

Book Reviews

Authoring A Life: A Woman's Survival in and Through Literary Studies. Brenda Daly. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998; xiii + 268 pages; ISBN 0-7914-3680-2; \$19.95US.

Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing. Tomoko Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp, editors. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998; 239 pages; ISBN 0-7914-3564-4; \$21.95US.

Fault Lines: Incest, Sexuality and Catholic Family Culture. Tish Langlois. Toronto, Ontario: Second Story Press, 1997; 236 pages; ISBN 0-929005-98-8; \$16.95.

There are books which come into my life that I jump into and do not surface from until the last page is turned. There are other books I circle, shift from the desk reading chair to a walk in the garden and back to the reading chair knowing these books are vitally important, yet knowing too how difficult they will be to read. I found these three books took me to areas I had not travelled before, books I needed before my own thinking around child abuse issues could develop further.

Tish Langlois' book deconstructs teachings of the Roman Catholic Church concerning male privilege and shows how these beliefs and attitudes play out in the lives of girls and women. I grew up in a formidable Catholic household. I understood the special impact of male privilege in terms of abuse, though Langlois' analysis clarified much that was still vague and provides a theoretical construct for speaking about it that I had not encountered prior to reading her book.

Langlois interviewed eight women who grew up Catholic and were abused as children; four were children before the 1960s and Vatican II, and four were brought up in the post-Vatican II era. Langlois uses "feminist standpoint theory," arguing that from research based in the participants' "...standpoint [there] would emerge a clear and sound critique of Catholic family culture"(14).

Fault Lines made me think particularly of a role model the nuns thought fundamentally important for Catholic girls when I was growing up. The child martyr, specifically Maria Goretti, was not covered in Langlois' book and that was a disappointment. Goretti's impact in terms of teaching how the church expected a girl would deal with abuse was profoundly damaging. We were taught that it was better to let the rapist kill us, rather than let him sin by his sexual assault, for that is what Maria Goretti did and was murdered, then canonized for her virtue.

I had a fierce resistance to reading and then writing about *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing*. While reading it I was by turns intrigued, inspired and angry. I found the book acutely upsetting even as I found it pushed my thinking in exciting new directions. This is not to say that any of the essays are particularly graphic, but merely that it made connections that were painful and articulated what I'd long felt. "Because our identities have been written in and by patriarchal scripts, telling the stories of our lives is not necessarily a liberating act. We may, almost as if by instinct, compulsively repeat femininity or rewrite ourselves as men..we must return to the site of possession - that is, we must read and reread the stories that have written us. Before we can write ourselves out of determined and determining patriarchal scripts, we must teach ourselves to read differently, vigorously, and dangerously" (Kari J. Winter, 206). Not all the essays in this volume affected me as indelibly as Winter's did. Susan Anne Carlson's essay "Incest and Rage in Charlotte Brontë's Novelettes" had me pacing the floor in anxiety, for the bleakness of Brontë's vision in her early work overwhelmed me. Each chapter in *Creating Safe Space* has insights I will need to mull over a long time, and in light of what I have learned I plan to re-read at least Wharton, Brontë, Woolf, Cather, Kogawa and Emily Dickinson. These essays inspire me to propose a new, deeper, and more compassionate reading of these authors. They also begin to give me a sense of "tribe" in the meaning given it by Margaret Laurence: a tribe of women

writers who did know in their own lives and experience what it was to endure patriarchy's assaults on body, mind and spirit. This knowledge would have meant so much to me in my thirties, when I searched so passionately for connection to the writers I loved, some understanding of the pain I endured, but was then too untutored to find.

Brenda Daly's *Authoring A Life* has been on my "must read" list for several years as references kept showing up in other texts I read. Daly's theoretical work on how an abused woman achieves what I have long termed "authorial authority" is important. She quotes Judith Herman: "...the act of authoring is an essential step in the recovery process..." (Daly, 3). I have seen this many times - women by the thousands are writing their lives and thereby recreating their lives as adults in the process of coming to terms with childhood abuse. Daly further says that "...recovery is primarily, though not exclusively, a linguistic event, an act of authorship by which a woman transforms her victim self into her ideal self" (Daly, 3). I would qualify this somewhat and propose that we rethink our ideal selves and work toward them, since I'm not sure any ideal self is entirely achievable, however much I believe in the importance of having such a goal.

I did wish in this book for more theory and a condensed version of her life story. I particularly appreciate her point about the danger of public speaking: "...visibility makes one vulnerable, threatening the loss of the writer's authorial ear and voice. Once again: objectifying women, making spectacles of them, is a strategy for denying them public voices, for taking away their authority" (Daly, 212). Having once been described by a woman journalist, on air, as Canada's most famous victim, I know precisely what she's talking about and the validation here was very useful. The texts written by women, most unpublished because there is a publishing chill around stories of child abuse, and memoirs by women - unless they are very famous - don't make it to the bookstores. We can learn to give ourselves permission to create our own adult woman's authority, but it doesn't mean anyone will be willing to publish it or make it available to readers. We have a long way yet to go to change this, but Daly's contribution will help us think about the process and realize just what we are engaged in. Not mere useless scribbling as some would have it

(and I've heard women describe their work this way too, though that doesn't seem to stop them), but a rebuilding of our strength, word by word, line by line, page by page. I wrote journals for thirteen years before I was strong enough to write my first book; thirteen years of trying each day to give myself permission to speak in my own voice about my own pain.

Each of these books was a challenge to my thinking. I recommend them to you in the hope that you will discover new directions for your own thinking, research and writing.

Elly Danica
Nova Scotia

Muriel Duckworth: Practising Peace. Produced and directed by Patricia Kipping. Canada; 1999; 46 minutes; VHS; color; English; distributed by Perversity Productions Inc.

Democracy à la Maude. Directed by Patricia Kearns. Produced by Annette Clarke and Signe Johansson. Canada; 1998; 61 minutes; VHS; color; English; distributed in Canada by the National Film Board and in the United States by Bullfrog Films, www.bullfrogfilms.com.

Muriel Duckworth: Practising Peace and *Democracy à la Maude* are two recent documentaries focusing on the underdeveloped subject of Canadian women who have shaped the country and the culture we live in. *Muriel Duckworth: Practising Peace* invites the viewer to experience a very personal portrait of Muriel Duckworth, a leading peace activist and founding member of the Canada Council for International Cooperation. Told within the framework of a journey to her cottage, the documentary explores Duckworth's relationship with filmmaker Patricia Kipping and the way in which Duckworth's commitment to social activism has influenced Kipping's *Life*. In contrast, Patricia Kearns' *Democracy à la Maude* provides a more conventional political biography of Maude Barlow, president of the Council of Canadians, the largest citizens' group in Canada and a Canadian social