

# The New Criterion

## Books

December 1995

### Priestesses together

by [Robert Richman](#)

While there has been no shortage of criticism of radical feminists and New Age proselytizers, there has been little fiction that dissects these follies with skill—at least until now. *Hunters and Gatherers*, Francine Prose's hilarious satire of the odder progeny of the women's movement—not to mention the Native American "healers" on whom some of these women rely for spiritual guidance—goes a long way toward filling the void.

The book opens with the protagonist, Martha, a thirty-year-old fact-checker at a New York fashion magazine, wandering alone down a beach on Fire Island. Her boyfriend has just left her, and, hesitant and unsure thanks to her failures in love and in life, she is ripe for the comedy about to befall her.

On her walk she notices a number of women who seem to know one another and, unlike herself, to have come here for a purpose: they "paired off and gazed warmly into each other's eyes until they fell into melting embraces; then, regretfully, they separated, and each floated off down the beach to another woman, another gaze, another soulful embrace." What Martha has witnessed is not a seaside staging of some trendy play, but a ritual of a "Driud holy night, a late-summer revel and gathering-in of female force." The woman who talks to Martha first is Randi, or Hegwitha (her "Goddess" name); the others in her circle are Titania, Freya, Diana, Joy, and Bernie. The group's leader, Isis Moonwagon, is a former academic turned New Age shamaness. Martha first sees Isis smiling beatifically, educating disciples on the beach; it is she who moments later stages her own drowning so someone—Martha, as it turns out— may have the privilege of "saving" her.

Back at Isis's beach house, Martha comments on the grandness of her home and is icily informed by her hostess that it is not "just *my* house ... It's *all* our houses." Isis explains to Martha that the house is an "ovulary"—the politically correct version of "seminary."

Across the room, Martha sees a strange sight—strange, anyway, in Isis's abode: Sonoma, the sullen teenaged daughter of Freya. "Stuffed into a tight white cowboy outfit, satin miniskirt, blouse, fringed vest, [and] cowboy hat"—and consuming lots of junk food—Sonoma is a stark contrast to the peasant-shawled, tofu-devourers around her. When Diana suggests a ritual to honor Sonoma's first period—one summoning "the Goddess whose blood flows with the cycles of Earth our Mother"—Sonoma responds: "No way."

Martha's attempts to "center" herself that night, first through long silences and later through chanting with the group, are vain. But most of her initial doubts about Isis and her followers begin to vanish after a satisfying talk with them about her old boyfriend. (Whenever anyone in the group speaks she must be in possession of the Talking Stick. "As long as we have the stick," Isis declares at one point

to her minions, “we can freely share our hopes and fears and dreams. But when we don’t, our work is to listen and be caring and not judge.”)

A few weeks later, after an evening with the ladies commemorating Witches’ Sabbath—during which they attempt to communicate with witches-past by lighting a cleansing fire in a wok, all the while wearing hag faces of their own design—Martha agrees to go with them to visit Maria Aquilo, a Native American healer living in the Arizona desert. Maria’s specialty, it seems, is to aid Goddess worshipers in their “vision quest”—that is, she helps women literally *to see* the Goddess. At first Sonoma, ever defiant of her elders’ wishes, balks at the idea of the trip, but Joy argues persuasively that it would be a boon to both her and her mother: “Being around wise women who live in harmony with Turtle Earth, women respected in their tribal cultures, passing wisdom from mother to daughter. How could that not be good for Freya and Sonoma?” Martha too has some vague second thoughts—walking through the airport, it annoys her to think that onlookers will presume her one of those “instantly recognizable mental-case feminist man-haters”—but by the time she is in the air her qualms are gone. Indeed, she suddenly has the urge to “beam healing love down to a damaged planet,” but is distracted by the loud breathing of Hegwitha beside her.

After an amusing visit to a Papago mission in Tucson where Isis again contrives to have someone save her, the ladies pile into a rented van (a Ram, to Joy’s dismay) to find Aquilo’s Four Feathers Institute. When they arrive, they are greeted, not by Aquilo (she has bolted for the Earth Sisters Week in Sante Fe), but her gun-toting assistant, Rita Ochoa. Some of the women are annoyed that they will be working with an unknown. “Who says Rita’s a healer?” asks Freya. “Anyone can hang out a shingle and call herself a medicine woman.”

Isis thinks they should stay “to see why the Goddess has sent Rita instead of Maria”; Bernie and Sonoma want to stay because they are famished. Rita tries to assure everyone that she is just as good a dispenser of Indian lore as Aquilo. “I do Talking Stick ... I do storytelling. I do sweat lodge. I do drumming.” When the dish Rita serves is revealed to be roadkill stew—“It is very important in our Native culture not to waste the earth’s bounty,” Rita declares—everyone takes it in stride except Sonoma: “It’s like so racist to expect us to eat this crap just because she’s Native American and we have to be polite.” Yet eat they do, for soon they must fast in preparation for the vision quest Rita has planned for them.

