to wander the face of the Earth, bereft of a home place. *The Forms of Water* reads as though it might be the chronicle of the descendants of some prideful American cousin to Noah.

Chris Goodrich (review date 29 June 1993)

SOURCE: "Family Tug-of-War over a Plot of Land," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, June 29, 1993, p. E8.

[In the following review, Goodrich offers a mixed assessment of *The Forms of Water*.]

[In *The Forms of Water*] Henry Auberon has returned with his Uncle Brendan to Coreopsis Heights, the real-estate subdivision that proved to be his undoing.

Half-built houses, bulldozer slashes in the hillside, dried mud, aging lumber, even squatters: It's a grisly reminder of failure, but Henry sees, perhaps for the first time, that no amount of risk would have prevented him from developing the family land.

"Gone, he thought. All of it. And as he continued to look at his uncle's face, he wondered if Coreopsis Heights had not been, all along, simply the only way he could find to destroy the memory of his childhood there"—that what he felt while watching his grandparents' homestead fall was not the thrill of new beginnings but "the joy of destruction," the obliteration of the last physical vestiges of his childhood.

The despoiling of rural ways of life through real-estate development has become a common literary theme in recent years, fueled largely by growing environmental

awareness and the sheer crudeness of the average suburban housing venture.

At first, such destruction appears to be a major theme in Andrea Barrett's newest novel, her fourth [*The Forms of Water*], but the story turns out to be rather more complicated: Henry is more pathetic than unscrupulous, Brendan's connection to his ancestral home is limited, and the remaining members of the Auberon clan are driven primarily by self-interest.

Although by the end of the novel Henry seems to have understood the error of his ways, *The Forms of Water* isn't a simple morality tale in which the just are rewarded and the unjust punished.

Barrett has written *The Forms of Water*, surprisingly, as a kind of road novel. Brendan, a former monk and now a crippled resident of a rest home in Upstate New York, has persuaded Henry to "borrow" a rest-home van and take him to a secluded plot of land next to Stillwater Reservoir in Massachusetts. The van is soon reported missing, and Henry and Brendan become the unlikely focus of a manhunt—unlikely because neither man is particularly wanted, by family or by authorities.

There's soon a caravan of sorts, however, as various Aubérons figure out where Henry and Brendan have headed and decide, for their selfish reasons, to catch up with them. Wiloma, Henry's sister, wants to save Brendan's mortal soul by taking him home and introducing him to her cultish Church of New Reason; Waldo, Wiloma's ex-husband and a more successful real-estate investor than Henry, hopes to get his hands on Brendan's 200 acres; even the cousins. Wiloma's and Henry's children, join the chase, worried that their parents will end up reliving old family disputes.

Barrett follows each of these groups—Henry and Brendan, Waldo and Wiloma and the carload of cousins—as they make their way toward the reservoir, and the result is an overly diffuse narrative.

Henry and Brendan are much more interesting characters than Waldo and Wiloma or the younger generation, for they seem to have real concerns and real confusions in their lives, to believe that their adventure, however misguided, is truly about something.

It's clear, though, why Barrett has developed the other characters at some length: so she can have a convincing rendezvous when the three bands of relations converge to watch Brendan, in the novel's climactic scene, go out in a rowboat on Stillwater Reservoir, which used to be Paradise Valley, where Brendan lived before it was dammed to create a water supply for Boston.

Brendan has come here to mourn that loss, and when Henry understands that, he also understands why the development of Coreopsis Heights was a mistake.

The Forms of Water is a curious book, overstuffed with apparently meaningful memories and moments and relatively shapeless, given direction chiefly by the magnetic pull of Brendan's land. Yet the book is frequently compelling, for Barrett is a good writer drawing, one senses, from a deep and difficult place.

There are no speeches about progress in this novel, about the need to balance development with preservation, the past with the future, but those issues form the backdrop against which this novel takes place.

