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Olga Masters, *Loving Daughters*. University of Queensland Press. 319 pp. \$14.95.

Born in Pambula, New South Wales in 1919, Olga Masters has worked as a journalist for both country and metropolitan newspapers as well as rearing a family of seven children. Not surprisingly, Masters was in her late fifties before she began writing plays and short stories. Her first collection of short stories, *The Home Girls* (1982), was welcomed as a "powerful contribution to contemporary Australian literature from a genuinely original voice". Masters won a National Book Council award for this collection. In speaking of *The Home Girls*, she observed: "It is just about men, women and children — what they do, why they do it and what they say. Sometimes it is not to express their feelings but to hide them". It is this ability to penetrate beyond surface manifestations and subtly expose the real motives of her characters that constitutes Masters' greatest strength as a writer. *Loving Daughters* (1984) represents a further development of this particular talent. On the surface, the novel depicts life in the neighbourhood of the small, sleepy, rural town of Pambula. However Masters, who has obviously observed her territory and its inhabitants both lovingly and critically, exposes the subconscious motives, the dreams and desires which compel her characters to behave as they do.

Olga Masters is very much a regional writer. Both *The Home Girls* and *Loving Daughters* are set in small, rural neighbourhoods in southern New South Wales similar to those in which she lived. *Loving Daughters* is located precisely in the Pambula-Wyndham district, on the south coast of New South Wales. The time frame for the novel is the years immediately following World War I. Masters, in detailing the daily activities of the inhabitants of this small, circumscribed, rural community, presents us with a very authentic portrait of small town life. This portrait is enlivened by Masters' considerable talent for acute observation and humorous, albeit satiric, description. All aspects of small town life are captured in *Loving Daughters*: domestic affairs and crises; the ubiquitous network of gossip; the local show and picnic races; funerals, shopping trips, visits, pregnancies, births, and, most importantly, new arrivals to the

area. The following passage illustrates the way in which Masters infuses mere description with her unique blend of loving observation:

But in the kitchen Enid went to the window giving her the best view of her garden . . . How glad she was that she had insisted on keeping the trees, deaf to the Wyndham view that fruit trees belonged in an orchard and flowers in a garden . . .

Those who thought the trees out of place and Enid better employed inside the house, and said as much to Jack, changed their view as the garden developed into something close to a small, well kept park.

They praised the elder Herbert girl to soured wives immersed in motherhood and small, dirty houses. The wives' envy turned to dislike of Enid as they waited darkly hopeful for her life to become a pattern of theirs.

The basic plot of *Loving Daughters* is quite simple and unfolds in a straightforward chronological manner. The 'loving daughters' are Enid and Una who function as housekeepers for their father after their mother's death. Their lives are disrupted by the arrival of two male characters: Small Henry, their newborn, motherless nephew and the young, eligible Reverend Colin Edwards who arrives in time to bury Small Henry's unfortunate mother. Given the lack of suitable males in the district, Enid and Una inevitably find themselves in competition for the attentions of Edwards. Edwards, attracted to both women, seems unable to choose between them. Ironically, the girls' father makes the choice for Edwards and the remainder of the novel explores the wisdom of this choice, juxtaposing his life with his wife against his continuing interaction with the other sister. Edwards experiences a fair measure of post-decisional regret, but this is alleviated by rare but heightened moments of emotional intensity shared with his otherwise imperfect wife.

The major characters in *Loving Daughters* are clearly delineated and easily differentiated. Each character has his or her own peculiar manner of speaking and thinking. Such clear differentiation within what, on the surface, would seem to be a reasonably homogeneous social group, is further evidence of

Masters' acute observational powers. Enid, the elder daughter, is loyal, competent in her domestic duties, in possession of much commonsense, and sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Her sister Una is spontaneous, vital, energetic, tactless, uninterested in most domestic chores, independent, and physically attractive. Edwards is faced with the difficult choice; Enid would be the perfect wife for a clergyman, but beautiful Una possesses other qualities which he admires.

Edwards is the most complex of Masters' characters. He is regarded suspiciously by the males in the district because he fails to match up to the machismo image required of any self-respecting male. As a religious man he is also suspect because his mind often dwells on sexual fantasies rather than spiritual themes. His childhood is explored briefly but with a tender sensitivity generally uncharacteristic of Masters. On one occasion, as a small, scared child, he had rushed to his Nanny, diving under her dress for comfort and safety. His father later whipped him severely for his unpardonable offence:

His mother let his father beat him. But afterwards when she went to him sobbing on his bed, she pulled his stockings up over his legs striped pink and red with tears in her eyes too. He flung her hands off him and turned his head to burrow it in the pillow, wondering if he would be beaten for this too, not caring if he died, hoping he would.

Later in the day she took him to the park. He still hated her. She took him to the water, murmuring her regret that she had not brought bread to feed the ducks. This omission brought tears to her eyes again. He failed to understand it. He didn't like to see her cry, but saw no reason why she should. She had not been hit. He fiddled with his stockings, and she put a hand out to cover his, appearing to be afraid he would pull his stockings down and expose his welts . . .

"It was a very bad thing you did to Nanny, you mustn't forget that," she said.

The mother is unhappy with this harsh patriarchal discipline but she is powerless and cannot prevent it. The child resents her for being so weak. This early incident is shown

to have a marked effect on Edwards' later development. As an adult, Edwards is melancholy, self doubting, self deprecating and guilt ridden. Masters describes his search for happiness in a gently ironic manner.

Edwards, like many of the characters in *Loving Daughters*, reveals much of himself through non verbal measures such as a particular gesture, a certain tilt of the head, or a positioning of the body. In the following passage, Mrs Palmer, the wife of a minister in neighbouring Candelo, discusses Enid and Una with Edwards:

"They, are both capable, from what I hear."

Edwards needed to blink away the light suffusing his eyes and running down to tenderize his mouth. Capable! Indeed they were capable. And one of them his! He crossed his legs and Mrs Palmer's attention was caught and rivetted to his thighs, one squashing the other on the chair she had never thought so frail before. Ah, I see, thought Mrs Palmer. And I had thought his day as drab and empty as most of the others! Which one, I wonder?

Loving Daughters is a shrewd, witty exposé of life in a small, rural community. Masters' novel does not offer the grim, relentless vision of rural life found in the best stories of Barbara Baynton; her characters lack the tragic stature of those of Henry Handel Richardson. Accurately described by one reviewer as a 'comedy of manners' and 'a treasure trove for the social historian'¹, *Loving Daughters* is a well crafted and highly entertaining novel. It is interesting to speculate on the kind of novel Olga Masters might write if she were to abandon her role as witty commentator and bring herself into closer confrontation with the powerful basic human needs and emotions which she explores and comments on, from a safe distance, in *Loving Daughters*.

¹ Adrian Mitchell: A comedy of proprieties, *The Weekend Australian*, September 29-30, 1984, p. 14.

