

During those months, Guy-Sheftall and Cole were gathering personal archives of written material related to the unprecedented campaign. They have honed their collections into an anthology of writings on the subject, including personal reflections, open letters, op-ed pieces, petitions, critical essays and speeches, most of them contemplating or agonizing over the nagging question: Who should be first?

The result is a contemporaneous record of a riveting rhetorical battle, especially among feminists, over the preeminence of race or gender. Guy-Sheftall and Cole's compilation of the perspectives of journalists, professors, public intellectuals, students and bloggers—including such influential voices as Gloria Steinem, Katha Pollitt and Mark Anthony Neal—has captured the mood of this momentous event.

Essays by law professor Tracy A. Thomas and author Alice Walker place the campaign in useful historical context: Thomas reflects on parallels between the 2008 primary debates and the divide among 19th-century progressives over the 14th and 15th amendments, which granted the vote to black men even as they excluded women's suffrage. "Women... were told that it was the 'Negro's hour' and that they must wait patiently for their time to come," she writes. Walker explores the racial history of Jim Crow segregation and the denial of black voting rights: "Imagine, if he wins the presidency we will have not one but three Black women in the White House; one tall, two somewhat shorter; none of them carrying the washing in and out of the back door." Both Thomas and Walker view the contest with tremendous awe and hope, while simultaneously warning of the dangers of false divides when we fail to recognize our common oppressions and different experiences.

In contrast to the long view of history taken by Thomas and Walker, most of those writing during the debate season could not see beyond the primaries. And though some addressed the intersection of race and gender, many couldn't get past the question of who should be first. Yet the general election revealed that voters—whatever their race, age or gender—were able to transcend their identity-based sentiments to elect a first, even if he was not their first choice.

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**A WOMAN'S PLACE IS IN THE RING**

Helena María Viramontes

*The Lady Matador's Hotel*  
By Cristina García  
Scribner

Dictators and their aftermath continue to dominate the literature, and the lives, of the Americas. Writers from Gabriel García Márquez to Julia Alvarez to Junot Díaz chronicle the force of grief these regimes leave behind, as well as the hopeful resiliency of citizens suffering under the greed and corruption of leaders who fear nothing but the loss of power. The winds of change in these fascist governments are measured by which way the United States' Latin America policy weathervane is pointed. What doesn't change is the ferociousness



inevitably directed at the innocent.

An ex-dictator is campaigning for president in Cristina García's lyrical, bewitching fifth novel, *The Lady Matador's Hotel*. Over the course of a week in the Hotel Miraflores, García switches between the intersecting lives of Suki Palacios, a vibrant and no-nonsense bullfighter competing in the first "Battle of the Lady Matadors"; Aura, a hotel waitress and former guerrilla whose family was murdered by the military; Colonel Martín Abel, an organizer of a military gathering that expounds the usual rhetoric about "weeding out the insurgents... monitoring university students... infiltrating the unions..."; Won Kim, an unhappy Korean textile-factory owner with employee problems and a 15-year-old mistress who is eight months pregnant with his child; Gertrudis Stüber, a calculating lawyer made wealthy in the adoption business; and, finally, the Cuban-American poet Ricardo, who arrives in García's unnamed country from New York City to adopt a baby.

One might think such a cast could fall prey to stereotypes, but García hasn't won almost every writing award, for nothing. Her amazing talent is to depict psychologically complicated characters against the backdrop of a complicated society, in this case one made more unstable by upcoming elections. The novel is slim by today's standards, yet García's subject matter is epic: civil war, assassination attempts, historical amnesia, godly messages dispatched from a canary, xenophobia, communication with the dead, the redemption of art, you name it. After every chapter, she inserts reports from newspapers and magazines, the Weather Channel, television

celebrity and news shows and feminist radio programs regarding events in the fragile nation. These banal entries offset descriptions of horrific destruction, and the reader can't help but laugh.

The metaphor that permeates the novel is the bullring. García implies that sometimes, in this "wedge of forgotten land between continents, to this place of hurricanes and violence and calculated erasures," the only goal that one can strive for is to look directly into the eyes of death. Without the bull, "there's no drama, no spectacle, no poetry...no glory. No immortality." García is at the height of her imaginative powers, and *The Lady Matador's Hotel* is a tour de force, at once hopeful and hopeless.

