

sensitivity.

Another innovative American writer I recently discovered is Jane Bowles; she has a humor and individuality that could have come only from a woman. She also is much neglected. Djuna Barnes, another innovative writer, enjoys only an underground reputation to this day and she might not have even that token recognition except that a man--T.S. Eliot--praised her. Anais Nin struggled for years to achieve recognition for her novels and diaries and had to wait until she was past sixty to receive attention. Even then it was patronizing and qualified--it was called good "feminine writing"--when it was really good human writing.

As with all minorities women writers have always had to be better and to achieve more than men in order to receive the same recognition. Until we have more critics and publishers who are women and who have not been shaped by the principles of masculine ideology, no one will notice that women's writing is infinitely freer from convention than men's. No one will point out that men have always feared and denied women's innovativeness. They do this largely through the most primitive of critical tools--the principle of exclusion. They simply do not notice, discuss, study or feature on television programmes, writers like Jean Rhys, Jane Bowles, Djuna Barnes and Nin among the older writers. They often sneer at Virginia Woolf.

Among younger writers they praise and notice only those who, like Erica Jong, imitate men writers and conform to the masculine ideology about women. We must never forget that the first freedom men have always been willing to grant women is a specious kind of sexual freedom which is no freedom at all unless it is matched by the freedom to think and to create according to her own individual experience. By necessity this is the feminine experience and the voice that articulates it is a feminine voice.

#### NOTES

1. "Women" in Miriam Waddington, The Price of Gold (Oxford: Toronto, 1976).

## Beth Harvor

It was very hard for me to make a list of women writers I admire; the list could go on for the whole length of time allotted to me on this panel. So I limited myself to twelve (with a reservation here and there): Jane Austen; Charlotte Brontë; the autobiographical writing of Colette; the early and middle Doris Lessing; Simone de Beauvoir (not for most of her fiction but for one quiet brilliant novella, The Woman Destroyed); the early Margaret Laurence; almost all of Alice Munro; Isak Dinesen's Out of Africa; the short stories and some of the novels of the late great English writer, Elizabeth Taylor; the novels

and stories of the South African writer Nadine Gordimer; and the short stories of two greatly gifted Americans, Flannery O'Connor and Ann Beattie. On the strength of this list alone I feel it cannot be denied that



there is a feminine tradition in literature and I feel it also cannot be denied that it is important (even vital) for women writers to have other women writers to read, to admire, to learn from. But in speaking of the vitalness and vitality of a tradition I feel we must also take into consideration elements that have little to do with literature. I am thinking of two Canadian examples--a writer from English Canada and a writer from Quebec. Two stories of the coming of age of two young girls in two languages. In French we have Claire Martin's In An Iron Glove and in English we have Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women. Both these books are well-known, classics in their own cultures. In An Iron Glove is factual, a bitter memoir which won the Governor General's award for fiction because the judges could not believe that so brutal and medieval a story was actually true.

Lives of Girls and Women is fiction, although very autobiographical fiction, and came out eight years after In An Iron Glove. And yet there might have been a hundred years between the two, the children in the family of Claire Martin were so tyrannized, the children in the fictional family of Munro were so loved. Claire Martin describes the marriage between her despotic father and her submissive mother as a marriage between "a tiger and a dove" but in Munro's fictional family it is the mother who comes closest to being the tiger--she is a

feminist and an agnostic, she drives an unreliable old car from one small town to another selling encyclopedias, she writes letters to the editor of the local newspaper opposing compulsory religious education in the schools and celebrating (in a precious Victorian prose) the beauties of winter mornings and is, all in all, a considerable embarrassment to her young daughter. But it is an enriching embarrassment, as much of Munro's work has shown, whereas the embarrassment that Claire Martin felt must have seemed almost like an indulgence to a child who lived in a constant state of terror. The finer feelings (and embarrassment is one of the finer feelings) come with freedom and also if brutality is too simple, it closes one to complexity.

So there are situations for an emerging writer in which a tradition is not of as much significance as some other factors are. Virginia Woolf published "A Room of One's Own" two years before Alice Munro was born. And Colette was a middle-aged woman by the time Claire Martin was fifteen. I don't know what Claire Martin was reading when she was fifteen but I'm sure that the church and her family saw to it that she didn't read any Colette. In any case her family situation made her see the world in black and white. But I think the really fundamental difference between the two writers lies in the ways in which they were encouraged to see themselves as sexual beings. Claire Martin was terrorized by her father

for changing a younger brother's diapers, her father saw her as a budding voyeur), but Munro (at least in her fictional persona) was allowed to be a sexual being. Her mother, a complex woman who was by turns admirable, silly, remarkable, brave, arrogant and warm was resolutely asexual herself, just as she was unreligious but the daughter Del sought the attractions of both sex and faith. I feel it is at least partly because Munro herself was allowed her own explorations in the realms of sex and faith that she has become one of the major writers on sexual feelings in this country, in this century. Doris Lessing may have written more about feminine body processes and more about sexual grief but Alice Munro has written more about sexual celebration. And I think it has been extraordinarily important to women (as writers, as readers) to have women writers writing about their most secret relationships to themselves and others.

Several important women writers have been feminists. The most illustrious ones, the ones who come most quickly to mind, are Colette, Woolf, de Beauvoir and Lessing. But Lessing has certainly resisted a feminist label for her work and I don't think the others would have been too "wild" about it either. No serious writer wants to be too beloved of any group and in fact the women writers who have tried to impose feminist theory on fiction have, as far as I know, failed as artists.

## Carol Shields

A recent example of this imposing, this failure, is the American novel The Women's Room by Marilyn French. This book is, I think, a poor book and, like many poor books, I suspect it was written with the best of good intentions. I recently noticed that part of it has been serialized in Cosmopolitan magazine which seems to me a just resting place for it.

As for great books, they do change the world but they do not change it quickly. And organized movements want change; they want it in a hurry; it's in their nature. But for those of us who are both feminists and writers, I would like, as a cautionary tale, to quote from the American critic Richard Gilman, writing critically (in both senses of the word) about Norman Mailer. "Fiction," Gilman says, "that slowly achieved, bodiless, ineffectual system for changing the world, could not contain Mailer's impatience nor assuage his disconsolate wish to see himself as the recognized source of change." As writers, I believe we should heed Gilman's words, they apply to anyone, male or female, who sees power in too pragmatic a way. Writers, whether they are men or women, have, after all, only one responsibility, and the woman writer, when she is alone in a room with a blank page before her, should do everything in her power to meet it: she should listen to her own voice.

Let me say at once that I would be happy to embrace the altogether attractive myth of the feminine voice. It is a temptation to believe that delicacy, fluidity, subtlety and elegance are more pronounced in the writing of women--though one must bear in mind that these qualities in their over-ripe stages produce preciousness, whimsy and flatulence.

Many of you here will be familiar with Frances Brooke's Quebec novel The History of Emily Montague. Published in 1769, it is regarded by some as North America's first novel. In the story one of the characters, a vivacious young coquette, writes to a friend in England promising that with her very next letter she will enclose a frost piece, a frost piece being a silvery little bit on wintery description, an exercise in pure style, the kind of genteel piecework which ladies of the time turned out much as they produced water colours or embroidered cushions. The important thing is, I think, that even then, in 1769, Frances Brooke was gently mocking this tradition.

Female chauvinism would be gladly served by a belief that women are masters of rich language patterns, intricate clustered metaphors or a syntax which is artful, supple and suggestive --but all these things are difficult to prove. What is somewhat more ap-