

San Francisco Chronicle Aug. 1997

THE MIRROR

By Lynn Freed

Crown; 224 pp.

Twenty-two years ago, Pat Rotter took three dozen stories by and about women and published them under the provocative title *Bitches and Sad Ladies*. Society, Rotter argued, forces women to be one or the other. Rotter described the sad lady as the victim of her own needs, chiefly the need to be taken care of. The bitch "is a woman who can finally say, 'I come first....' The bitch takes care of herself."

There's no question which woman the self-invented heroine of Lynn Freed's masterful fourth novel chooses to be. "I'll find my own way," states the unapologetically self-interested Agnes La Grange, "it's ... how I'll always be."

She's seldom sure where her "way" will lead, but it won't be into the impoverished existence she left behind in Southampton—where women dutifully bore and tended to children until a middle-age that looked like old age. When Agnes lands in Durban, South Africa in 1920, she's confident her beauty and ambition will bring comfort and independence.

She starts as a housekeeper to an elderly Jewish couple whose grandson "fancied" her, "but I hadn't come all the way out to South Africa to give pleasure to a Jewboy, even a charmer. I meant to make a marriage of my own, with a house and a servant, too." The shrewder route to a future begins when the boy's grandfather gives Agnes a tall mirror, which becomes a slightly creaky vehicle for Agnes's self-discoveries throughout the next six decades.

Before the mirror, she sees herself as the old man does, so alluring that he begins leaving his sick wife to visit Agnes's room, making love to her before the mirror, leaving money each time. She's intoxicated by his appreciative desire: "I have never felt so strongly the power of being alive." A feeling of being alive, a financial stake, and a baby—Agnes takes all three from the old man and moves on.

Soon, she owns her first hotel and has a doting husband and a daughter. It is the hotel she loves most. Therein lies the quirky appeal of this tale and the mettle of Agnes herself. She constantly moves against the grain both of her society and of conventional heroines.

Always choosing assertiveness over compliance, independence over intimacy, she keeps her money in a purse around her neck, freely indulges her sexual desires and has little patience with child-rearing: "The whole thing felt like another form of service.... I wondered how women the world over, natives included, went in for this sort of thing time after time." She moves through a succession of men whom she never even dignifies with names, referring to them simply as "the old Jew," "the newspaperman," "the tycoon," "the

hunter," "the banker." She feels contempt for her husband: "There was lacking in him a sort of manly need that came and took what it wanted regardless."

Having this "manly need" herself, Agnes tells us, "I'd never been able to stand a good girl, all the dark things buried away." She may be selfish, cold, even racist, but Agnes is refreshingly guileless. She tells her story with the bare-souled candor of a Billie Holiday ballad. And if, in retrospect, she may see in her life costly mistakes, she never takes the easy route of blaming someone else but is proud they were at least her own mistakes.

The question at the heart of Agnes's story may be "Is fulfillment even possible when you feel you must choose between independence and love, yet you want both?" Like the butterfly in Buson's haiku that can't both be held and show the qualities that make you wish to hold it, Agnes says of a lover, "If he needed me for adventure, well I needed to be free to give it." She says of herself, "What did I want indeed but to be mastered myself and mistress of myself at the same time? It was hopeless."

But it is not hopeless, because Agnes has too much strength to give up hope. Nor is it, as this story might be for a milder heroine, ever tragic, as Agnes has a proud dignity that would never allow her to be a victim, even of her own choices. Rather, in a world that told women even more hauntingly than now "You can't have it all," Agnes holds her head high in the knowledge that she can at least live life by her own rules. Readers may find many moments when she is hard to like but few when she's hard to admire.