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**M**aureen Freely brings Daphne du Maurier's anti-heroine up-to-date in **The Other Rebecca** (Bloomsbury £14.99) by turning her into Sylvia Plath. The re-vamped Rebecca is an American writer whose bitterly confessional novel **The Marriage Hears** is hailed as a feminist classic after her death. Her craggy handsome, well-born English husband is a womanising poet, labelled "Mad Max" Midwinter by reporters who blame him for her death; while sinister Mrs Danvers becomes a batty acolyte editing —

and re-writing — her idol's letters. Freely uses the naive new wife, who finds herself living in her predecessor's fiction, to comment shrewdly on English snobbery and the problems of second marriages. But though she rings the changes with comic verve, ingenuity, and insight into the continuing power of her prototypes, her characters never quite cut loose into independent life.

**P**eggy, the narrator of Elizabeth McCracken's remarkable first novel **The Giant's House** (Jonathan Cape £9.99) is a librarian in a small Cape Cod town, "less a woman than a piece of civic furniture". Only 25, but safely settled into old maid's routines, the cool, pedantic Peggy mocks her own dreams of "kisses that wouldn't be delivered". But one day in 1950, 11-year-old James — impossibly tall for his age, already nick-named the town giant — comes

into her library, and the pair tentatively become friends. Peggy's liking for the boy turns to obsession, and she patiently insinuates herself into his family and his life. Realising that James cannot live long, she makes up her mind with ruthless simplicity: she will love him, and "never care what others thought of me, or even what he was thinking of me." The relationship that she wills into being becomes increasingly complex. Peggy's compassion for James, whose enormous, fragile body is "killing him just with its growth", turns into fierce, physical passion. James, handling his role as circus freak with quiet dignity, needs Peggy but hankers after easy flirtations with other teenagers. The lucid, compelling prose convinces us that this mismatched pair do become a real couple: improbably, disturbingly, and very movingly, theirs is a true love story.

**J**o-Ann Richards displays a wonderful feeling for place and period in **The Innocence of Roast Chicken** (Headline Review £16.99). Kate is miserably out-of-step in 1989 Johannesburg, newly — and, she feels, naively — euphoric about political change. Drinking heavily, quarrelling with her human-rights lawyer husband, she sits isolated but observant, through an enormous, ebullient black-white rally. Kate blames her cynicism on a traumatic incident in 1966, the last of her idyllic summers on her Afrikaans grandparents' chicken farm. Richards handles the juxtaposition between past and present, and the countdown to horror, a shade schematically; but her prose is sharply evocative, and she conjures up the child's powerful feelings with a vividness intensified by nostalgia.

Margaret Walters