The next day, during a walk on which she informs the ladies that the arms of certain cacti actually do talk to one another, Rita tosses her gum wrapper on the ground; at the end of the walk she offers everyone, not the expected “organic bark infusion,” but Gatorade. When Joy asks Rita about the gum wrapper, she mumbles something about the Earth Mother’s ability to heal herself, then changes the subject to the sweat lodge, where, later that evening, she will conduct a rite that will purify the group before they attempt to see the Goddess. “Tonight,” Rita says, “we will counsel with the Great Spirit and the powers of the four directions... . We will gather kindling to heat our stones and bring water to heat our sacred fire pit, so the power of the Great Spirit will cleanse our body of toxins and negativity. The sweat lodge entrance is narrow and low, and when we enter and leave, it is like being reabsorbed and born again through the birth canal.” Martha, who has slowly grown dismayed with what she has seen at the Four Feathers Institute, has a sudden realization: “she wouldn’t be able to do it. She would panic and not be able to strip and crawl up the birth canal.” Tired of “playing at Goddess worship,” she fakes getting her period to avoid the ordeal.

Martha also forgoes the climax of the trip—the vision quest—by hiding in the rocks. Sonoma, too, plans to avoid the quest, but her strategy—to run away—is a little more extreme. Freya, when she learns that her daughter has gone, tearfully observes: “I thought some kind of healing was starting to happen between us.” (And you know Freya is upset because she unthinkingly cries “Jesus!” instead of “Great Goddess!”) The book ends with an unharmed Sonoma found hitchhiking on the highway by Martha, Hegwitha, and a meat-truck driver named T-Bone, a miraculously nice fellow who has

been enlisted in the search and who reminds one of the very man Freya invoked.

I have divulged much of the story of *Hunters and Gatherers*, but this should not spoil it for anyone. For what matters most is not the plot, but the particulars. Not a page goes by without some amusingly apt observation or detail. Ms. Prose's uncanny ability to mimic speech—in this case, the precise, pedantic talk of educated New York women—is, of course, nothing new. In *Primitive People* (1992), she does an amazing mimicry of the speech of Hudson Valley blue bloods; in *Hungry & Hungry Hearts* (1984), that of immigrant Jews; and in *Household Saints* (1981), that of working-class Italians. All these novels have satirical elements, but none comes close to the sheer quantity of ridicule that Prose heaps on her subjects here. And for good reason: in these novels, the subjects did not deserve this treatment quite so much.

It is not that Francine Prose cannot—as her wonderful invention Rita Ochoa might say—“do” compassion. She can; she can “do” pathos, too. Some of her characters—miracle of miracles—on occasion speak and act like real people. (You just have to pry it out of them.) Only rarely does someone (like Sonoma) talk sense from the start. Indeed, apart from Freya's wonderfully acerbic daughter, only Titania, the owner of Love's Body, an ecologically-sound bubble-bath maker, takes the air out of Rita's and Isis's respective balloons with any regularity. “Don't you hate it when people use the planet to make a point?” Titania asks after complaining about how Isis forces group members to drink cheap jug wine out of large, environment-friendly bottles. Even Isis (heaven forfend) is not wholly without virtue. But her displays of goodness—and the intelligence and prudence the others sometimes show—do not come close to the number of occasions worthy of satire.

And yet, the judgment and sense a few of the Goddess worshipers sometimes demonstrate only heightens the idiocies they perpetrate in the name of their feminist ideals. Of these, perhaps none is more outrageous than the claim of equality in their relations with one another. From that first cozy mingling on the beach, when Martha observes that “the same rules of selection appl[y]” as at the high-school dance (“the graceful, the pretty, the confident danced; the others stood around watching”), to the rivalry, later on, about who has better visions; from the competitiveness evinced by everyone even for the affections of lowly Sonoma, to the pointlessness of the Talking Stick~dash/everything contradicts the endless avowals of cooperation and harmony. “Power's not supposed to matter,” says Hegwitha at one point, “we're all priestesses together. But what do you do about someone like Isis who's so incredibly special?” As for Martha, when she finally is fired from her magazine, she has the urge to denounce the patriarchal rule that she had to submit to when she was there, but eventually realizes that life among Isis and her followers is not “unlike the Darwinian scramble of daily life” at her former place of employment.

Prose's delicious ironies seem almost self-generated and enough for two books. Rita, the guru of rocks and herbs, is not only disrespectful of the earth but man-obsessed and racist to boot. The cancer-ridden Hegwitha—she refuses to tell the others that she is no longer in remission, so as not to spoil the trip—needs real medicine, but has to listen to Rita's bogus claims about the healing power of spirits and mud. And while Martha despises the way Isis plays favorites, the onetime fact-checker has the urge to use her knowledge of Hegwitha's condition to score points against the ladies. This last irony is not particularly at the expense of either feminists or New Agers; nor is the one on the last page of the novel, when Martha and Sonoma appear to share a genuine spiritual experience. But no matter. All in all, *Hunters and Gatherers* is a much-needed fictional demolition of some of the excesses of feminism. Is the book a healing and centering experience? No: just a wildly funny one.

**Robert Richman's** book of poems, *Voice on the Wind*, was recently published by Copper Beech Press.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 14 December 1995, on page 73

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