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Cathy N. Davidson

A Literature of Survivors: On Teaching Canada’s Women Writers

“Do all feminists kill themselves or go crazy—or does that only happen in the books feminists write?”

I am reminded of this question put to me by a student in the first Women and Literature course I taught, whenever I look over a syllabus which begins with, say, The Awakening or The House of Mirth and ends with such writers as Plath or Sexton. Of course, we teach more than plot summary and biography. Set in its context, Edna Pontellier’s “awakening” should be historically, sociologically, and psychologically illuminating for the contemporary student. But we must also accept the fact that our students do look to the books and the authors they read for models of behavior. And many of the female characters in the texts commonly used in women’s studies courses just do not provide positive models.

Furthermore, we now address a different audience than we did with our first courses. The women’s movement has grown, diversified, gained a wider grass-roots following, won some victories, and consequently achieved a broader sense of perspective and a greater tolerance for diverse lifestyles. Contemporary students seem to be less sympathetic to women characters who are crushed by “The System.” They seem less tolerant of rhetoric in general—even feminist rhetoric. Regularly a class will now find books by women which mechanically characterize men as male chauvinist pigs to be as dubbiously sexist as books by men which perpetrate demeaning stereotypes of women.

Not surprisingly, then, at several recent meetings of feminist teachers and scholars, discussion has centered on the need to modify or revise the typical women’s literature syllabus. It seems that many of us now want to teach more works that (1) portray strong female characters—women who are survivors and not always victims; (2) depict women from a wide range of backgrounds who take up various occupations, including mother and housewife, and whose personal worth is not governed solely by the occupation chosen; (3) present female protagonists who enjoy satisfying relationships with other women and even, at times, with men. Books that serve these three purposes must also be significant works of literature. So we really have four demands that can surely be met by various authors. What I want to suggest here is that there are a number of Canadian women writers in particular whose works exhibit just those qualities for which we are now looking.

The Frontier Spirit

Considering the small population of the country, Canada has produced a surprising number of first-rate women writers. The first novel written in North America was by Frances Brooke, a Canadian woman. The History of Emily Montague (1769) in part contrasts proper English manners with the more liberated behavior of women in provincial outposts of civilization. The frontier continued to be a main theme in the nineteenth century, too. Canadian women wrote travel books, novels about pioneer life, and detailed accounts of life in small towns or on the prairie. Writers like Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill illustrate how well women could cope with the problems of settling a new land. Furthermore, the same sense of strength and independence that those women displayed extends into the twentieth century and is especially exemplified by Nellie McClung whose egalitarian spirit informed her work as both a novelist and an ardent Canadian suffragist.

Possibly because of this heritage, contemporary Canadian women writers tend to portray impressive female protagonists. There are singularly few defeated victims of a sexist society. For the Canadian women writers, the sexes are not simplistically polarized; anatomy is not obviously destiny. These authors seem to feel “secure” (perhaps the best word) with their women protagonists, willing to grant their characters individual strengths and weaknesses. The result is characters who are multifaceted, complex, capable yet believable—and who can consequently provide the positive role models for which many of our students are now looking.

Margaret Atwood

Margaret Atwood could well be such a role model. Although not yet forty years old, she has written three novels, a collection of short stories, a book of criticism on Canadian literature, and some six volumes of poetry. But, more to the point, any one of Atwood’s three novels might be profitably incorporated into a women’s literature course. For example, the first, The Edible Woman (1969), though largely predating the current women’s movement, confronts many of the issues that this movement has dealt with in recent years. And it should especially appeal to college students. The protagonist, Marian McAlpin, is a young woman with an un rewarding job and an unpromising fiancé. During the course of the novel, she must choose between a proper but stifling marriage and a socially suspect but personally challenging autonomy. She finally opts for the latter. Indeed, the title derives from Marian’s final gesture to her intended: she bakes him a woman-shaped cake which effectively symbolizes how she has earlier viewed herself, how he has seen her, and how she would be “consumed” by the marriage. As even this one episode suggests, the novel is very “teachable.”

