The Blind Assassin: A Review
By Abigail Thomas

"I felt confused, and also inadequate: whatever it was he was asking or demanding, it was beyond me. This was the first time a man would expect more from me than I was capable of giving, but it would not be the last." With these words, Iris Chase Griffen, the narrator of Margaret Atwood's latest novel The Blind Assassin, describes the feelings that would haunt her throughout her life.

With this book, Atwood reexamines some of the themes she began in the Handmaid's Tale. The two central character's - Iris Chase Griffen and her younger sister Laura - are examples of the ways women can be trapped by circumstances and society. The Blind Assassin is in no way as dramatic as the science fiction world created in a Handmaid's Tale, where women are trapped simply by their biology, their reproductive functions. This story is told by an 82 year old Iris who is looking back over her childhood. She tells the story of growing up between World War I and World War II. As the story unfolds, we see that to some extent she is trapped and limited by society, but we also see another side through the perspective of her younger sister Laura. As Laura develops in her years as a teenager, she shows Iris some of the ways in which women allow themselves to be trapped.

Readers familiar with Atwood will also recognize narrative techniques from Alias Grace. In The Blind Assassin, however, Atwood uses a novel within a novel within a novel to tell the tale. While at times this is effective, it is also slightly confusing. The outer framework is a memoir - Iris' story. The next layer is a novel with the same title - the Blind Assassin - written by see BLIND on page five

Dancer in the Dark
By Darcy Roake
How can I describe Lars Von Trier's brilliant film Dancer in the Dark? The most emotionally and physically grating film I have ever seen? Yes. The most beautiful and raw acting and directing I have ever experienced? Yes. Absolute adoration and repulsion for one of the most fascinating films put onto celluloid? Yes. So I suppose it would be fair to call it a jumble of contradictions that left me more confused and yet somehow clearheaded. Now that I've managed to confuse you in discussing it, let me clarify.

The film stars Bjork as a Czechoslovakian immigrant (Selma) working at a factory in America. She see DANCER on page four

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR:
Know the Facts About Eating Disorders

AT A DORM, I RECENTLY SHOWED A VIDEO ABOUT HOW MEDIA IMAGES DISTORT OUR VIEWS OF OURSELVES AND HAD A DISCUSSION ABOUT EATING DISORDERS ON CAMPUS. THE ALL FEMALE GROUP SEEMED A BIT TIRED OF THE SUBJECT - THEY SAID THAT THEY'VE HEARD MOST OF THIS BEFORE, AND WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH BEING THIN ANYWAY? NOTHING, DEPENDING ON HOW YOU GOT THERE. Compulsive Exercising, see KNOW on page two

The VAGINA Monologues
Austin Arts Center
Goodwin Theater

February 12, 2001
8:00 pm

In This Issue:
A Look at the Controversy Over Same Sex Marriages
Womyn's Space: Creativity Inspired and Executed by Women
Maureen's Article
A Look at the Controversy Over Same-Sex Marriages

By Maggie Korey

Two men clench at each other, one is at the edge of life:

"An acidness in health,"

The other has sold the house to pay the medical bills, changed the hospital sheets himself, sacrificed even beyond the point where assistance could help.

"For richer or for poorer."

They are married to each other in their own eyes, in God’s eyes, in the eyes of their church and community:

"In every eye but the laws."

"For better or worse."

And so now, as the doctor unplugs the respirator, as the lovers’ duet ends, the law will put the living lover through a hell for which not even his beloved’s death could have prepared his imagination.

"Till death do us part."

- Richard Mohr

The preceding quote painfully illuminates the high emotional stakes behind the debate over legalizing same-sex marriages. It illustrates, in the opinion of the author, that homosexual couples are capable of embracing the ideals that compose traditional marriage. Mohr is not alone in his belief that same-sex couples should be granted the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. In recent months the State of Vermont passed a bill legalizing the "civil union," or what most would recognize as the equivalent of same-sex marriage. Vermont’s Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples are entitled to the same legal rights given to heterosexual couples.

The approved bill grants spousal rights to areas covered by Vermont state laws, such as medical decisions, insurance coverage, inheritance, family-leave benefits, and child custody. In fact, many assert that the civil union is identical to traditional marriage in every aspect but its name. Like heterosexual couples, same-sex couples have to have their union certified by a justice of the peace, judge or clergy member. Failed unions must file for a dissolution. Vermont now stands in the same position that Hawaii did almost four years ago. In 1996, Hawaii’s Supreme Court overturned the state’s prohibition on same-sex marriage on the grounds that denying the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples was a form of sexual discrimination, clearly forbidden in the state’s constitution.

