

## Book Reviews

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*Athena's Daughters, Television's New Women Warriors*. Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy, eds. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003; xvi + 175 pages; ISBN 0-8156-2989-3; \$19.95US (paper).

As female heroes like Xena, Buffy and Chyna increase in popular culture, so do feminist studies of this phenomenon. *Athena's Daughters* situates itself in an emerging genre constituted by such works as *Tough Girls* (1999), *Fantasy Girls* (2000), *Reel Knockouts* (2001), *Action Chicks* (2004) and *Girls Who Bite Back* (2004). The collection under review here brings to the literature an academic focus on contemporary American television.

Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy, the editors of *Athena's Daughters*, set out to address the following questions: "Do images of just warrior women disrupt and challenge the dominant male-centred war narrative? If so, in what ways and by what means?" (2). The book delivers on its claim to provide a diversity of perspectives on the issue. There is commentary from historians (four), literary scholars (two) and media scholars (two) as well as a playwright. The strong contingent of historical perspectives is a welcome addition to media studies. For example, Alison Futrell's opening article on *Xena's* feminist reinterpretation of our Greco-Roman heritage provides an excellent context for a discussion of the female warrior. Futrell answers the editors' questions by arguing that Xena represents a female-centred warrior who privileges home and family over heroic conquest. Similarly, Kathleen Kennedy holds that *Xena, Warrior Princess* presents images of pacifist and anti-individualist women warriors in the characters of the reluctant fighter, Gabrielle, and the Taoist Lao Ma, respectively. At the same time Kennedy notes that the show remains caught within a discourse of orientalism because its Asian women warriors need Xena's rescue.

Another strength of Early and Kennedy's book is its incorporation of several audience studies in addition to its studies in representation. Lee Parpart's study of gay and straight male fans of *Buffy, The Vampire Slayer* in particular shows how heterosexual men alone resist dominant readings of the show's feminism: "For such viewers, the novelty and entertainment value attached to the show's key gender reversal holds more importance than any potential for cultural or ideological shifts in the construction of femininity" (86). Unfortunately this article does not address the research question and thus weakens the overall coherence of the collection.

These three articles are nonetheless among the highlights of the book, which also includes another article on *Xena* as well as three more items on *Buffy*. There is a

very nice symmetry between these two sections as the collection addresses the historical context, representation of gender, race and sexuality as well as viewer reception for each. Marring this symmetry are two additional articles on *La Femme Nikita* and *Star Trek Voyager's* Seven of Nine. Consequently the volume is neither a focused look at two popular women warriors nor an examination of the diversity of television's female fighters. Not being a fan of Xena or Buffy, I would have preferred more discussion beyond the typical "action babes" (*Action Chicks*, xxx). Or at least another example of the cyborg feminist warrior, particularly a human-animal cyborg such as, say, Chyna of the Worldwide Wrestling Federation.

In addition to this unevenness in content there is also an unevenness in quality here. Several articles offer only brief and incomplete grapplings with the issues. In "Buffy? She's Like Me, She's Not Like Me," for example, Vivian Chin laudably invokes Trinh Minh-ha, who is central to her thesis (and her title). But unfortunately Chin does not engage with her ideas. Also in "We Who Are Borg, Are We Borg?," Edrie Sobstyl attempts the difficult task of developing a Cixousian critique of Haraway's feminist cyborg as played out in *Star Trek Voyager* in a mere thirteen pages. In both of these cases the arguments would have benefited from more depth of analysis. In my opinion, then, this collection will be of most interest to Xena and Buffy fans as well as to specialists in women and media.

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*Heroines & History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord*. Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002; illustrations; xii + 368 pages; ISBN 0-8020-4784-X (cloth) and 0-8020-8330-7 (paper); \$75.00 (cloth).

Historians Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan have collaborated to produce a well-crafted and probing disquisition on the complex relationship between social memory and historical understanding as revealed in the processes associated with the commemoration of two Canadian heroines, Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord. The real women who form the focus of this study, Coates and Morgan insist, deserve to be understood on their own terms. Thus, the authors have aimed to interpret "in a fair manner the words and actions of the heroines" as well as those of their commemorators (x). Coates has written the chapters on Verchères, a *seigneur's* daughter

who in the absence of her parents at age fourteen defended a fort for eight days in 1692 against "enemy" Iroquois; Morgan is responsible for the chapters on Secord, a Queenston wife who traveled nineteen miles on a June day in 1813, through difficult terrain, to warn British troops of a US invasion plan during the War of 1812.