Atwood’s second novel, Surfacing (1972), should work even better in the classroom, for it is an unusual book—a beautifully written, tightly structured, mythic quest romance. It is also a quest with a difference. The knight of old gives way to a modern woman whose search for her missing father soon evolves into a search for her own authentic self. Because this book is generally known, I will not attempt to do justice to it here but will pass on to the third novel, Lady Oracle (1976), which, more like The Edible Woman, conjoins humor and feminism. The complex comedy in this novel centers on the two related themes of
duplicit and escape. The protagonist, as an obese, unhappy adolescent and as an attractive adult who has become a successful writer of romantic poetry and fiction, characteristically evades common problems, yet finds herself partially living the fantasies (her own and those of others) that supposedly compensate for limited lives. All (even a botched attempt at a final escape through a faked suicide) is handled with a light touch, yet the novel gives rise to some serious questions. Especially pertinent is the focus on how sexist standards, particularly the beauty ethic, pervert both men and women.

Margaret Laurence

Another Canadian author, Margaret Laurence, has also produced works of the highest quality, but she has been generally neglected in the United States. Only one novel, A Jest of God (1964), received substantial notice, and that was under another name and in a different medium—as the popular movie, Rachel, Rachel. Rachel Cameron, a middle-aged, unmarried schoolteacher still dominated by her mother, suffers a long-overdue identity crisis. Out of a brief first affair, which finally forces the protagonist to face her own life, comes the promise of change. Even this painfully self-conscious, long-repressed woman can achieve self-respect and independence. A Jest of God would especially fit into a Women and Literature course if read and taught in conjunction with another Laurence novel. Rachel, unhappily unwed, envies her married sister. However, in The Fire-Dwellers (1969), we have the story of that sister who often feels as if her life is “an unbroken series of trivialities.” Husband and children are not conclusively the “answer.” Neither is a brief affair with a younger man. Stacey Cameron McAindra, too, must learn to understand herself, her husband, and her children better, through experiences that partly parallel Rachel’s.

Incidentally, two other books by Laurence would also go well together. A Bird in the House (1970), a series of interrelated stories, centers on Vanessa McLeod, a young woman who is going to be a writer but who, for the present, overhears more than she yet understands. And just as this work looks forward, A Stone Angel (1964) looks backward. The bitter nonagenarian protagonist of that novel reviews her life and retrospectively examines the same issues the inexperienced Vanessa gradually realizes she faces. These four books examine basic questions that define women—single, married, young, and old.

The Diviners (1976), however, is Laurence’s best novel. Her protagonist in this work, Morag Gunn, is surely as strong and as complexly human as any character in contemporary literature. Furthermore, if Surfacing is a feminist mythic novel, The Diviners is a feminist epic. Scarcely an aspect of the female experience goes untouched by this book that tells, with commendable artistic subtlety, how the protagonist rises above both her low status as the foster daughter of the town’s garbage collector and her first escape, a respectable but demeaning marriage, to become a successful novelist. Morag’s life after leaving the marriage, her experience of raising a daughter (out of wedlock and by a Metis Indian), her development as an artist, and her aging as a woman bring into focus one woman’s attempt to be independent in a world that is sometimes hostile, sometimes (especially when Morag is with her women friends) supportive. By the end of the novel, Morag Gunn has become the Female Hero (writ large), one of the “diviners” who stand, let us hope, at the beginning of a new fictional tradition for women. The Diviners is a perfect book for anyone who wishes to end a woman’s studies course on an affirmative, optimistic, and even exhilarating note.

Other Writers Deserve Attention

While Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence are the two giants of Canadian literature, other writers also deserve attention. Alice Munro, for example, has published three excellent volumes of short stories: Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), Lives of Girls and Women (1971), and Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You (1974). The second of these titles is particularly noteworthy. A series of related tales focuses on a young woman’s adolescence. Munro writes of such matters as Del Jordan’s fascination with her own social and sexual maturation, of her eagerness to rid herself of her virginity, and of the dichotomy between her biological urges and her desire to go on to university, to move away from the small town where the typical pattern is to get pregnant, to wed, and to remain. This is a book that explores, with subtlety and compassion, several varieties of liberation: from custom, from community, from family, from ignorance and innocence, from self-doubts and personal insecurity.