These recent steps to guarantee same-sex couples the same rights that heterosexual couples have taken for granted since the advent of the now-traditional Western form of marriage at the beginning of thirteenth century have, needless to say, been met with both strong support and opposition. The issue of same-sex marriage has been taken up as a political platform, an opportunity for candidates to express their views on the hotly-debated "family values" issue. The civil union bill has provoked politicians, gay-rights activists, religious leaders, and the community at large to express their views on the matter.

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A Look at the Controversy Over Same-Sex Marriages

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to defend or contest the role of
traditional marriage in contemporary
American society. Although
historically the Western institution held
a woman to be the personal property of
her husband, marriage has long ceased
to be merely an instrument transferring
ownership. There is not debate that
marriage has evolved as a social
institution for as long as history records
it. Even in ancient Rome, where
romantic love was recognized to play a
role in marriage, it was seen as largely
as a "hindrance to the establishment of
stable households." Marriage was
primarily a practical union, a means of
linking socially prominent households.
Today, however, marriage is viewed as
more than simply a recipe for economic
stability of the domestic unit or for the
civilizing of "wayward and wanton"
young men. If the ideal of romantic
love at the center of marriage is given
greater emphasis now than ever before,
in practice the goal of procreation does
not necessarily lie at its core. In an era
in which contraception and abortion
have loosed the ties between sex and
procreation, what exactly does marriage
mean to us as a society?

Expectably, no consensus
view has yet emerged. Supporters
of same-sex marriage argue for the
continued evolution of the role of
marriage in our society. They point out
that slavery was once socially
acceptable and that, as recently as 1967,
several states didn't recognize mixed-
race marriages performed outside the
state. They argue that the prohibitions
against same-sex marriages will be
abolished as were the antimiscegenation
laws barely more than three decades
ago. Many supporters assert that the
dynamics of marriage must shift to
accommodate the changes in our
society; the next logical step being
inclusions of same-sex couples within
its rubric. But if the state were to
recognize same-sex marriages,
opponents of the bill ask, where would
the line of limitation be drawn? Why
shouldn't the government legalize
polygamy or marriage between
children? Gay-rights activists respond
that the issues of same-sex marriage and
of sanctioning multiple spouses are
entirely unrelated. Some activists go
so far as to contend that acceptance of
same-sex marriage represents a
profoundly conservative social
direction: after all, the bill seeks to
promote monogamy, fidelity, and "the
disciplines of family life." Although
perhaps the legalization of same-sex
marriage is not Dan Quayle's ideal
exemplification of family values,
heterosexual and same-sex couples
alike hold the idea that marriage is the
foundation of a stable society.

Opponents of the same-sex
marriage maintain that marriage, by
definition, is the union of a man and a
woman. Supporters, however, argue
that our society needs to redefine
marriage in light of the growing social
acceptance of other forms of sexual
relationships. Andrew Sullivan,
departing editor of The New Republic,
offers the following syllogism:
"Marriage is for people who love;

The other has sold the house to pay the medical bills; changed the
hospital sheets himself; sacrificed even beyond the point where assistance
could help.

And so now, as the doctor unphuses the respirator, as the lovers' duet
ends, the love will put the living lover through a hell for which not even
his beloved's decay could have prepared his imagination.

They are married to each other in their own eyes, in God's eyes, in
the eyes of their church and community - in every eye but the love's.

The public debate on same-sex marriage quickly makes apparent that
politicians and policy makers are caught in a difficult dilemma. It is quite
impossible to satisfy both the supporters and the opponents of the civil union bill
by significant legislative compromise.

see CONTROVERSY on page seven
is the epitome (to all exteriors) of a tragic figure. She is going blind and yet refuses to reveal her disability in order to keep working so as to save enough money to get her young son an operation that will cure him of the genetic, progressive blindness in their family. One would believe that such a figure would be a tortured soul, and yet, at least in the early part of the film, we see such an amazing light in this woman. What sustains her is the “music” she finds throughout life: both rhythms of those who truly care about her and actual music.

