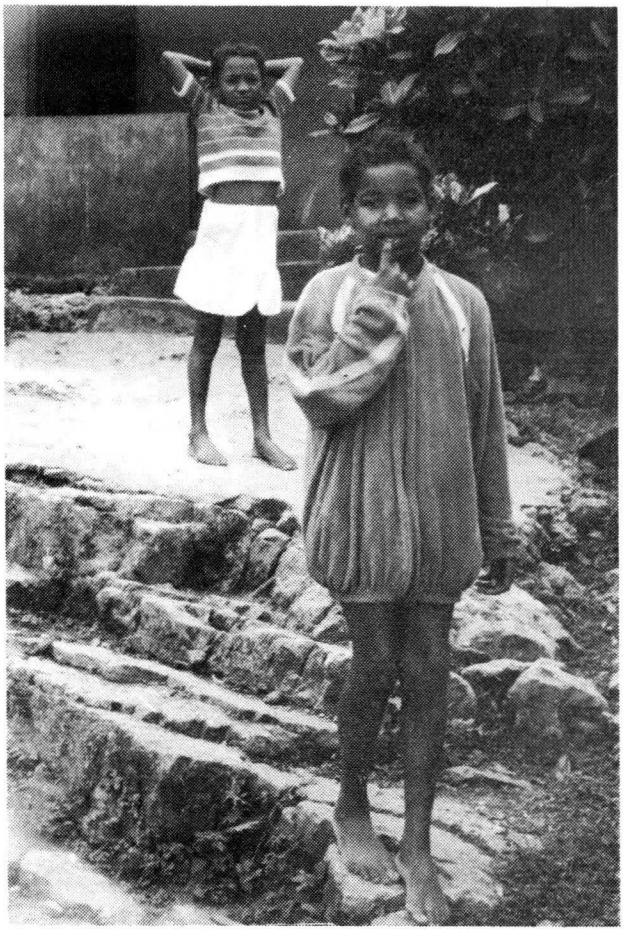
Ad Feminam

DONNA JAMES



DONNA JAMES

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Not Enough Time...

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It is a morning in mid-July, 1983. I walk in to teach my nine o'clock class at Seneca College. The class is strangely silent today. The usual animated chatter that I have to subdue before I can begin teaching is absent. Their faces are solemn, reserved, almost secretive with expectancy. We look at one another. Then a voice asks: "Did you know that Gabrielle Roy died in hospital last night?" The tension between us is released, allowing our grief to surface and they will not let me begin till they are sure I am familiar with the details, that she died not of her illness but of a heart attack. It was unexpected; she was seventy-three years old.

It does not seem possible. For us she is still very much alive in *The Tin Flute*, which we have been reading and studying together. Now there will be no more novels. The creative heart and hand are stilled. Her last years were increasingly a race against time and the illness that devoured the little time that was left.

For almost fifteen years I had the privilege of being in touch with her, first as a student, then as a friend. Every time a conference or academic affairs led me to Quebec City I made an effort to see her and she was always there to greet me, in her apartment on the Grande Allée and at her beloved country home at Petite-Rivière-Saint-François. Memories flood in as I recall those visits and read through the correspondence which I have saved and treasure.

The first time we met, however, was not in Quebec City but at the Westbury Hotel in Toronto. I was a mature student writing a thesis on the depiction of women in the French-Canadian novel from 1940 to 1967. In the fall of 1969 I had completed my first chapter. It was long, seventy-five pages, and dealt with the work of Gabrielle Roy. I had developed some theories I wanted to test and I decided I would go to interview her in Quebec City, if she agreed to see me. As it turned out, she was coming to Toronto, armed with dictionaries, to discuss with Joyce Marshall what would later become *Windflower*, the translation of *La Rivière sans repos.*

I shall never forget that Monday afternoon when I was carefully stirring a white sauce for my family's dinner and the phone rang at four-thirty p.m. It was Gabrielle Roy. Could I come to the Westbury Hotel at seven that evening? She had had a tiring day struggling with words but she could spare a little time to talk to me. I was to meet her in the lobby of the hotel and we exchanged details about appearance so we could recognize one another. She was wearing a suit; so was I. We were both not very tall. I could barely continue with the preparations for the meal I was so excited! I had spoken to Gabrielle Roy on the phone and I was going to meet with her later!

What with extricating myself from my family and the difficulty of parking, I was a few minutes late. I rushed into the hotel, only to see a smallish woman in a tweed suit with dominant tones of blue and grey about to enter an elevator. Instinctively, I sensed it was Gabrielle Roy but I didn't call out; I wasn't sure. The elevator door closed and I was left, standing helplessly, angry at myself for being late and anxious about what might now become a lost opportunity. I was still there, panic-stricken and undecided, when the elevator descended and the door that appeared to have closed so irrevocably on her opened and she stepped out towards me. She, too, had sensed that I must be the unknown student who was coming to interview her.

My first reaction was one of surprise. Although she had told me she was not very tall, I had not expected to greet such a small person. I had become accustomed to seeing close-ups of her face on the jacket covers of books, which would account for the impression that she was much taller than she was in fact. We expressed relief at having found one another and once again she went through the elevator door, this time with me close behind.