Two other authors, Marian Engel and Jane Rule, also address the question of female sexuality, but do so in different contexts. Engel, in No Clouds of Glory (1968), The Honeyman Festival (1970), and Monodromos (1973), studies identity crises, personal and sexual, that especially beset women in their thirties and forties. Her characters see a need for change in their lives and are determined and strong enough to act accordingly. Thus, in the first of
these books, Sarah Porlock abandons profession and possessions to make a break for Europe and a new life.

Jane Rule, in such works as *The Desert of the Heart* (1964), *This Is Not for You* (1970), *Against the Season* (1971), and *Theme for Diverse Instruments* (1974), explores a different kind of identity crisis. In Rule's fictions, some characters find, often belatedly, that they are lesbians. The outcome of that discovery is sometimes an unexpected sexual fulfillment (as in *The Desert of the Heart*) and sometimes only a recognition without fulfillment. Rule also shows how—for heterosexual and homosexual, for the young and for the very old (as in *Against the Season*)—loneliness is a common condition, yet complex friendships (sometimes platonic, sometimes not) can still bridge the gap between people. Her works are sensitive and are especially appropriate for students sympathetic to gay rights but not fully appreciative of the sociological and psychological ramifications of being homosexual in a society that does not generally condone that sexual orientation.

**French Canadian Writers**

Although I have concentrated on English Canadian writers (because they pose no problem of translation), there are a number of French Canadian authors, such as Marie-Claire Blais, Anne Hebert, and Gabrielle Roy, who deserve note and whose work could well be included in women's studies courses. Perhaps the most accessible of these three is Gabrielle Roy. Her *Where Nests the Water Hen* (1950) portrays a most maternal woman, one who has a child nearly every year and who exists mostly for and through her family. Yet living in northern Manitoba, almost beyond civilization, Luzina Tousignant still achieves for her many children what she thinks they should have and, in this beautifully written and carefully structured novel, fulfills her own life with an impressive capability and dignity. In a very different setting—Montreal at the end of the depression—*The Tin Flute* (1945) shows how various women confront the squalor of their lives—some becoming hardened to it, others sur-

viving whole and powerful. Both these novels show women from a somewhat different culture responding to the demands of their environment and their society, but demands that any reader should readily understand. However, Elsa Kumachuk, a young Eskimo woman who bears a blue-eyed baby and who is the main character in *Windflower* (1970), comes from a completely different culture. This novel moves between the poles of Eskimo and white, old and new, mother and daughter, mother and son, to explore questions that are temporal and timeless, societal and universal. And it, too, is eminently teachable. Roy, I would say, is the least "feminist" of the Canadian authors I have discussed, but her female characters are unique and her vision of strength and survival is one that should be heeded.

**A Literature of Survivors**

That same vision, as I have already indicated, characterizes the English-speaking Canadian writers. And I will close by mentioning a few more of these authors who should be better known. To start with, Audrey Thomas has produced some five books since the late 1960s. One of her best is *Songs My Mother Taught Me* (1973), which, like Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, centers on a young woman's passage through adolescence. Again the introduction to sexuality as well as the coming to terms with self and family are sensitively handled. Both initiations, moreover, are closely connected to the protagonist's experiences while working in a hospital, particularly with mental patients—those who didn't make it. Yet Margaret Gibson Gilboord's *The Butterfly Ward* (1976) shows how "those who didn't make it" really do and also suggests how arbitrary and socially defined are both the causes and the consequences of insanity. In much the same vein, in Adele Wiseman's *Crackpot* (1974), the protagonist, a prostitute daughter of a blind father and a hunch-backed mother, rises above the title which only ostensibly defines her.

