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## VINDICATION

By Frances Sherwood

Farrar Straus Giroux; 435 pp.

Imagine the nerve of this woman. In Britain's Age of Reason. In 1792. To suggest that the state had an obligation to provide an education for its citizens. Worse, to propose that girls be educated the same as boys and become intellectual companions rather than adornments, nursemaids and vessels for physical release. Worst, to hint that marriage—even if the only alternative to streetwalking or the poorhouse—was a form of sanctioned prostitution rather than a divinely ordained rite making a man owner of home, wife and children.

Clearly, this Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas were as perverse as, say, the new American notion that government should be accountable to the governed. She had to be, and was, thoroughly denounced.

But, in Frances Sherwood's engrossing fictionalized biography it isn't the furor provoked by her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that destroys Wollstonecraft. Rather, it is her childhood of abuse, neglect and loss that forms a lifelong melancholia with bouts of insanity and suicidal depression. Ultimately, it is being the bearer of life in these pre-antiseptic, pre-antibiotic days when childbirth so often cost a woman's life.

It's easy to see why two-time O. Henry Award-winning Sherwood, whose own father committed suicide the day before he was to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and who then enrolled as the only white student at Howard University, would be drawn to Wollstonecraft and the radical circle she dined with each Thursday night: the revolutionaries Thomas Paine and William Godwin, the visionary William Blake (Sherwood includes a subtly erotic/edenic scene of Blake, his wife and Mary dining nude in the wild garden behind Blake's house) and, Mary's first lover, the painter Henry Fuseli.

By creating a novel rather than biography, Sherwood can fill gaps in the factual record with whimsical detail. She takes, for example, an affair Wollstonecraft had with American Gilbert Imlay in Paris—a real enough tryst, which produced Wollstonecraft's first child—and adds whips and bondage and transvestism.

Sometimes, Sherwood wanders too far afield in her eagerness to portray the barbarities of the Enlightenment, such as having Mary committed to Bedlam (she never was) or fall in love with a gay publisher (she didn't) as artistic ruses to show how society treated mental patients and gays. Sherwood's decision to render 18th Century life in a 20th Century voice leads, too, to a quivering sense of skating the expanse to two centuries on sometimes wobbly blades.

Yet, the novel's three great virtues easily overwhelm its flaws. First, Sherwood showers the reader with fascinating period detail: the constant search for chamber pots (which are invariably dumped out windows onto the street), the public zest to watch hangings, babies soothed with laudanum, the capricious executions of the Reign of Terror, women's underwear or lack thereof, the "rule of thumb" stating a man could beat his wife whenever he chose provided the stick was no thicker than his thumb.

Sherwood colors Mary's world with a brilliant tapestry of supporting characters, not only fiery thinkers like Godwin and Paine and the magnificently eccentric poet/engraver Blake, but Mary's witty and benevolent publisher Joseph Johnson and his housekeeper Mrs. Mason, a warm, loquacious servant worthy of Dickens.

Chief, though, of this compelling book's strengths is its complex portrait of Mary, who watched her father beat his family and later wondered how she could be wife or mother, who saw her dearest girlhood friend die in childbirth and wondered if anything you love can last, and who suggested to a world whose rules were written by men that women, given an equal chance at full personhood, might prove worthy to walk beside men rather than several timorous steps behind.