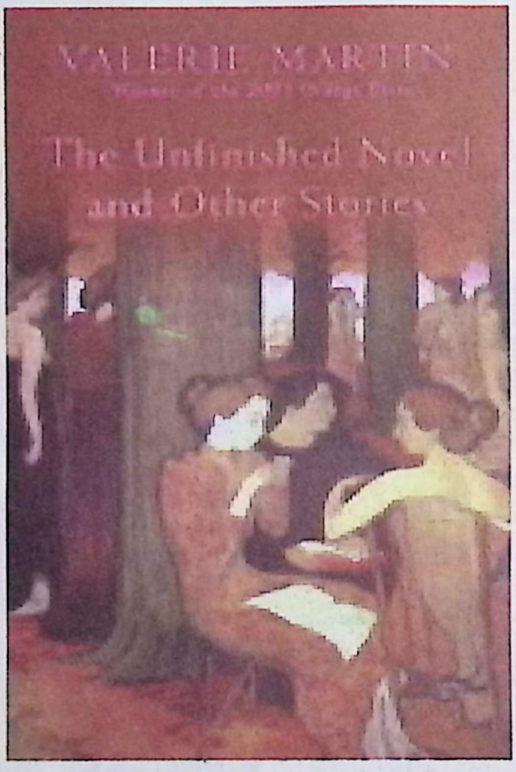
# The cruel muse

**FAY WELDON**




*The Unfinished Novel and Other Stories*
*Valerie Martin*

Fiction divides, by my reckoning, into four crude categories. There are bad bad books (bin them), good bad books (read and enjoy before binning), bad good books (shudder and down to the charity shop), and good good books, which you reverentially keep. Valerie Martin's The Unfinished Novel and Other Stories comes into the good good category, the smallest, slimmest section of all.

These six longish stories deal with the nature of art and the artist, and the tyranny of creative talent. The muse is cruel and capricious. She makes few distinctions between good and bad, gives worldly success to the least deserving, demands but seldom rewards integrity, and requires the lifeblood of sacrificial victims in the form of those who have the misfortune to love the artist, the writer, the dancer, the musician.

Martin's writing is graceful, controlled and precise: she herself is evidently well acquainted with the muse. Certainly her portraits of places and people accord only too well with studios and rehearsal rooms one has known oneself. Those who cluster there unite against an indifferent outside world, only to fall to squabbling, cheating and conniving; they are humiliated and arrogant by turns, entangled in emotional and practical webs of their own making. But what good stories they offer the writer.

There's the world-famous painter Meyer Anspach, in "His Blue Period", with his lyrical outbursts and "ceaseless whines of paranoia". Anspach is blamed by his less famous but self-righteous friend for driving his mistress to suicide, only for the friend to find that he himself is responsible. In "The Bower", Sandra, a drama teacher, has a dangerous affair with Carter, a beautiful young actor, only to discover that his sensitivities belong to the stage, not to real life. As if she shouldn't have known! In the title story a writer, nervous of his own talents and not wanting to be outshone, literally buries a rival's unfinished manuscript entrusted to him after her death.

In the final story, "The Change" - destined, I imagine, to turn up time and again in anthologies - Evan, a hack writer, lives with Gina, a genius painter. Gina, preparing her exhibition, is increasingly immersed in her work, indifferent to the world and its expectations. She becomes cold and uncivil. One night Evan awakes in terror from a dream. "His throat was parched, he felt dehydrated, as if he had been wandering in a desert. Pursued by what? he thought, as he sat up and fumbled around for his slippers. Some desert creature? A creature with claws and wings and the face of a woman who would pose some unanswerable riddle before tearing him to bits? The idea amused him ..."

Martin uses these very different stories to address "the unanswerable riddle" that surfaces in Evan's dream - how can the artist function in an unreal world while doomed to live in the real one? In its last few pages, "The Change" provides an answer as a "change" takes literal form, and very eerie and exquisitely written it is. With this answer the book takes a cohesive form and ends up feeling more like a many-peopled novel than a collection of stories.

I read Martin's 2003 Orange prizewinner, Property, and mistook it for a bad good book, a deed for which I now apologise to the Gods of Literature. That novel, about a slave owner's wife, was relentlessly, upsettingly monotone; colourless, like a body short of red blood cells. I ascribed that to a deficiency in the writing, but in the light of The Unfinished Novel, I see that Martin was merely giving an exact and proper account of what it is to be denatured by evil. The breadth of Martin's interests is remarkable. She moves around flawlessly in time and space; nothing frightens her. She took on 13th-century sainthood in her novel/biography Salvation, explored the Victorian underworld in Mary Reilly, dissected the relationship between man and nature in The Great Divorce, and in lighter mood engages happily in Tuscan romps. I suspect it is because she is no relativist that she is so universally at ease. Morality to her has a real existence, so time and place become irrelevant. She feels as well at home there as here, and effortlessly takes the reader with her.

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