

From JSU's Joanne Gates: portrait of singular woman

"ELIZABETH ROBINS, 1862-1952: Actress, Novelist, Feminist," by Joanne E. Gates: University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1994, \$39.95.

Sarah Bernhardt, Katharine Cornell, Helen Hayes. George Sand, Edith Wharton, George Eliot.

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Carrie Chapman Catt.

To each of these lists of actresses, novelists and feminists could be added the name Elizabeth Robins — yet she and her many accomplishments are virtually unknown. There are no books of Robins' on a typical bookstore shelf. Her work doesn't even appear in nearly 2,500 pages of The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women. Gates



Yet after reading Joanne Gates' biography of Elizabeth Robins, the desire to find something written by this remarkable American woman will spark many a search for more.

GATES OPENS EACH of the biography's eight chapters with a "dramatic scene" from Robins' life. Whether it is young Bessie Robins' introduction to the theater, a speech made to celebrate the release of suffragettes from English prison or a "dialogue" between biographer and subject in the epilogue, the technique serves Gates — and Robins — well, putting a vivid face on the scholarly body of work.

Not that the work as a whole is dry and dusty. Robins was accomplished, intelligent and beautiful, and her life was such that it would be a difficult task indeed to render it boring. Gates lives up to her subject by establishing a pace that maintains the reader's interest while still making full use of the vast amount of Robins' own personal papers.

ALSO EXAMINED closely are Robins' plays and fiction — not merely in terms of plot synopsis, but by showing the genesis of each work in Robins' experience and the impact of such events as the great dramatic fight for women's suffrage in turn-of-the-

century England. That battle could be seen as central to Robins' development as a feminist and writer, bringing out her conviction that women had essential stories and essential rights as well.

Still, Gates avoids being preachy, allowing Robins' growth to lead us to Robins' conclusions. At the same time, she places Robins in context, showing her relationship to such great women writers as Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Bronte. She also avoids the problematic pedestal, showing how Robins felt guilt and failure as well as success — and showing a well-rounded, three-dimensional subject as a result.

Joanne Gates has already been awarded a prize for excellence for *Elizabeth Robins*. All one can wish for now is wider recognition of Elizabeth Robins herself — and copies of her works to read.

—KIM KOSTER