

## *Old Lady Power*

**The Banishment**, by Alma Stone, *Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1973. 279 pp. \$6.95.*

IN *The Banishment*, a short novel at once both sad and funny, Alma Stone dips into the future (how fantastic? how improbable?) to report on the banishment of all the old ladies from New York City by the decree of an all-powerful Committee, presided over by a Leader, and their subsequent overthrow of the city's regime and return not only to residence but also to power. The Committee, which has already dispensed with all the city parks and has poured concrete over all the grass and flowers too, finds, in the old ladies, perhaps the last threat to the hegemony of death, whether of conformity or uniformity, it has imposed on life in the city and decrees their registration and then banishment in a whole fleet of chartered "special" buses. But what have the old ladies actually *done*? On board one of the buses, one old lady speaks of the son who "turned her in" to the Committee's minions. "Puzzled, she sought an explanation from her seatmate. 'I was very quiet and meek. I tried not to be in the way. Why did he turn me in?"

Why was I banished? What did I do wrong?" "You forgot to die," said her seat-mate. . . ."

And that about sums it up—this parable-like story, with its overtones of *King Lear*, where the children of this world in their generation look on the old ladies as superfluous or expendable. They get in the way, with their walking sticks, their shopping bags "with glorious, ringing names—Gimbel's East, Larry's Fish Market, Send Bella Back." They clutter up, even halt traffic; they stand on corners proclaiming their delusions for all to hear: one old lady who thinks she's been deprived of one breast, another who proclaims the imminent Second Coming of Christ. Above all, they feed the pigeons, who also clutter up the city—droppings, feathers, and all. Finally, for all their doddering age, they're alive and still kicking—on the side of life (albeit an often grotesque one) and thus a reproach if not a downright threat to the city fathers, who have banished the pigeons along with the trees and grass—all in the name of efficiency of course, but the efficiency of a computer rather than a human being. And the old ladies don't have qualities likely to find favor with a computer.

So most of them are sent into banishment on the special buses, some of which scour the country as though they were on holiday but one of which breaks down near the Jersey Turnpike, with a Howard Johnson's close by. There the old ladies survive by hook or crook (selling the salvage from turnpike wrecks, for example) until they muster forces enough to march on the city. Meanwhile, a saving remnant, in the form of an underground, has been at work deep in the city's bowels (one strategy: tampering with the city's standpipes so that fires—many mysterious ones too—cannot be fought effectively). And thus the way is prepared for the great debacle of the Committee, when the two groups of old ladies unseat the ruling powers and quickly pass some laws of their own which might well be interpreted as forming some sort of Old Lady Constitution: "Restore the parks at

once. Dig up the concrete and plant back real trees and flowers. Return books and music and art to the people. Turn the sound off on TV. . . . Restore the benches. . . . Give everybody something to hold on to. . . . Stop treating old ladies like old ladies. Treat them like people. . . . Drop silly expressions: golden years, senior citizens. . . . Recycle old men."

And the old ladies carry the day—among them the underground leader Sarah, who writes her autobiography on the walls of her room, and the black Elizabeth, who puts on "the old granny act" to please her son but who is really a Sister under the skin, and the nun Sister Mary Magdalena with her Dat Nun car. This oppressed minority group turns out to be the dominant majority: after all, if we live long enough, we all get old—black, white, rich, poor, Protestant, Catholic. It's the only thing you can really count on—that and death, Miss Stone suggests; so you had better show it some tolerance, even respect. And to sin against it is to sin against life itself. Even the self-appointed "catcher of people," a waiter whose hobby is pushing old ladies out of their one-room apartment windows, halfway hoping he may someday catch one before she reaches the ground and thus achieve ultimate fame, seems to acknowledge as much. (Happily, one of the old ladies hoists him with his own petard and pushes *him* out the window; and that's the last of him.)

This novel ends in a triumph of Old Lady Power, which is to say also a triumph of Life Power. And Miss Stone, for all that she is sometimes too elliptical, even obscure here, her comic norms, her rationale for the grotesque not always clearly in focus, celebrates the old ladies for all they're worth, while not closing her eyes to their follies and the indignities, even indecencies they may be called on to suffer in the fullness of time. She is all the more persuasive as a result: hurrah for Old Lady Power, but isn't it a shame our world should thus force it into being? This seems her principal theme; and, on the whole, she

manages her central paradox and the complex tone it demands very well indeed.

Three short stories conclude this volume: "The Portrait," "The Traveler," and "Oh, Pity the Dwarf's Butt." Here especially is evident (as it was in a previous novel, *The Bible Salesman*) Miss Stone's splendid ear for the colloquial idiom of black folks, poor white folks, "the weak and the underdogs," as one of her characters, speaking in some exasperation, puts it. (Miss Stone is originally from Jasper in east Texas, and one feels sure that she did a powerful lot of listening during her growing up there, as she apparently has done since then where she now lives, in New York.) But she is never merely colorful or quaint; she makes her idiom work for her dramatically, in the most functional way. These stories, as does *The Banishment*, show her sympathy for the outcast and the forlorn; but the pathos inherent in their situations is never allowed to congeal into sentimentality because of Miss Stone's complex—and saving—perception, which includes irony and humor as well as the pathetic. If these stories have faults, they are the faults of *The Banishment* previously cited. What is important—and what abides—in Miss Stone's work is her genuine and honest sympathy for life in all its manifestations—a sympathy rendered all the more meaningful because of her undoubted—perhaps inevitable—zest for all that this same life has to offer. For Miss Stone, then, sympathy and compassion seem but the other side of celebration and joy. What more blessed vision can any writer hope to have?

Reviewed by ROBERT DRAKE