It's tempting to say that *The Forms of Water* would have been a better book if Barrett had made the connection between her characters and this background more explicit, but in this age of heavy-handedness, one doesn't want to chide a writer for showing an unexpectedly light touch.

Erin McGraw (essay date Winter 1996)

SOURCE: "Nor Good Red Herring: Novellas and Stories," in *Georgia Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Winter, 1996, pp. 808–18.

[In the following excerpt, McGraw explores the unifying thematic material in *Ship Fever*.]

The stories and novella in Andrea Barrett's *Ship Fever* are bound by a clear thematic unity: all of the book's characters are, in some fashion, scientists, and in every tale science provides both the framework and a metaphor for the action. "The Behavior of the Hawkweeds" centers on a genetics professor's wife, "Birds with No Feet" on a chronically unsuccessful collector of rare natural specimens in the nineteenth century, "Rare Bird" on an eighteenth-century would-be naturalist frustrated in her ambitions because she is female.

It is not coincidental that the stories focus on minor characters, science's also-rans: Even in "The English Pupil"—the collection's one offering that features a famous figure—botanist Carl Linnaeus' body is already doddering, and his mind, "which had once seemed to hold the whole world, had been occupied by a great dark lake that spread farther every day and around which he tiptoed gingerly." Barrett's interest lies not with the successful, the famous, or those at the height of their powers, but rather with the helpers and assistants, the amateurs, the ones who labor on without reward, seemingly unable to stop themselves.

Her characters are obsessives, and she presents their obsessions with lyric tenderness. Gregor Mendel's garden, remembered by a man who had worked for the great geneticist, was an enchanted place filled not only with pea plants but by "the tame fox he tied up during the day but allowed to run free at night, the hedgehogs and the hamsters and the mice he kept, the beehives and the cages full of birds." And the specimen collector in "Birds with

No Feet" mourns the loss, by fire, of "[h]is sweet sloth, no bigger than a rabbit, with his charming habit of hanging upside down on the back of a chair and his melancholy expression." But for all the elegiac grace of these descriptions, Barrett is no romantic. In **"The Littoral Zone"** the same salt that sparkles on the skin causes infections to set in, a gala trip to the Andes in **"Soroche"** causes altitude sickness, and swallows found dead in **"Rare Bird"** are "not wrapped serene in a cocoon of wings" but rather are "twisted and sprawled." Barrett brings a naturalist's eye to her stories, and the resulting accuracy of observation gives them a sense of gravity—not only weight, but seriousness.

The same serious, observant eye is turned to characters, gravely examining the facts of their lives—many of these tales tell entire life stories—and presenting those facts so that readers might draw conclusions. The tone is not judgmental, but it is *careful*, investing the characters with haunting dignity. Perhaps the best example of Barrett's scrupulous care comes in **"The Littoral Zone,"** a story about a love affair between two married scientists which blasts apart their marriages and all the lives that have been contained in them. Ruby and Jonathan meet at a marine biology research station; they return home after three weeks and are met by their respective families on a dock in New Hampshire.

Nothing that was to come—not the days in court, nor the days they moved, nor the losses of jobs and homes—would ever seem so awful to them as that moment when they first saw their families standing there, unaware and hopeful. Deceitfully, treacherously, Ruby and Jonathan separated and walked to the people awaiting them. They didn't introduce each other to their spouses. They didn't look at each other—although, they later admitted, they cast covert looks at each other's families. They thought they were invisible, that no one could see what had happened between them. They thought their families would not remember how they had stepped off the boat and stood, for an instant, together.

The passage occurs early in the story; Ruby and Jonathan go on to share a settled life, and their children come to visit them. But their eventual ease doesn't block out the astonishing pain of this moment on the dock, and whatever pleasure comes in their lives together must always be weighed against the first, widespread cost.

