

Chicago Tribune Oct. 18, 1992

FOLLY

By Susan Minot

Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence. 279 pp.

When Susan Minot's debut novel-in-vignettes *Monkeys* appeared six years ago, critics compared its then under-30 author to Salinger, Faulkner, John Irving, Evelyn Waugh, Updike, Virginia Woolf and Louise Erdrich. All this on the basis of 159 pages. Seldom has so little inspired comparison to so much.

While this suggested fellowship might appear to thrust Susan Minot into the heart of the literary mainstream, she is refreshingly original. After the slight step backward of her bleak 1989 collection *Lust and Other Stories*, Minot offers her first organically unified novel, dazzling in how many things it does so well.

Folly's surface feels serene enough, as serenity is a dominant force contending for the heart of its heroine. Coming of age in Boston during World War I, Lilian Eliot lives in an affluent, insular world under the emotional anaesthesia of propriety. Around her, people put "their feelings in one hidden place and the rest of themselves out in life." Bostonian mothers won't even tell their pregnant daughters that childbirth is messy.

Warm and bright, Lilian at 18 flows easily with this stream of decorum until she meets Walter Vail. Visiting New Yorker Vail salts Lilian's world with its first taste of passion. He sees beyond Boston and sees new things in Lilian. "The person he sees is quite different from the one I feel myself to be," Lilian senses. "It's a better person Walter Vail sees. She preferred being that person ... she had the feeling to go with it, a feeling everywhere in her, poured into her body as brass into a mold, liquid and warm." His first kiss puts color into her black-and-white world. When Vail goes off to war, remains in Europe and marries a Frenchwoman, those hues fade.

Passing years resign Lilian to staid Boston and lead Gilbert Finch into her life. Stodgy and insipid, Finch is "the sort of fellow who moves over on a bench to make room for a girl, not thinking that the girl might want to sit close." Finch's idea of pleasure is birdwatching, "especially if they were indistinguishable and brown." He is exactly the sort of man her friends have married, exactly the man her mother married, and when he proposes Lilian accepts for the most common of reasons: he was the one who expressed interest when she was ready. She feels at home with Finch, "returned to herself."

The years bring increasing emotional isolation. Lilian bears three children. Finch suffers protracted clinical depression broken by moments of domineering petulance, but the essential tone is distance. When he looks about their parlor, Lilian does not feel he sees her.

Then Walter Vail returns, widowed.

There is no doubt which man the reader wants for Lilian. Vail is Cary Grant to Finch's Ralph Bellamy, Rhett Butler to Finch's Ashley Wilkes. But this is Boston in the Thirties, where leaving a husband or even breaking the mold is believed "insanity" or "ruining her life." Lilian is not Anna Karenina, nor was meant to be. And Vail falls short of Count Vronsky. He has a habit of disappearing. As Lilian spins internally through fire for Vail and duty to Finch, it is precisely because she struggles so hard to stifle her yearnings that we sense how powerful those yearnings are.

Set when and where it is, Lilian's prolonged conflict grows agonizing. Minot evokes the era expertly. She dabs period detail—Herman the Great Mouse cartoons, ball gowns of rustling organza and crêpe de Chine—and employs a narrative voice faintly antique. She uses spare prose with gem-like precision and a painter's eye (the watercolor on *Monkeys's* jacket was by Minot). Even when she lifts an image—here from Keats, there from Twain—we feel more like complimenting her taste than charging literary misdemeanor. Like Fitzgerald, she cascades names for atmosphere and sketches characters clearly in two or three strokes.

They become, however, background against which only Lilian stands out fully drawn, for this seems initially her story. But soon, to borrow a Minot metaphor, at the end of Lilian's sleeve we see our own hand. Rather than emotional thrust, this is a novel of deepening evocations. Under the magnifying lens of her rigid world, Lilian struggles to become who she is meant to be while her vision grows torturously bifocal. Is she meant to be like virtually everyone else, proper, despite the desolation that will cling to every day of her life? Or should she swim against the current, as do a favorite aunt and an artistic friend, leading them respectively to solitude and suicide?

If Finch has proven a nagging ache, Vail, with his disappearances, can be a searing pain. Just miles from where the words "quiet desperation" were first penned, Lilian has found her marriage to Finch to be side-by-side, not face-to-face, yet even if emotionally absent his body is in the room.

As tension swells over which course Lilian will choose, we sense how carefully Minot's grim vision has shaped Lilian's life. Her darkest depths coming from shattered hopes rather than progressive petrification, we fear she may define happiness as absence of pain, a notion built entirely in negative territory, and buy peace with lost hope.

Like Lilian, the novel itself may too easily reject the heights of human possibility. But if Minot eschews the grandeur of high tragedy in favor of taut realism, and it's arguable which she achieves, *Folly* places her beside the most gifted of our young writers—Madison Smartt Bell, Lorrie Moore, Mona Simpson—whose best is still to come.