

St. Petersburg Times May 20, 1990

FALLING ANGELS

By Barbara Gowdy

Soho Press

Because he was speaking as a writer, not a family therapist, Tolstoy's opening line of *Anna Karenina* embodies a palpable truth: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." That is: in fiction, only trouble is interesting. The love affair or family life we wish to live is not the one we wish to read about.

The Field family in Canadian novelist Barbara Gowdy's *Falling Angels* is more than troubled enough to be interesting. The book opens in 1969 with the death of the alcoholic mother, Mrs. Field, who has either jumped or slipped from the roof of her home. We never do find out which, but the answer would resolve merely whether hers was a fast or a slow suicide. All she had done for the past 21 years was lie on a couch holding a coffee mug filled with whiskey while staring at the t.v. screen, even when the only thing on it was a test pattern.

She, alone in this family, is not interesting. But the reason for her torpor is. As the novel flashes back ten years to Christmas Day 1959, her three daughters find an old newspaper clipping revealing that their mother, in what was ruled a "tragic accident," dropped her infant son over Niagara Falls in 1948. Baby Jimmy, of whose existence they'd never known, who would have been their older brother, becomes a heroic figure to the girls. He would have been their champion when boys mocked them at school. Maybe he even would have made their father different.

Mr. Field, a used-car salesman, humiliates and bullies his daughters. Lou, 9, the middle daughter, immediately forgives her mother for the baby's death; after all, it may have been a baby *him*. With their supine mother and tyrant father, the girls become the novel's focus. Different as sisters can be, they form for each other the only sanctuary in a hostile world. Norma, 10, kindhearted and obese, is the most pitiable. She gravitates toward any warmth. When boys taunt her, moo at her and call her Enorma, she feels she should act like Daniel in the lions' den. Lou is the tough one, the leader. While Norma turns her pain inward, Lou turns hers outward, angry at the world, storming off after dark to throw stones at windows and streetlights. Sandy, 8, is the pretty one, the baby, the sweet one whom even the father never hits. Norma adores her: "Norma longed for a pretty friend . . . like her sister Sandy. [Pretty girls, Norma thought,] stay sweet as babies. Ugly girls are rotten; their outer ugliness rots them inside."

Much that happens to the girls verges on comic but instead feels torturous because of how effectively Gowdy uses the girls' viewpoints. We see events only through their eyes. So when the trip their father promised them to Disneyland—in a chapter included in *Best American Short Stories 1989*—turns into two weeks of enforced practice drill in

living in a bomb shelter, we feel the horror of their helplessness, particularly Norma's, who gets her first period as soon as the shelter door is sealed. Her father refuses to let her return to the house for napkins. "We'll tear up a sheet. . . . What do ya think the pioneers did?" To make the two weeks endurable, the mother lets the girls sip from her mug.

Over the ten years it covers, this novel becomes the story of surviving parents who cannot love. Each daughter copes as best she can, which is often not very well. Sandy, to whom older men are quickly drawn, becomes pliantly promiscuous and "because the whole point of being with him is to make him happy" gets predictably pregnant. Norma, toward whom Mr. Field makes a sexual advance, eventually finds the girlfriend as beautiful as Sandy and falls in love. Lou meets an LSD-dropping revolutionary who looks like John Lennon, and, as often happens with daughters of unloving fathers, pours herself so obsessively into the relationship that she drives him away.

Barbara Gowdy has written a hard-hitting book which presents all three daughters as fully realized characters. Even the foul-mouthed, malicious Lou becomes sympathetic. The complex network of feelings among the Field family cries out for more development, perhaps, than these 208 pages provide, but that sole complaint may just be another way of wishing for more of an otherwise good thing.