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BISCUITS OF LOVE: PAMELA DUNCAN'S NOVELS

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When Pamela Duncan took Lee Smith's workshop in fiction writing at North Carolina State University, she brought in what she hesitantly called "chunks," unlike the short stories other members of the class were writing. She was encouraged to continue producing her chunks, and these eventually became her master's thesis. Her first novel, *Moon Women* (2001), is a revision of that thesis. To publish a well-received novel from a school assignment is a notable accomplishment; to follow that achievement by producing two subsequent novels, both award winning, is nothing short of spectacular. In each of her succeeding novels, *Plant Life* (2003) and *The Big Beautiful* (2007), the chunks are evident, put together with progressive skill. This essay will examine four common characteristics of the three novels: balanced structure, colloquial language, humor, and the theme of love both within and without the family.

Although details and settings differ, the plots are basically the same: a young woman finds herself in a crisis situation, moves back to live with some family members, becomes involved in a new job, encounters an attentive man whom she originally resists but eventually accepts, and ends better off than she was when the book began. This bare bones outline does not do justice to the rich diversity of these books. Ashley, Laurel, and Cassandra, the protagonists, are surrounded by an extraordinary group of characters whose words and actions differentiate the novels.

In an unpublished essay, "Spinning Words into Gold," Duncan has written about her writing method. She explains

> So much of writing seems to come from this mysterious place inside, this storytelling mechanism that already knows the whole story but only doles it out to me in bits and pieces. I pick up the pen, I start making words on a page, and I see where the writing takes me. I don't

> write in a linear fashion at all. The bits and pieces grow into chunks, then I work on organizing the chunks, like patches in a quilt, and then I try and stitch them all together.

This quilt metaphor, indicating itself her Appalachian mountain origins, is useful in emphasizing both the rich content and careful organization necessary for the completed work. A structure of this sort allows her to use multiple points of view, a combination of narrative and rumination, and a way to go back and forth in time. This form gives her freedom to explore widely, and it is successful because she stitches her chunks together so carefully.

Elsewhere in her "Spinning Words" essay, Duncan deals with what Henry James called the germ, or donnée, of a particular novel. She writes

> One day about a week before the workshop started, I was lying in the bathtub daydreaming when suddenly I saw a near-collision of three women on a country road at night. A mother and daughter in a car heading one way, an old woman with a walker heading the other way. The car rocks to a stop, the old woman stares mesmerized into the headlights. It became the first scene I wrote for the book.

This scene comes early in *Moon Women*, when the three principal characters, Ruth Ann, driving with her daughter, Ashley, nearly runs over her befogged mother, Marvelle, who is on the road with her walker (p. 36). The scene is replicated near the end of the book when Ruth Ann, driving Ashley to the hospital to have her baby, spots the disheveled Marvelle in her red and white polyester suit struggling down the road (p. 281). These paired events exemplify one way that Duncan controls her materials.

The challenge of writing with multiple points of view is handled adroitly and differently in each of the three novels. *Moon Women* presents Ruth Ann, mother of Ashley and daughter to Marvelle Moon. All are principal points of view characters, but when Marvelle remembers her past life her thoughts are indicated by italics. *Plant Life*, where the three generations of women share the focus with their friends in the mill, employs a different device. In it the deceased grandmother,

Alberta, is given five set pieces of narrative spaced evenly throughout the book and set apart with shaded paper and labeled with her name. Other mill workers, Percilla, Maxann, Lottie Mae, and Idalene, have set pieces with titles. The mother and daughter, Pansy and Laurel, control the action with their words and thoughts with no artificial separators. In *The Big Beautiful* the focus is almost entirely Cassandra, the character who runs away from her wedding in the mountains and drives in a borrowed limousine to Salter Path on the North Carolina coast. The point of view occasionally shifts to her Aunt May and the pre-teen Annie Laurie, along with a few others. These shifts in point of view are integrated smoothly without typographical intrusion.

Having all these speakers and viewpoints in the novels gives Duncan an opportunity to do what she does best: use colloquial language in a skillful and rhythmical way. Marvelle tells Ashley, "When Mama brung Jesse home to board with us while he worked the mines, I knowed he was the one for me" (*Moon Women*, 91). Duncan not only uses ordinary speech in direct dialogue but also indirectly in thoughts. For instance, Cassandra had "even took to listening to talk radio at night" (*MW*, 201). And Pansy, snapping green beans in a bowl, "despised the tin-can taste of store beans. Even when she rinsed them and cooked them with fat-back they still had a whang to them" (*Plant Life*, 112). Sometimes Duncan combines direct and indirect vernacular, as in this conversation between May and Cassandra:

> And if you love him, why then, everything else falls just as natural as breathing. You don't have to think about it ary bit." When she said "ary bit" it sounded so much like Cassandra's mama it about broke her heart (*Big Beautiful*, 176).

Writing in dialect is extremely difficult. To be effective a fine line must be drawn between credibility and the exaggerations of the "Literary Phunnymen" of the nineteenth century. Like her control of structure, her flamboyant style is constrained by not going over the top. Her style is commendably natural and sensitively nuanced.

Duncan most often uses the vernacular in an unselfconscious way, but there are times when she makes her characters aware of their idiosyncratic speech. The matter of grammar is raised in *Moon Women*.

Angela, the one so stuck up that Ashley tells her "You better not let yourself get caught out in the rain. Your nose is turned up so high, you might drown," (83) takes her uncle to task.