Obsessed with musicals, Selma will find joy in the beats of the factory, of her trailer, of the train that allows her to daydream. In this daydreaming, her life suddenly breaks into a musical number complete with singing and choreographed, 30s musical style dancing. While this may seem strange, I felt it was one of the most powerful parts of the film. The score of the film was composed by Björk, and you feel as if she was living as the character when she created such amazing music. Just as I could hardly discern the actors from their characters (which I will discuss later), the music was inextricably linked to every single aspect of the film. The silences were even more devastating once you had heard the music in Selma’s mind.

Björk’s powerful yet poignant and sweet voice once again added so many dimensions to Selma. At times it was as if Selma was crying out — in pain, love and anger — even amidst her own version of "My Favorite Things" from Sound of Music.

There is such an amazing contrast brought out between the beauty that Selma sees in the "musicals in her mind" versus the "darkness" of her everyday life. Von Trier visually does this in his cinematography. The majority of the film is shot in a grainy, almost overexposed light in which the characters look so worn. However, the minute a musical number begins, there is a vibrancy. Vivid oranges emerge; the characters are given a color, a light. The music pounds, those who would never move their feet leap, and it is in these numbers that we get a true glimpse into the usually guarded character of Selma. It is through this interior mind of hers that we see what a conflicted but an absolutely self-sacrificing, almost angelic creature she is. The most tragic part of the film is that once you return to the stark contrast of actuality, events occur (that I will not mention for the sake of the film) that cast her, to some, as unforgiving and cruel.

At this point one may be scratching their head at what would be particularly profound in what seems to be contrived plot complete with musical numbers. All that I can say is that, first the plot thickens to a tremendous degree, and second, one has to see it to truly understand its brilliance or, in some cases, abhor it. I can write until my fingers turn blue (which I could most likely do) but it is an experience, not just a film, and you MUST see it. I’m not a typical reviewer that gives you an option. You will severely regret it if you don’t see such a tremendous film. Even if you come out of the theater in actual pain from so much crying (as I did), it is worth it — this film will forever haunt you. What else is about it, however, that makes it such a heartbreaking film? It is the fact that I wasn’t watching actors on a screen as much as watching these characters live.

While there is a controversy over Von Trier directing method, all the actors, but especially Björk (in what she says is her last acting experience) give such amazing, raw performances. In the case of Björk, I never felt she was acting — she had become Selma. Her sweet, impish face, lilting voice, and guarded yet open body language blended so beautifully into the film. The character in the film does questionable things but for pure reasons.

Björk made you literally fall in love with her. Those that surrounded her and truly knew her looked at her in almost awe, and as an audience member I felt that as well. However, despite all that she endures she is imbued with an unparalleled emotional strength and fixed idea about what the point of her life is and is obsessed with achieving that dream, even if it makes her a martyr. Despite the strength we see in her, what was truly difficult to watch in the film was Selma having to endure so much churning, almost see DANCER on page seven
Margaret Atwood's The Blind Assassin

continued from page one
Laura Chase and published posthumously. The third story is a science fiction tale - the paperback, drugstore kind, told by the lover in Laura Chase's novel. These three different layers are woven together but have seemingly very little to do with one another. This adds an element of confusion to an already complicated story. Atwood also employs newspaper clippings, similar to those in Alias Grace, to keep the reader abreast of current events surrounding the story. She had her reasons. Not that they were the same as anybody else's reasons. She was completely ruthless that way.

From the opening lines, we know that Laura has committed suicide. The book then jumps back in time - back to a time when Iris' parents were just getting married, before she and her sister were born. Atwood uses this opening to draw the readers into the story and to give us an important clue about the two sisters.

Atwood dabbles, to some extent, with the effects of society on the girls, both as they grow up and as Iris steps into adult responsibilities. Set mainly between the two wars, historical events such as the Depression, the Red scare, and the organization of Canada's union workers have significant impact on these two lives.

However, Atwood does not concentrate on outside events; they are mentioned only in passing. Therefore it is easy to get lost if a reader is not paying attention; these things have bearing on the characters and yet are not really dealt with. What is apparently significant, both personally for the Chase sisters and for women, we realize, is their social situation. Atwood creates a scenario where the paternal grandmother of the girls is a true old-time aristocrat in Toronto society. This old family has lost their money, so their grandmother marries their grandfather, an up and coming young man who is making a fortune off his button factory. Here we see a meeting of class and nouveau riche capitalism.

