



ANDRZEJCZECZOT

MARBLE SKIN

By Slavenka Drakulic.

Translated by Greg Mosse.

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By Nicholas Christopher

THE narrator of Slavenka Drakulic's finely wrought novel "Marble Skin" steps from the cold shadows of one of those antiseptically lighted rooms in Samuel Beckett's twin masterpieces, "Molloy" and "Malone Dies," and, speaking as much to herself as to us, breaks a lifetime of silence. Both she and the novel's other two central characters, her mother and her stepfather (except for a brief walk-on, all the minor characters live only in photographs), remain nameless. This can be a heavy-handed device when used by a lesser writer, but Ms. Drakulic handles it with such skill that one finishes the book convinced that attaching a name — any name — to a member of its infernal triangle would have hopelessly disrupted its delicate symmetry.

The plot around which Ms. Drakulic opens up her characters is skeletal. Her heroine is a sculptor who carves a deeply sensual statue out of icy, glittering

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marble and calls it "My Mother's Body." When a newspaper publishes a photograph of the sculpture, the mother, who lives in another town, sees it, recognizes her youthful self and tries to commit suicide. Her daughter is summoned to her bedside, and during a two-day vigil there she summons up her childhood, her mother's past and the disastrous intrusion into both their lives of the man who becomes her stepfather. These memories float to her on a gulf of space and time bound by two very distinct shores: her mother's two suicide attempts, the one attached to the sculpture and another very early in the daughter's life.

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Deftly alternating recurring images involving hands, moisture, whiteness and dust between contexts of sexuality and sculpturing, the author brings to life the inner lives of mother and daughter with clarity and power. The reader is drawn at once into the scents, textures and human temperatures of the small flat, its bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom, the creaking of its beds, the faint flutters of air set off by its doors opening and closing. Mother and daughter, we are told, live together in "parallel silences," excruciating to the daughter, comfortable for the mother. The novel subtly takes on new depth, and greater risks, when at its midpoint those silences become equally comfortable for the daughter: "I have no sister. I have only her. And she remains silent. To learn to know her I had to become her," the narrator thinks. "She had no voice but objects betrayed her because they spoke her language — the language of the body. I had to get into her bed, her wardrobes, put on her dresses and shoes."

Ms. Drakulic, a Croatian national who now lives

most of the time in Paris, is one of Eastern Europe's foremost feminist authors. She has published a previous novel, "Holograms of Fear," and notable works of nonfiction, including "The Balkan Express," which makes an especially fine introduction to her work. But it is in "Marble Skin" that she has done her finest writing, exploring the relationship between a mother and daughter with such a simple but volatile mixture of revulsion, eroticism and intimacy that by the novel's end it is an entire panoply of women we feel we have come to know through this single pair and their clothes, their bed linens, the care and neglect of their hair and fingernails, the fears and tensions centered on the subjects of their menstrual cycles and sexual lives.

On occasion, the author lapses from her spare prose and overwrites descriptive passages, using strings of modifiers when a single well-chosen adjective would have sufficed. The translation by Greg Mosse is also stilted in places, and occasionally even sloppy. This may be due to the fact that Mr. Mosse's translation is two steps removed from Ms. Drakulic's original; he is working from a French translation.

Still, "Marble Skin" is a novel that quietly comes at you, putting ice into your blood long before you're aware of it. Ms. Drakulic deals unflinchingly, and without jargon, pop psychologizing or editorial comment, with child abuse, incest and rape, making them the more horrible for the nearly suffocated voice in which her heroine speaks of them. In dealing with issues of deadly seriousness to men as well as to women — both politically and emotionally — she speaks, like her heroine, as powerfully with her silences as with her words. □