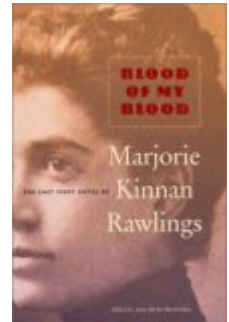


Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. *Blood of My Blood*. Edited by Anne Blythe Meriwether. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xvi + 170 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-2443-1.



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Mothering Marjorie: Rawlings' First Novel

Seventy-three years ago, in 1929, thirty-four year old Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings submitted a typescript entitled *Blood of My Blood* for the Atlantic Prize, sponsored by the Atlantic Monthly Press. The 183-page manuscript was returned to her a few months later with a rejection letter. In 1943, Rawlings wrote a note on the cover of the typescript to indicate that it was written in 1928; thereafter it disappeared into her materials, eventually passing into the hands of her friend Julia Scribner. According to Anne Blythe Meriwether, editor of *Blood of My Blood*, not until 1988--after Scribner's death--was the novel rediscovered. Meriwether was given access to the typescript by the C. J. Society of Columbia, South Carolina. Publication of this interesting and important first novel has at last occurred.

The novel is autobiographical. It reads in many ways like a first draft, since the real names of dozens of Rawlings family members are used. Even the main character of the book is called Marjorie. According to Meriwether, dates of deaths, births, and other plot elements are essentially

true. The omniscient third person narrator seems to be Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings herself who is therefore both the main character and the commenter on the action.

Rawlings' purpose in writing the novel is transparent. The novel is a sad and bitter expose of her mother, Ida. In the prologue of the novel, Rawlings states that her mother's "physical ugliness" caused her to look to a world of prestige, materialism, and wealth as a compensation for supposed lack of physical beauty. When Ida did not find any deeper qualities such as courage and character in herself, she attempted to extinguish any similar virtues in Marjorie. With a combination of flattering her daughter's egoism and admonishing any attempts of Marjorie's to develop qualities of strength, independence, and virtue, Ida very nearly succeeded.

While the narrator maintains throughout that she understands her mother and concludes that her mother eventually began to appreciate "beauty, and peace of soul, and love" (p. 170), the novel nonetheless reads as a bitter indictment. The narrator does not forgive Ida for the injurious influ-

ences on Marjorie's early life. *Blood of My Blood* takes its theme from the title itself in which the young Marjorie's relationship to her mother is unhealthy. From Marjorie's perspective, Ida attempts to warp young Marjorie with her own values. As Marjorie matures, though, she is assisted by people outside her family who help her develop a healthier view.

The novel opens with Ida's early life as a girl with an "unlovely body" and an "unlovely mind" (p. 8). When Ida marries a teacher who has a love of the land with its "beauty and peace and permanence" (p. 9), Ida despises these qualities. Her marriage is fraught with her frustration that her husband does not aspire to climb the social ladder in Washington, D.C., where they are living. Instead, he insists on using whatever income he has to care for their little farm.

Ida conceives Marjorie when she decides that because her life is not progressing as she wishes, perhaps her child could live the life that she wishes she could have. Ida is not able to see Marjorie as her own person. She sets about to create a pretty, insipid little doll whose external appearance will bring adulation. When Marjorie turns out to not be pretty, Ida nearly despairs until it is discovered that Marjorie has some talent as a writer.

Ida's efforts to encourage Marjorie's writing, however, result in Marjorie's becoming a writer of sentimental and insipid stories and poems. Only through a rigorous education at the University of Wisconsin does Marjorie begin to learn her craft. For example, a wise professor acknowledges her talent but tells her that her next assignment must be devoid of all adjectives and adverbs. While Marjorie is rather excited by this assignment, Ida admonishes her regarding what she considers to be a ridiculous assignment.

Marjorie's relationships with men are similarly soured by Ida's bad advice. Rather than appreciating her mother's efforts, Marjorie only sees the cloying and oppressive weight of Ida's influence. Marjorie says to her, "I don't respect you, be-

cause you don't have any self-respect" (p. 131). The love of a pragmatic and straight talking man allows Marjorie able to free herself from Ida's influence.

The climax of the novel is a fight, not between mother and daughter, but between mother and boyfriend. Chuck says to Ida, "You are an evil, ambitious woman you're greedy for all the ugliest things of life. You've got a greedy, affected daughter, as selfish as Hell, and now I've got to undo some of your work to make her fit to live with. You've got her wanting the things you want. Money and clothes and society columns" (p. 142). Ida responds by doing everything possible to get rid of Chuck. When World War I takes him away to active duty, he, unfortunately for Ida, survives the war and marries her daughter. Marjorie becomes a working young woman in New York, making her way as a magazine writer, with Ida remaining behind in Wisconsin. The separation is good for both mother and daughter. Ida assumes a role as a house mother in a sorority house at the University of Wisconsin. When mother and daughter reconcile, the narrator nonetheless afflicts Ida with cancer. Only then can Ida learn "beauty, and peace of soul, and love" (p. 170).

Blood of My Blood is an important first novel because it reveals Rawlings' early views of her family and of her early development as an artist. The novel will be of interest to historians, literary critics, and readers who love her later novels, *The Yearling* (1938), and *Cross Creek* (1942). The novel is interesting as a first novel, but that said, it is indeed a first novel. Rawlings has some stylistic quirks. She fills sentences with words highlighted with quotation marks. Rawlings is attempting to write satire, and she is developing her repertoire to include satire growing out of situation. But to be certain that the reader is aware of the ironic nature of the discourse, sentences are littered with words within quotation marks. Because the novel aspires to be a satire, the bitterness of the tone derives comes from Rawlings' use of what

classically is called Juvenalian satire--satire which is meant to bite and tear, rather than Horatian satire which gently teases and humorously rebukes. Although there is some of the latter, it appears that Rawlings at age 34 was not yet beyond those rebellious feelings which she needed in order to separate herself from her mother. And thus the novel adds insight to those who study Rawlings' life as well as her work.

The introductory essay from Anne Blythe Meriwether is very helpful. The provenance of the manuscript is well explained, although the location of the manuscript from 1988 to the current publication is not entirely clear in the essay and must be inferred from the Acknowledgements section. While there is a short set of notes to the introductory essay, the scholarly aspects of the book would also would have benefited from a more extensive introductory essay with some reference to the standard Rawlings biographical references.

Readers of local and regional history will nonetheless be interested in the novel's many references to Rawlings' family origin in Michigan, her school days in Washington, D.C., her college days in Wisconsin, and even some vignettes about the young Marjorie being mugged in New York City.

Florida readers of Rawlings will not find any of the Florida settings which are so beloved by readers of her later novels. However, the theme of the portrait of the young artist as a potential prig who almost lost her artistic abilities through her love of buying clothes and fancy hats is of great general interest. The novel joins the many novels by Southern women writers who write of the difficulties of the woman artist experiences when she tries to throw off the negative influence of her mother, realize her potential, hone her gift, and achieve the recognition which she finally attains.

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