This study succeeds in explicating in a nuanced fashion the characters and deeds of Verchères and Secord as represented in prose, poetry, drama, film, and other genres, including in Secord's case, commercially-based and tourist-oriented texts and monuments. The authors show that the most ambitious efforts to turn Verchères and Secord into Canadian heroines occurred from the 1890s to the 1920s, a golden era for commemorative discourse. Coates and Morgan contextualize the commemoration of two nationally embraced heroines scrupulously, helping the reader to appreciate the complex interplay - approaching in their words a "dialectical or even dialogical" process - between popular culture and the state in the valorizing of Verchères and Secord. Interestingly, they suggest that the commemorative mania of these decades might be viewed as an aspect of modernity: Canada, a society experiencing momentous change, including anxiety over women's increased public role in society, "scrambled to preserve those parts of the past that could be imagined in specific and useful ways... Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord [became in this context] part of [a] linear narrative of progress and advancement" (13).

A key theme in this study concerns the way the "gender of heroism" is played out in terms of Verchères and Secord against a backdrop of ideas about history, nation, womanliness, and manliness in late-nineteenth-century Canadian society. Since the narratives of both women include encounters with Native men (in Verchères' case, a bellicose confrontation), the authors also show how discourses about Verchères and Secord were constructed in ways that shored up the notion of white superiority over all non-white peoples - an aspect of imperialist thought - and connected whiteness with agency and subjectivity in history while relegating Native people to "political subjection and historical irrelevancy" (271). Nevertheless, women's agency in the case of heroines such as Verchères and Secord was also constructed in the commemorative style from the 1890s onwards so as not to threaten male prerogative and identity. Verchères, for instance, was deliberately and frequently compared to one of the most famous woman warriors of Western society, Joan of Arc. Like the Maid of Orléans, Verchères, a young "maid" herself at the time of her attributed heroic act, possessed the potential to be represented as an unruly challenge to masculine authority. But, according to Coates, "writers and artists [understood that they] had to transform her from a woman warrior into a domesticated, if brave, young woman" (40). As for the "real-life" Verchères, Coates asserts in ironic fashion, that following a tradition "trodden by medieval and early modern women" who occupied a male warrior role "in a

moment of danger and opportunity," Verchères "relinquished her role as soon as practical - or, at least, she claimed that she did" (40).

This original reflection upon historical understanding in relation to historical memory is provocative and engaging. This book should be in every university library. It appears to be a book that Canadian historians and historians of women and gender will read and ponder with pleasure and profit, and, probably, assign to upper-level undergraduate students interested in historiography and historical methodology. Graduate students in history, women's studies, and cultural studies will be attracted to the sophisticated analyses and painstaking research that Coates and Morgan bring to their chosen subjects.

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***The Feminine Gaze: A Canadian Compendium of Non-Fiction Women Authors and Their Books, 1836-1945.*** Anne Innis Dagg. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001; ISBN 0-88920-355-5; 346 pp; \$49.95 (cloth).

Anne Innis Dagg's *The Feminine Gaze* is a fascinating collection of information about women's non-fiction writing that can be read in two ways: first, as a resource for researchers; second, as a perceptive look into the lives, preoccupations, challenges and abilities of Canadian women writers of non-fiction. This book provides valuable insight into the diversity and amount of non-fiction writing produced by women over the one-hundred-and-nine-year focus of the collection.

As the title suggests, this is a compendium: an entertaining, encyclopedic series of entries which provide brief biographical sketches of the authors, notes on their writing and its context, and bibliographic information. The authors and their works are varied and enlightening. As Helen M. Buss notes in the foreword "the collection contradicts the truism that women have not been a part of public culture in Canada's past" (viii). Indeed, this collection of notes, summaries, and titles makes it clear that the majority of the women included here have left their (often unacknowledged) mark on all aspects of Canadian culture.

Researching and writing *The Feminine Gaze* was a kind of archeological project for Dagg because the entries were to be as much biographical and anecdotal as bibliographic and the former information, as she points out in her introduction, was often hard to find. Many of the authors would write under pseudonyms, or would refuse to divulge their dates of birth, or were lost when they changed their names after marriage. But it is the anecdotal and