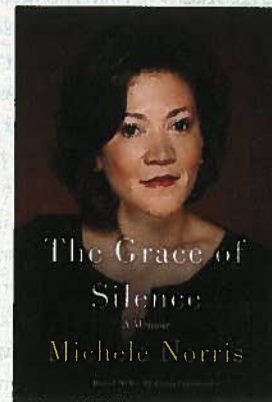
HELENA MARÍA VIRAMONTES is director of creative writing at Cornell University and author of *Their Dogs Came With Them* (Atria, 2007).

**UNSPOKEN**

Ebony Utley

*The Grace of Silence*  
By Michele Norris  
Pantheon

AS THE TITLE OF Michele Norris' memoir suggests, there can be valid reasons for staying quiet. But in the face of overt racism, silence exacts a striking price. It wasn't until long after her father's death in his 60s that Norris, a prize-winning journalist and co-host of National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*, learned he had been wounded by a police officer's bullet just weeks after returning home from naval service in World War II. Nor



had she been told that in the 1940s and '50s, her polished and eloquent maternal grandmother had worked for Quaker Oats as an itinerant Aunt Jemima, promoting pancake mix across six states.

"Our parents felt we needed to know only so much," she writes. "No time for tears. No yearning for sympathy. ... How can you soar if you're freighted down by the anger of your ancestors?" *The Grace of Silence* is Norris' attempt to understand her family's choice never to speak of these events.

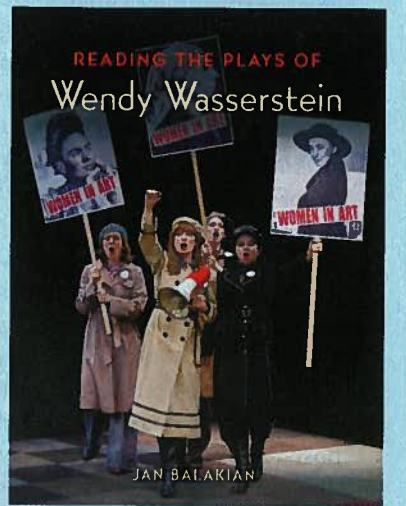
Piecing together the Aunt Jemima period of her grandmother's life, Norris juxtaposes her uncle's pride in his mother's small-town fame—"She put that costume on and she was a star"—with her mother's shame at the humiliating image and Norris' own disbelief, ambivalence and fascination. She also cleverly critiques the historical symbolism of the iconic pancake-wielding "mammy" character, from Aunt Jemima's debut at the 1893 World's Fair in the form of a large and gregarious former slave to the 1994 ad campaign starring Gladys Knight.

While trying to grasp why her father intervened one night in an altercation with a white police officer and was shot and wounded, Norris explores the overlooked role of black WWII veterans in the U.S. civil-rights struggle. Bygone racism and resistance affect the present whether we discuss them or not, she suggests. We cannot move on until we tell the truth.

Norris illustrates the everyday cost of silence at seemingly minor moments: her mother's unexpressed anger when a white neighbor cuts down an apple tree rather than let the Norris chil-

**"When I think of my plays as a body of work, I always hope that they reflect how a group of people lived at a certain time."**

—Wendy Wasserstein



The New Title from Award-winning Screenwriter, Author and Professor

**Jan Balakian**

The women's movement, American cultural history, social class in Manhattan, and Jewish-American identity define the plays of Wendy Wasserstein. Balakian's essays place Wasserstein's seven major plays, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Heidi Chronicles*, in historical context.

Balancing drama and comedy, Wasserstein also drew inspiration from Chekhov and from the comedies of S. N. Behrman, Moss Hart, and Noel Coward. Balakian's interviews with the playwright before her death in 2006, with her classmates, with playwright Chris Durang, and with director Dan Sullivan, further illuminate Wasserstein's concerns. For the first time, the public can see handwritten pages from Wasserstein's notebooks and personal letters about the plays from Frank Rich and Betty Friedan, which Balakian excavated from the Mount Holyoke archives. 50 black-and-white illustrations capture the theatrical productions, social movements, locations, culture, and music that define the plays.

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