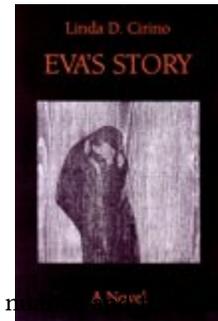


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda D. Cirino. *Eva's Story*. Princeton: Ontario Press, 1999. 167 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86538-097-4.

Reviewed by Robyn Sassen (Department of History of Art, University of South Africa)
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On a first reading, this is a simple love story, constructed around the issue of the personal becoming political. Cirino has painted an image of a fictional German farm wife in Europe at the time of the Second World War. Placed in a marriage totally lacking in emotion of any kind, and mother to children who are quickly falling into the brainwashed structures of the Nazi Youth, Eva, the egg woman is a believable construct. The appearance of a young male Jewish refugee seeking sanction in her chicken coop serves as a catalyst to the narrative, giving it historical relevance, body and impetus. The book is written in the first person. On the one hand, this has the effect of personalising the narrative and making the reader feel a part of the sequences, on the other, it fleshes out the main character considerably. By virtue of the character's down-troddenness, much remains unspoken and implied. The subsidiary characters in the book are not as full-bodied as Eva, but, by the same token, this effect enriches Cirino's description of the Nazi indoctrination in process, particularly with regard to Eva's relationship with her husband and children, whose names are used very sparsely in the text. More frequently they are referred to as "the boy" and "the girl". Also, dialogue between Eva and these members of her family tends to be jarring and automaton-like, which serve to concretise the inadequacies in her relationship with them.

The other main protagonist, Nathanael is also dealt with in a more full-bodied sense, yet he is less convincing, particularly where role reversal so obviously is manifest toward the end of the novel, in the strength that the characters demonstrate in their relationship with one another. Also, Eva and Nathanael's dialogue sometimes feels strained and the distinction between her dialogue with her oppressive and indoctrinated family and that between her and her lover, is occasionally not bold enough

to make this a significant thematic moment. This is an important aspect to the construction of the novel.

But as a story, it remains simple. As Cirino vies considerably away from using the names of Eva's close family, so no actual reference is made to the time frame or the geographical context in which the story takes place. Indeed, there is no indication that the main protagonist would be cognisant of the type of things which characterised the persecution which preempted the Holocaust itself. Everything is implicit, as would be the knowledge of the world around this woman who had only just been privy to a high school education before her marriage. This pared down quality to the text is undoubtedly its main strength.

On the whole, this is a sweet rendition of the realities and complexities of this period. It is compulsive reading and highly recommendable in that light.

In a different light, it breaches a feminist advantage - taking this example of European peasantry in the light of the imminent Holocaust and world war, and presenting a body of hypothetical realities which penetrate into her existence in such a way as to make her grow, think, develop, enjoy passions and ecstasies, and become a fuller woman.

Eva's Story is one of ultimate victory in the face of abusive marriage, which treats the wife like a child, but in the face of war, which presents this 'child-woman' with responsibilities and the need to understand, make decisions and express herself and become powerful in her own right as an adult. Cirino has realised a potent book. In spite of areas where dialogue feels jarred and contrived, and the plot predictable, the story runs smoothly and presents an inroad into understanding war-induced

injustices to the innocent, the ignorant, the very young. It is a piece of work which could be recommended to a young adult readership of both Jewish and gentile origin.

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