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HOUSE ARREST

By Mary Morris

Doubleday/Nan A. Talese; 272 pp.

Maggie Conover, the 36 year-old narrator of Mary Morris's compelling fourth novel, began her travel writing career with a magazine column whose "readers had no idea about the places I wrote about. So I began to write about places that do not exist." Thereafter, readers found her pieces more interesting.

Maggie's strategy also makes a perfect metaphor for what Morris does here: veering off the facts toward the more significant territory of the truth.

Needing periodic escape from the restrictive domesticity of marriage and motherhood, Maggie sojourns to exciting vacationlands for Easy Rider Travel Books. But when she returns to a Caribbean island called only *la isla*—but which feels a whole lot like Cuba—Maggie finds she has leapt from tame household constraint into a far more sinister imprisonment. She has barely left the plane when the island's authorities put her under house arrest.

Like Kafka's Josef K., Maggie seems at first to have no idea what offense she has committed. But this is not Kafka. Morris's taut novel is not about guilt but confinement, particularly about women imprisoned by men and possibly even by societies designed by men.

On her first visit, Maggie had befriended Isabel Calderón, illegitimate daughter and vociferous critic of El Caballo—who feels a whole lot like Castro—the dictator who professes love for his people but who rules as a tyrant. Exotic, high-spirited and sensuous, Isabel's beauty is marred by a haunting misery and need to escape *la isla*, which her father forbids.

Extensive flashbacks chronicle Maggie and Isabel's growing friendship, rich in mysterious and erotic touches—meeting Isabel's mother and daughter, sharing with each other life histories, confessing dreams, topless sunbathing and showering together—until, in a contract sealed with a kiss, Isabel seduces Maggie into conveniently "losing" her passport and ticket back to the States.

Now, two years later, having returned ostensibly to update her description of the island but more concerned with learning what's become of Isabel, Maggie is imprisoned in a hotel while El Caballo's underlings interrogate her about Isabel's disappearance. Quickly, we see Maggie will never admit she helped Isabel flee. What we don't know is whether she'll ever leave this island alive, a tension Morris manipulates masterfully right to the final page.

In part, that tension is what helps this novel rise above several plot improbabilities. Despite her "arrest," Maggie manages to skip out easily enough to tour the island, updating her earlier account, even having a night on the town with some lively, affable prostitutes. She is free to call the States and speak to her husband, her father and her editor, yet she never bothers to tell them of her arrest or ask for help.

Many readers may wish Morris had elasticized the spare prose that was more suited to her poignant *A Mother's Love*. In the earlier novel, focused on intense yet familiar feelings, such reserve added the power of understatement. But in the more exotic situation of *House Arrest*, we might wish Maggie to sift her reactions more finely.

Perhaps, Morris might have felt that self-indulgent, however, as this novel contains a number of roman à clef touches: like Morris, Maggie is a travel writer who lives in Brooklyn with an architect husband and small daughter, and, like Maggie, Morris wrote about Cuba in 1991 and was detained upon returning two years later.

The novel's texture is greatly enriched by thumbnail sketches of Caribbean history and by the professional travel writer's sense of place, the emerald hummingbirds and air perfumed by frangipani, and especially the images of an island putrifying under despotic rule: a place where people lack what Americans take for granted, so Maggie tips waiters with toothpaste, a place where looters ate the birds in the zoo: "They ate the giraffe as well. It is not difficult to see that the people are starving. They have eaten their cats. Their horses too. But they draw the line at dogs. They think if they eat their dogs, they will eat their children next."

Morris employs similarly expert brushstrokes in characterization: an interrogator "has the kind of eyes that make you understand that one human being can actually pull out the fingernails of another."

What most lifts this book far above its thriller-genre plot outline are its thematic depth and urgent tone. At its heart, this book explores some of the best and worst of being a woman, although by no means are the women in this novel all alike. While Isabel sees her father as a tyrant, her mother sees him as a dashing romantic figure, and Isabel's daughter simply feels, "If Mummy would just get on her knees and grovel, we could have whatever we wanted."

At her best—such as whenever Maggie and Isabel are together—Morris makes us feel the allure of female friendship, its multileveled complexity and resonance, the reasons why many women insist that no matter how wonderful any male figure in their lives might be, they cannot imagine life without close female friends.

But those lives are fettered by restraint and vulnerability. As everything on this island conspires to keep Maggie from escaping imprisonment for the crime of having helped another woman find freedom, she finds herself longing for the protected bondage of the home she'd always sought to escape. We can't help but feel a fierce frustration bubbling up in Morris's voice, speaking of confinement, oppression and clipped wings, speaking unmistakably and authoritatively with a woman's voice.