> "I wish you would quit talking like that in front of my children."
> "Talking like what?" Dwight said.
> "Well, cussing, for one thing, and using bad grammar."
> "Hell, punkin ain't bad grammar. It's bad pronuncement" (218).

When Laurel goes to the beauty parlor she reports that

> Nicky the hairdresser [was] telling in great detail how her mama had gone blind in one eye because of a detached rectum. It had taken all her willpower to keep from busting out laughing (*Big Beautiful,*196).

This awareness of the language is demonstrated in her occasional use of puns. Just as Cassandra has left her groom at the church door, she drives alone to the Grove Park Inn in Asheville, the planned honeymoon location.

> "Do you have reservations?" the valet-parking boy asks. Oh, honey, she thought. Where were you last month, last week, this morning, when that question might've done me some good? (*Big Beautiful,* 45)

Her acute ear for the rhythms of Appalachian talk is seen in a variety of ways. Duncan's use of language is part and parcel of her comic vision. Reviewers of each of the novels emphasize the pervasive humor. It is apparent not only in the way people talk but in what they say. Colorful metaphors abound. In *Plant Life* Dan says that Maxann "goes through men like Popsicles" (166). In the same book the not-always-amicable housemates, May and Doris, get into an argument about saving the turtles at the beach. When Doris says something May disagrees with, she says that she "got on her like a duck on a june bug." Moments later, noticing that Doris is on the brink of collapse, May tells her with real concern, "You look like death eating on a cracker" (88-89).

Food, both literal and metaphorical, plays an important part in the novels. One especially comic scene in *Moon Women* is the food fight Ruth Ann's family wages at a family dinner. Only one soft roll is thrown, but that is enough to turn an argument into gales of laughter (85-86). In charge of the Labor Day picnic at the mill in *Plant Life,* Laurel

> had ordered enough pig and potato salad and baked beans and slaw and hush puppies and rolls and sweet tea to feed everybody at least twice (294).

Cassandra, in *The Big Beautiful,* comes home one night from the Food Lion and trips and falls:

> The grocery bag flew out of her hand, and the pint of Ben & Jerry's rolled across the cement and into the grass. New York Super Fudge Chunk, her favorite. There go my lovers, she thought. Ben and Jerry. And the Keebler elves. They were in that sack, too (136).

Cassandra "broke up" with her lovers by throwing the pint of ice cream and box of chocolate chip cookies in the sound. But at the end of the novel she realizes that Hector is her true lover. Shortly after they make love (in a closet, during a hurricane) she thinks, "sex was the gravy on the biscuit of love" (376).

A prominent vehicle for humor is her treatment of weddings. In *Plant Life* Percilla remembers her wedding at home with disappointment: "Didn't have nothing for a reception but coffee and a little old pound cake with lemon icing, and it already had a piece cut out of it" (187). However, Percilla has a second chance at a church wedding, though with a very unexpected outcome. The scene in Chapter 11 of *Plant Life* is preparation for a more elaborate treatment of a wedding in the first chapter of *The Big Beautiful,* which retains my vote as the most comical sequence in all of Duncan's writing.

The books, of course, are not simply comic explorations of life in the mountains or on the beach. The prevailing subject of the three novels is family relationships, especially in the way an older generation influences the younger. Marvelle, Alberta, and Doris, the grandmothers, attempt to impart the wisdom of their collective ages

to the ones coming behind. Much of the advice leans toward cautions against men. "'Don't never get married, honey. Stay single and love them all if you got to, but don't never get married,'" Alberta advises Laurel in *Plant Life* (1). When Laurel asks her why she didn't take her own advice, her grandmother acknowledges that the young are at the "mercy of their own fickle heart" and says that she would have been better off if she "wouldn't never have give up my own dreams, just to have him love me, have him touch me."

The tension between practicality and passion is a persistent theme, expressed in a multitude of ways. There generally is a reluctance to marry, but usually the protagonists (all women) succumb to the blandishments of a man. In *Moon Women,* Ashley, unmarried and pregnant, resists the attentions of Keith, the admirably loyal suitor and the baby's father, because she is not sure she wishes to marry. Her mother, Ruth Ann, allows her husband A. J., the good ole boy whom she has divorced, to come back to live in her house. Laurel, the chief character in *Plant Life*, flies off to Vegas with her women friends at the end of the novel, but the chivalrous cop, Joe Clark, is waiting in the wings. In *The Big Beautiful* Cassandra weighs her choice between two suitors. While women are the focus in each of Duncan's novels, all are deeply involved with men.

There is also a tension between romance, or courtship, and reality. Literal dreams are recounted often, some more nightmarish than others, but often dealing with the relationship between genders. This emphasis on romance is bolstered, perhaps ironically, in Duncan's frequent allusions to film, music lyrics, and especially romance novels, both classic and contemporary. All bolster the romantic aura of the novels. In *The Big Beautiful* Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is frequently referred to. More than once, Cassandra sees Hector giving her "the Darcy look."

To conclude, Duncan's three novels of love and courtship in the context of family dynamics, presented through a gratifyingly encompassing lens of interesting and sometimes exotic characters, enriched by language that rings true and an allusiveness that has yet to be uncovered, is a remarkable achievement. In her essay, "Spinning Words," she says,

> I learned that it's great to start out with an idea of where you're going, but don't resist those detours when they come up. They almost always lead to the most interesting surprises, the discoveries that make writing a novel such an adventure and a joy.

May her growing readership share in that adventure and joy as she continues to perfect her craft.