Barrett's prose moves with a scalpel's accurate delicacy, and her stories; have the sense of consequence of longer pieces. So when I came to **"Ship Fever,"** the novella that completes the volume, I was surprised to find that she doesn't continue in this lyrical, contemplative fashion, which would seem ideal for the work. Instead, the pacing accelerates.

"Ship Fever" begins with a letter sent in 1847 to Dr. Laughlin Grand from Arthur Adam Rowley, describing the horrifying conditions he has found in Ireland as a result of the potato famine. Quickly, deftly, Barrett fills in the relationship between these men: they are friends, and

Arthur Adam is married to Susannah, whom Laughlin has loved secretly since boyhood. For many writers, these relationships would be the obvious center of narrative interest, but Barrett turns the usual pattern inside out. Here, the romantic triangle forms the background for the novella's real subject: the ships that came to America and Canada in the midnineteenth century jammed with typhus-stricken immigrants. The tactic is ingenious, allowing Barrett to use her main characters for reference points inside the story of a plague—small, human voice crying out in a sea of fear and disease.

"Ship Fever" lacks none of the fine detail or elegant expression of the stories that precede it, but it carries a greater urgency; many lives are lost in these pages, and Barrett manages both to register those losses and to keep out eyes on the larger picture. By maintaining a close focus within a larger vision, she creates several layers of experience—the stench and terror of the suffering, the incomprehension of epidemiologists, the helplessness and despair of doctors faced with wave after wave of desperately sick people for whom, they know, their medicines are too few and too feeble. In the end, **"Ship Fever"** illustrates how inextricably heroism is linked to despair, and human accomplishment yoked to human defeat. Barrett's novella displays the same grave intelligence that animates every other fiction in her sure-footed collection—the most moving, accomplished book I have read for some time.

Samuel Baker (review date 10 August 1998)

SOURCE: "Images of Science Past," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 245, No. 32, August 10, 1998, p. 363.

[In the following essay, Baker provides an overview of Barrett's life and work, as well as discussing her recent critical success.]

Rochester, N.Y., home to corporate headquarters for Eastman Kodak and for Xerox, styles itself "The World's Image Centre." It is a city much concerned with capturing the past and, indeed, a city that finds the past palpable in the present. Along the expressways that divide the town, Kodak billboards beam the golden-yellow hue indelibly associated with that firm's brands, and the city seems to draw energy from the timeless trademark. Beneath their patina of rust-belt obsolescence, aging factories are reminders of an industrial heyday, while well-preserved residential boulevards march towards the city limits, evoking a statelier era.

In her own way, Rochester resident Andrea Barrett has become a leading light of the image industry. She doesn't ply the trade of a scientist or an engineer; rather, she crafts powerfully vivid works of fiction, most recently *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, an epic of 19th-century polar exploration due in September from Norton. In 1996, Barrett surprised the publishing world by winning the National

Book Award for fiction, in a decision that startled many industry insiders. Since then, the powerful volume that garnered the prize, the story collection *Ship Fever*, has won additional acclaim. Yet Barrett herself remains something of an enigma. To understand Barrett, it helps to understand that if she seemed to come from nowhere to take home NBA laurels, she actually came from a place long devoted to the science of making memory tangible.

Memories both personal and historical saturate Barrett's shady, barn-red three-story home, which lies not far from The George Eastman House, Rochester's noted museum of photography and cinema. Photographs of China and the Arctic recall Barrett's travels. A 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica set—the edition most treasured by historians—fills several bookshelves, while the coffee table offers a volume titled *Voices of the Spirit World*, which contains communications from the great beyond transcribed by a spiritualist medium and published in Rochester in 1855. The collection's most striking figure is its curator, Barrett herself: a lanky woman whose animated face peers out from under a crown of long tresses. Barrett's own voice is tremulous; her long sentences emerge in the torrent characteristic of a shy person determined to be voluble.

