A Woman of Salt, by Mary Potter Engel

reviewed by Ann-Janine Morey in the July 17, 2002 issue

Midrash refers to the rabbinic tradition of interpretation that explores scripture beyond its literal meanings. The verse by verse interpretations generated by midrashic commentary bind the Talmud, the rabbinic traditions and the Bible into a complex, inexhaustible source of religious significance. Mary Potter Engel takes inspiration from this tradition by relating the fictional events of a woman's life to a contemporary meditation on the meaning of the story of Lot's wife.

In the opening chapter of Engel's novel the protagonist, Ruth VanderZicht, is called to her dying mother's bedside. Subsequent chapters offer episodes from Ruth's life that explain why Ruth is traumatized by this call. These chapters alternate with mid-rash on Lot's wife. In the biblical story a maternal glance, wrongly directed, results in a terrible consequence. But what other meanings can one find in Genesis 19:1-29? Perhaps the real danger is not in the act of looking back but in being seen by God. As Ruth writes each entry on Lot's wife, she is herself both the mother looking back and the daughter left in Sodom. Lot's wife becomes both Ruth and her mother, women solidified by tears. Gradually the story of Lot's wife merges with Ruth's story, and Ruth steps out to narrate the final section of the novel in the first person.

Ruth has spent her adult life fleeing a strict Dutch Calvinist upbringing, and her mode of flight has been to treat her body as a foreign territory of uncertain welcome. Sometimes she tries to ignore it, and sometimes she abuses it, but rarely does she feel that her spiritual being is at home in her puzzling flesh. Ruth has various experiences that drive her into different postures of body-spirit dysfunction, including failed marriages, abortion and drug abuse and, apparently, achieving a Ph.D. in religion.

As Ruth's story unfolds, her mother Helen emerges as her psychological and religious tormentor, simultaneously accusing Ruth of whoredom and encouraging her sexual precocity. In the one chapter given over to Helen's point of view, Helen

tries to ambush Ruth with scripture and protestations of maternal solicitude. While Ruth cowers and then sleeps in the bathroom of her home, Helen flaps about the premises like a dreadful religious harpy.

This ambitious novel is a sometimes awkward combination of theology, poetry and mother-daughter dynamics. While overstructured, it also contains some memorable lyrical moments. Engel dramatizes the effects of fundamentalist theology upon a good daughter who has taken seriously her intellectual and religious upbringing. Since Engel cannot assume that her readers are familiar with the theological concerns that shape her characters, she must instruct and demonstrate at the same time. Her task is complicated by her narrative structure. The pattern of alternating chapters is slow to create a momentum that naturally carries the reader forward. Until that momentum takes over--about halfway into the novel--*A Woman of Salt* labors under the burden of the discontinuous events of Ruth's spiritual self-absorption. Men, all flawed and disappointing creatures, seem to appear and disappear. Theological comments are self-consciously inserted as explanations for Ruth's anguished and perpetual suffering.

The second half of the novel flows more naturally, making effective use of the water metaphors that have been accruing since the book's opening pages. Here Ruth's ecstatic, liturgical voice is a plausible outcome of her meditations on Lot's wife, and it is almost enough to convince the reader that a reconciliation between Ruth and Helen has occurred. Ruth's own impending motherhood intersects with her mother's death, and this seems to bring her to a new understanding of her own life, Unfortunately, this redemptive conclusion is achieved only through the death of the monstrous mother.

Ruth presides over her mother's deathbed, offering Helen the forgiveness she has never asked for. Nowhere does the dying mother consent to a reconciliation, much less one structured on Ruth's terms. Perhaps the novel's unkind depiction of the mother is mitigated by its tender meditations on Lot's wife, who is lent a fierce and loving maternity. Still, readers may find themselves puzzled by this transformation of the frightening story of Genesis 19--arguably a tale about the divine right of fathers to be fools and tyrants--into a cautionary lesson about how the daughter gets the last word over her mother's dead body.