

Boston Globe Aug. 1997

## UNRAVELLING

By Elizabeth Graver

Hyperion. 352 pp.

Claiming he coined the term, Apollinaire defined "surrealism" as a "return to nature itself, but without imitating her.... When man wanted to imitate the action of walking, he created the wheel, which does not resemble a leg."

To depict how society treats women, many writers (Joyce Carol Oates, Susan Minot, Frances Sherwood and Mary Lee Settle come immediately to mind) have found historical settings inherently surrealistic, in Apollinaire's sense, because the world women lived in then is the world they live in now, only moreso.

In her exquisitely poignant and sensual debut novel, Elizabeth Graver presents the life of New Englander Aimee Slater, born in 1829, when passion and dreams and a mind were terrible things to waste on a girl. Raised on a New Hampshire farm by a mother who never talks about her own dreams and a father who doesn't talk to daughters much at all, Aimee knows there must be more to life than marrying one of the dull local boys ("like my brothers, yellow teeth and splotchy skin and eyes that saw no further than the next big hill") and bearing and feeding children all her life.

From the 38 year-old Aimee, who now lives in a shack on the edge of her father's property and supports herself by raising rabbits and chickens and by selling her handicrafts, we hear in retrospect of a life in many ways ordinary yet ultimately unique. Like Huck Finn's, Aimee's is a life defined by conflict between the heart's urgings and the mind her culture has shaped. But unlike Huck, Aimee tries to glide through a world in which her gender permits only clipped wings.

Aimee's life, she feels, veered definitively onto a wayward course when, entering adolescence, she shared a moment of sexual curiosity and exploration with her younger, favorite sibling Jeremiah, a frail consumptive, "a boy we all knew would never live to be a man." Aimee's suspicion that her mother knows of this debasement begins a rift between them that becomes the heart of the story.

The rift becomes a canyon when Aimee's lust for excitement becomes wanderlust. Her aunts send magazines with portentous names like *The Ladies' Casket*, showing pictures of women in new bonnets, using luxurious potions, traveling to Paris.

Paris is beyond her, but Lowell, Mass., the City of Spindles, is not. That's where some acquaintances have escaped the farm for the factory, the self-improvement classes, the four-story buildings and promising husband material.

Her mother has other plans: "You'll just teach until you marry.... You're not going anywhere." But time, Aimee's imploring and tough circumstances wear down her mother. Even her father finally consents: "It's what girls do nowadays, I figure--the way men go West."

So Aimee heads to the city to seek her fortune. Able and attractive, she at first does well. Then, too well. She catches the eye of mill mechanic William Tanning. After a requisite number of walks and teas, they make love. But the ambitious Tanning can't be tied down my Aimee, or by what he's brought about. "Start again," he tells the six-

months pregnant 16 year-old, "You're still so young. Give it to someone who can care for it better, and then go home.... I have my job here, my reputation, don't you see?"

What Aimee sees is the empty future her mother arranges, bearing then giving up twins to an affluent couple whose identity her mother withholds.

Forever after haunted by losing her children, Aimee returns to New Hampshire to an isolate life containing some consolation: finding a good man "like me, on the edge of things and lonely" and taking a maternal interest in an orphaned local girl.

But it is loss, not consolation, that dominates Aimee's interior life. Therein lies the exceptional artistry and power of Graver's achievement. "Life," Thomas La Mance said and John Lennon echoed, "is what happens to us while we are making other plans." Looking back, Aimee sees how at each of her path's forks things could have turned out differently. She explains this to her lost children, whom she addresses increasingly in their absence as the novel progresses. "My regret," she tells them, "is that I did not struggle more to keep you."

That decision, though, Aimee feels was forced on her, and she can never forgive her mother for that nor for being ashamed of her. Eventually, the little talking they do is "past each other, around each other."

In a fruitless effort to reach final peace with her ailing mother, Aimee visits and in a Flannery O'Connorsque moment finds herself "a girl again, then a baby--mama, mama." For this is the central anguish of the novel, the failure of that most complex and primal of human relationships, mother and daughter. And both women here have known different kinds of failure as mothers in a world that allows women little success as anything else.

Following her Drue Heinz Prize-winning debut story collection *Have You Seen Me?*, 32 year-old Graver's first novel displays precocious mastery. Her descriptive prose is filled with unobtrusively poetic moments, as when Jeremiah braids young Aimee's hair: "his fingers could navigate my hair like a boat on a river with three currents." Even her minor characterizations pulse with life, like the sanctimonious church woman who visits the fallen Aimee, "her mouth tight with disapproval." Graver's period details ring with an authenticity born of extensive research in historical tomes and in magazine articles written by 19th century female millworkers.

This is one highly impressive novel, but even more impressive is what it displays of Elizabeth Graver's promise. *Unravelling* feels like advance notice of a distinguished body of work to come.