

October 18, 1987

Love With Reticence and Recipes

By JACK BUTLER

This is a title to make a Southerner flinch - another helping of country quaint, of yokel exaggeration? Nor do fried green tomatoes, important as they are, figure essentially in the architectonics of the book.

What Fannie Flagg has written, however, is a real novel and a good one. The story centers on a cafe in the railroad town of Whistle Stop, Ala., and on Idgie and Ruth, the two women who run the cafe; but it is a generational story, in which even the minor characters are given a goodly share of the stage, and it ranges from Whistle Stop to Valdosta, Ga., Birmingham and Chicago, and ranges back and forth in time from the pre-Depression era to the present. Ms. Flagg evokes, in fine detail, Hoovervilles, the Klan, a "hunting camp" that is more nearly a juke joint, a hot jazz spot in the black section of Birmingham and many other settings. I suspect a phenomenal memory combined with a great deal of research.

FRIED GREEN TOMATOES AT THE WHISTLE STOP CAFE

By Fannie Flagg.

The story is presented in several voices: in excerpts from The Weems Weekly and other journals - in the reminiscences of Ninny Threadgoode, an 80-year-old in a nursing home who tells her story to Evelyn Couch - whose mother-in-law is a resident at the home - and in direct narration. From early on, the author is lavish with invented detail, too - when Ninny Threadgoode, Idgie's sister-in-law, tells how she threw a broom at a cat in a tree but the broom stuck so now she can't sweep her floors, I knew I could trust the book's textures. The novel is not a comedy, but there are scores of tossed-off little hilarities.

The core of the story is the unusual love affair between Idgie and Ruth, rendered with exactitude and delicacy, and with just the balance of clarity and reticence that would have made it acceptable in that time and place. There are as many strong black characters as white: Sipsey, the cook; George, her informally adopted son, who handles the barbecuing; George's wife, Onzell, and their children and friends, are among them. One of the best passages is a summary of the hard-working life of Jasper Peavy, Pullman porter, who has put his children through college and paid his burial policy only to overhear his grandson, Mohammed Abdul, express embarrassment at his Uncle Tom ways.

The prose is serviceable, often good, but sometimes baggy and careless. Ms. Flagg undercuts some of her best effects by overexplaining them, as with the legitimate pathos of the legend on Ninny Threadgoode's hospital bracelet - followed by a paragraph of explication veiled as internal monologue.

The newspaper excerpts are on key and fetching, and Ninny and her interlocutor, Evelyn, are rewarding; but the narrative sequence is arbitrary, and while some events of

lesser interest are told in too great detail, others, like George and Idgie's trial, are passed over too rapidly. The effect is that of the busy brain of a born story teller, spooling it out however it comes to mind, so that perhaps quibbles with prose and structure are to be considered minor.

And really, in an era plagued by so much merely trendy experimentalism, I must admire a writer who can end with a genuinely productive innovation: the recipe for biscuits has way too much Crisco and not enough baking powder, but the one for fried green tomatoes is right on.

[Return to the Books Home Page](#)

[Home](#) | [Site Index](#) | [Site Search](#) | [Forums](#) | [Archives](#) | [Marketplace](#)

[Quick News](#) | [Page One Plus](#) | [International](#) | [National/N.Y.](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#)
| [Science](#) | [Sports](#) | [Weather](#) | [Editorial](#) | [Op-Ed](#) | [Arts](#) | [Automobiles](#) | [Books](#) |
[Diversions](#) | [Job Market](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Travel](#)

[Help/Feedback](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Services](#) | [New York Today](#)

[Copyright 1998 The New York Times Company](#)