This situation implies something about women's social situation which most of us know was applicable at the time - they were dependent, financially, upon men. What we come to realize, however, is that this is not universally true. The Chase sisters are raised with a mix of backgrounds. Their grandmother's old-world reputation had enough weight to overcome the taint of "factory money." Yet she dies before either of the girls are born, so they are merely left with her legacy. The Chase fortune, however, is a substantial reality in their lives. They are raised secluded on the family estate. They know the...
Penis Envy

I envy men who can yearn with infinite emptiness toward the body of a woman, hoping that the yearning will make a child, that the emptiness itself will fertilize the darkness. Women have no illusions about this, being at once houses, tunnels, cups & cupbearers, knowing emptiness as a temporary state between two fulnesses, & seeing no romance in it.,

If I were a man doomed to that infinite emptiness & having no choice in the matter, I would, like the rest, no doubt, find a woman & christen her moonbelly, madonna, gold-haired goddess & make her the tent of my longing, the silk parachute of my lust, the blue-eyed icon of my sacred sexual itch, the mother of my hunger.

But since I am a woman, I must not only inspire the poem but also type it, not only conceive the child but also bear it, not only bear the child but also bathe it, not only bathe the child but also feed it, not only feed the child but also carry it everywhere, everywhere... while men write poems on the mysteries of motherhood.

I envy men who can yearn with infinite emptiness.

by Erica Jong

He suffered the usual masculine disillusionment in discovering that a woman has a brain.

Gone With the Wind
Margaret Mitchell

Variations on the word SLEEP
MARGARET ATWOOD

I would like to watch you sleeping, which may not happen.
I would like to watch you, sleeping, I would like to sleep with you, to enter your sleep as its smooth dark wave slides over my head

and walk with you through that lucet waver forest of bluegreen leaves with its watery sun & three moons toward the cave where you must descend, towards your worst fear I would like to give you the silver branch, the small white flower, the one word that will protect you from the grief at the center of your dream, from the grief at the center. I would like to follow you up the long stairway again & become the boat that would row you back in two cupped hands to where your body lies beside me, and you enter it as easily as breathing in

I would like to be the air that inhabits you for a moment only. I would like to be that unnoticed & that necessary.
Dancer in the Dark continued from page four

same-sex marriage controversy continued from page three

In response to several polls showing the majority of Americans to believe that the government and elected leaders should support "traditional family values" (once the sole property of political conservatives), President Clinton embraced them as a central theme in his 1996 reelection campaign, indicating that he would sign the Defense of Marriage Act, a bill outlawing same-sex marriage at the federal level. This relatively "safe" political strategy is surely to be expected in the absence of a judicial challenge. On the other hand, with courts ruling such exclusive boundaries to marriage unconstitutional (as in Hawaii and Vermont), we may anticipate legislative bodies increasingly to be forced to confront this politically uncomfortable issue.

The controversy involved in passing a bill supporting same-sex marriage, or even the close variant of civil union, is exquisitely complex. The dilemma which policymakers face turns on society's still-conflicting views of marriage and of homosexuality. While many strongly believe that marriage between those of the same sex would destroy the sanctity of this institution, its supporters believe with equal force that withholding the benefits accompanying marriage denies them a most basic human right.

The Blind Assassin: A Review

older sister Laura to demonstrate the "proper spirit." With just as little knowledge of the ways and mores of the world than Iris, Laura is still sickened by the easy way that her older sister gives in to the pressure of men in her life. Laura is constantly testing her boundaries, breaking rules set by the adults in her life and violating social conventions. With no real resources, however, these tactics are almost as ineffective as Iris' choice to passively submit. Tension between the sisters increases, taking us back to the beginning of the book.

While the novel has been narrated throughout by Iris in her old age, we begin to see that the question asked in the beginning of the book is very simply this: did Laura choose to commit suicide or was she pushed over the edge by Iris? This is what, as an old woman, Iris is left with. This question is echoed subtly throughout the book; did Laura find herself in such desperate straits because of the choices Iris made? There is probably never a clear cut answer to a question like this, but Atwood skillfully weaves the various suggestions and feelings throughout the text. We end the book left with many things; the difficulties of growing old, learning to balance family relationships, a mysterious love story, an other-worldly sci-fi tale, and unanswered questions about men and women and society.