Barrett has often sought to seclude herself with her work, and, when she has emerged, she has often eschewed the role of author. "Until recently," she confides, "hardly anybody here knew I was a writer—they knew me as my dogs' mother, walking around the neighborhood." She is still adjusting to the attention brought by the success of *Ship Fever*. "The phone plagues me," she sighs. "I really can't make something new unless I feel that at least for a while it's completely secret," she says. "I can't work on it. I can't think about it. I don't sell books before they're done, and I don't show them to my agent or my editor."

Yet Barrett is poised to become a more public figure in the wake of *The Narwhal*'s publication. Her new novel resembles many of the stories in *Ship Fever* in its 19th-century setting and in its choice of a scientist as its protagonist. But by unfurling a larger canvas with *The Narwhal*, Barrett extends into new territory her uncanny ability to make stories of science past illuminate today's world. *The Narwhal* imagines the travails of botanist Erasmus Darwin Wells, who signs on to a polar expedition led by his sister's dashing but dangerously immature suitor. The novel's drama eventually encompasses not only how they search for a previous, lost team of explorers, but also how they navigate the sea of publicity when they return to their native Philadelphia.

Barrett, too, has felt the allure of extreme climes. A year ago last June, with the support of a Guggenheim Foundation grant, she traveled to the northern coast of Baffin Island, where she gathered much "visceral detail" for the book. Still, Barrett expresses some bafflement at the prospect that *The Narwhal* might bring her a still larger public. "I thought I was writing a deeply obscure book," she avers, "about some mid-19th-century Arctic explorers

and naturalists," about "material that ought not to be of interest to anyone but me." But people have likened *The Narwhal*, she says, to the adventure tales that have swept into the mainstream recently, from John Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* to fellow Norton author Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* and, of course, the ultimate iceberg saga, *Titanic*.

"The idea of this as an adventure story is very funny to me," Barrett says with a giddy laugh. "What I was after was much more ruminative. In fact, although the research I was drawing from is full of adventure, I think this book is much less full of adventure. Its people are painters and writers, they're thinking and mulling, they're seeing, they're looking. They're not going out and slashing polar bears to death."

Barrett shares the scientific bent and love of the outdoors characteristic of her protagonists. Born in Boston, she grew up largely on Cape Cod, where her childhood days on the beach instilled a deep feeling for the ocean and a passionate interest in natural history. By age 19, she had graduated from Union College in Schenectady, N.Y., with a degree in biology. On a first foray into graduate school—at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst—Barrett studied zoology, a discipline in which she remains enmeshed: on this day, her writing desk bears a textbook open to pages illustrating various jellyfish. "**The Littoral Zone**," a *Ship Fever* story, "is going in a Norton Anthology," Barrett explains, "and the editors asked me to write footnotes."

Barrett would later return to U. Mass to study medieval and Reformation theological history. It was during this second sojourn in graduate school that she became conscious of her true vocation. "Writing papers about the Inquisition or the early days of the Franciscan order, I was going through exactly the same process I use now to make my fiction," she recalls. "I'd go to the library and pull out everything, fill my room and become obsessed with the shape and the texture of the paper, and the way the words look, trying to make it all dramatic. At some point I realized: 'hey, this isn't history, and I'm not a scholar.'"

Subsequently, Barrett moved to Rochester, where her husband was doing an M.D./Ph.D. program. The couple lived a bleak, monastic existence, residing in a "crumbling graduate student housing tower." Barrett took secretarial jobs in science and medical labs, where, she recalls, "if it was slow, I could put paper in the typewriter and pretend I was typing notes—and I just started writing this novel." Barrett characterizes her first effort—never published—as "unspeakably horrible. I'd go to the library and get other novels and read those, and books about how books are put together, and criticism, and then I'd write. It was an awful experience and the book was awful. And I spent forever doing it." This lonely apprenticeship stretched from the end of 1977 until Barrett's first visit to Breadloaf, in 1984.

Barrett first went to Breadloaf "as what they call a contributor, the lowest rank of what used to be an infinite