But other characters can equally heroically rise above the most rigorously sustained respectability. In *The Book of Eve* (1972), Constance Elizabeth Beresford-Howe examines what happens when after forty years of a thankless, joyless marriage Eve does the unthinkable and finally leaves her domineering husband. It is a rare look at what happens to a Nora after she slams the door. And what happens is a continuing growth of awareness. In a letter addressed to God, the heroine writes:

*Do you realize . . . what submerged identities women like me have? How repressed and suppressed we are by a life that can have no kind of self-expression? . . . To live locked up. Never spontaneous. Never independent. Never free, even to use those four-letter words we all know, because the chief duty of females, we were taught, was to practice the restraints of civilization, not explore its possibilities.*

The novels I have discussed are significant because they concentrate on the possibilities, not the restraints. Although well aware of how women can be conditioned by social pressures, the Canadian writers consistently show women determined to succeed on their own terms despite restricting stereotypes. And these protagonists do survive. Survival, Margaret Atwood...
has documented in her book of the same title, is part of the Canadian national character. For those of us who have taught works in which so many female characters succumb to fate or fortune, helpless victims of a sexist society, it is gratifying to find literature of survivors—women survivors. Cathy N. Davidson is an Assistant Professor of English at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

Karen D. Rappaport

Women Mathematicians: A Bibliography

Although long ignored or unrecognized, there have been several notable women in the history of mathematics. That the list is not long is due to the barriers presented to women trying to study mathematics. Those who were able to learn the subject encountered many more difficulties in their attempts to apply their knowledge. Yet in spite of these difficulties there were women who, because of circumstances, force of will, and/or brilliance, were able to achieve some recognition.

In our efforts to rediscover our history, we should be careful not to continue the unjust omission of these mathematicians. All the women mentioned in this bibliography should be included in a course on the history of science and/or mathematics. Many of these women were involved in the intellectual circles of their times and may be found in other historical or literary contexts. With this in mind, the bibliography highlights the achievements, both mathematical and nonmathematical, of these mathematicians. It therefore emphasizes biographical materials. Articles discussing mathematical works are omitted, but are available from the author, on request.

The bibliography includes the major women in mathematical history. The significant number of references to articles about male mathematicians which include information about these women is evidence of the lack of interest in and published material about women mathematicians. Even less material exists about women who are considered “minor” figures in mathematics and those in computer programming. Thus, these women have not been included.

I. Survey Articles/Books on Women in Mathematics

The following is a list of books and survey articles, which, despite their limitations, are of particular relevance and will be referred to in the bibliography on women mathematicians:

Bell, E. T. *Men of Mathematics.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1937. This book mentions only three of the women and only because of their known working relationships to male mathematicians. Included are: Germain, Kovalevsky, Boole, and only a brief reference (in a footnote) to Noether.


Osen, Lynn M. *Women in Mathematics.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1974. This book, until very recently the only one on women in mathematics, offers a popularized view of the major female mathematicians. As such, it hardly considers mathematics, and fails to indicate why the women are important. Although it was published in 1974, it includes no new material; most of its information can be found in earlier survey articles listed above. Because of a reliance on old articles, a significant number of serious factual errors reappear. If this book is to be used for a course, since it is still the only one easily available, teachers should be aware of its limitations. The chapter on Kovalevsky, relying as it does on old and unreliable sources, is largely incorrect. Included in this book are: Hypatia, Agnesi, Du Châtelet, Germain, Somerville, Kovalevsky, Noether.

Perl, T. *Math Equals.* Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1978. This book contains biographies of nine women mathematicians, as well as enough discussion of elementary mathematics to clarify the contributions of each woman. Included are: Hypatia, Du Châtelet, Agnesi, Germain, Somerville, Lovelace, Kovalevsky, Young, Noether.

Schachter, Susan, ed. *Hypatia's Sisters: Biographies of Women Scientists—Past and Present.* Seattle: Feminists Northwest, 1976. This is a popular collection of very short biographies. The only mathematicians included are Hypatia, Du Châtelet, and Somerville. More important mathematicians have been omitted—an indication of one of the major problems with this work. No information appears about the relative importance of the women in their fields, and several significant scientists are missing. The most complete material is provided for the biological scientists. The biographies are very uneven: some