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THE FURIES

By Janet Hobhouse

Doubleday. 304 pp. (galley had 295pp.) \$22.50.

Janet Hobhouse's opulent novel was so clearly unfinished when she died two years ago that it feels unkind to suggest much of its intended ground was covered more adeptly last year by Susan Richard Shreve. It also feels risky, as *The Furies's* course swerves away from a beginning with which Hobhouse may have planned to realign.

The novel traces three generations of a matriarchal family to bring us to narrator Helen, modeled closely on Hobhouse herself. Our hurried century has taken Helen's family from an urban castle to the Manhattan squalor Helen shares with her clinging mother, Bett. As a small child, Helen was "ferociously in love" with her divorced mother. By adolescence, however, she finds the feckless, depressive Bett a "broken angel" whom she must cast off if she is to love anything else. She develops a passion to be English (evident even in the novel's affected British spelling) and enters Oxford. Here she falls in love, then forsakes her absent sweetheart for another suitor. New man in tow, Helen returns to New York where Bett has replaced her with an 18 year old lover. The combined agonies of the Manhattan rat race and her mother's proximity lead to twin tragedies. After Helen angrily rebuffs her, Bett commits suicide, leaving Helen tormented both by guilt and Bett's absence. When Helen's marriage ends shortly afterward, she sinks into suicidal despair, then grave illness.

Helen's story is magnificently described in almost pure narration with little dramatized action. The novel, however, remains an uncompleted draft. What begins as a sweeping family saga exploring the possibilities for twentieth century women seems in its final third a tortured introspection, Hobhouse's attempt to reconstruct a life with different outcomes and reparation. We would have had something more unified, if hardly more poignant, had we not lost this gifted writer in 1991 after her six-year battle with cancer,