In the impersonal atmosphere of the hotel room, I pulled out my list of carefully prepared questions and my sharpened pencil, along with my notebook. A shadow crossed her face. "Do you have to take notes?" she asked. I hesitated. She went on to explain:

> It's so inhibiting when someone is sitting in front of you writing down everything that you say. It cuts off spontaneity. Writing them down makes one's statements so permanent, as if you have to weigh every word before it's spoken.

I put the pencil and paper away. I have never regretted the decision because, in losing a verbatim report of our discussion, I gained a friend.

I learned many things from that interview. Several articles by male critics had emphasized the suffering of women in *The Tin Flute*, maintaining that the men, if they did not get off scot free, at least had an easier time of it. They succeeded in escaping from the misery of Saint-Henri while the women were trapped there by the feminine condition. Azarius had preserved his good looks and physical appearance, by contrast with Rose-Anna, worn out by repeated child-bearing and now, at the age of forty, pregnant once again. The critics referred especially to the chapter in which Rose-Anna, alone, in unfamiliar surroundings, gives birth in pain and humiliation to her twelfth child. During her labour there is a confusion in her mind about the boundaries between life and death and at one point she wishes she could die and be relieved of her many pressing responsibilities.

I suggested to Gabrielle Roy that the critics, in concentrating on the progression of the chapter, had overlooked its conclusion. At the end there is a note of hope and renewal. After the birth of the baby Rose-Anna is at peace with herself, emptied of all sadness, rejuvenated. It seems to her that this is not her twelfth child but her first, the only one, yet her love overflows to include all the others.

When I recalled these reactions to Gabrielle Roy she looked at me in surprise, then reached out and clasped my hands. "You are right," she cried, "I wrote that but I had forgotten it. It is over twenty years since the novel appeared and I had forgotten. They ended up convincing me otherwise."

I learned something, too, from the theory I had come to test. In that same chapter I had been struck by the repetition of the words "shame" and "humiliation" associated with Rose-Anna's ordeal. I attributed these feelings in part to the shame attached to the functions of the body. But the repetition seemed to indicate more. I wondered if these emotions were not a response to a woman's lack of liberty at that time, her inability to decide freely when she would have children and how many. Was the "humiliation," in fact, an inner rebellion?

I sat there before Gabrielle Roy, the eager student hoping for confirmation of her carefully elaborated theory. Her answer was very simple. She replied that the emotions she had described were the ones that seemed appropriate to the character. Writers, in creating characters, must give them the words and ideas that suit them, not their creator. The characters become beings apart; they are not the author.

> Many women of that generation, my mother and others whom I knew, thought that way. Even today, there are women who have the same feelings. When I was a child, women did not discuss this subject among themselves except secretly, in hidden fashion. It was surrounded with mystery because it belonged to the body.

She returned to the thought that, in creating a character, the author must describe him as he is. She gave as an example Tolstoy, who created so many characters different one from another, often at opposite poles, yet they all came from him. The idea of liberty that I had suggested would not have occurred to Rose-Anna. "It is not integral to the character. Women like her did not think that way: it was a fatality."

When we talked a while about *Street of Riches*, Gabrielle Roy mentioned the incident in "The Gadabouts," where the young Christine observes how her mother enhances her stature before relatives in Montreal by pointed references to her husband's high position with the government. Christine innocently remarks that she had never noticed that a man had to speak about his wife in order to make himself seem important.

I recalled "The Jewels," in which Christine is fifteen years old and wild about cheap, showy jewelry which she thinks will enhance her femininity and make her more provocative to the opposite sex. Her mother scolds Christine's older brother because he is amused by these fantasies and gives her money to spend on such purchases. The mother complains that he is encouraging Christine to be coquettish and capricious, characteristics which are the opposite of the ones men value in themselves: loyalty, frankness and directness. She ends with a plea for equality between men and women.

Gabrielle Roy was pleased that I noticed this comment and had understood the intention behind it. She cited a critic who had not liked this episode because the author seemed to be opposed to women adorning themselves! She added that to this day she does not often wear jewellery. I noticed then that her suit and blouse were indeed without "adornment."

We touched briefly on *The Hidden Mountain*. I quoted the passage in which Pierre, the artist, realizes that the

simple things in life are the most difficult to reproduce in art. With an impulsive gesture of joy she expressed her gratitude: "Thank you for that, for having understood that!" She shrugged her shoulders and explained: "Nowadays people prefer complicated things."

Gabrielle Roy had gone for a walk on Yonge Street prior to our meeting. She was distressed by what she saw in the shops, the sexual lures, big posters, a picture of a young girl with her legs spread apart. This image in particular struck her as being more sexual than a nude would have been. Inside, the music was deafening and the books on display exploited the double themes of sex and violence.

As the interview progressed, I began to feel more and more uncomfortable within myself. When I first contacted her it seemed only logical that she should give of her time to see me. After all, I had devoted months to exploring her writing and had written a long chapter of seventy-five pages on it; she owed it to me. Now I was not so sure any more.

When I saw how tired she was after the work she had come to do in Toronto, I felt that I was adding to her fatigue when she should have been resting. What right did I have to be there, I wondered? The fact that I had read her books and studied them no longer seemed a sufficiently good reason. I realized that the interviewer is basically an intruder. I understood, too, the protective mechanism that had prompted her to defend her privacy by asking me not to take notes in front of her. Later, when I knew her better, I sensed how difficult this must have been for her, gentle as she always was and anxious to help in every way possible.

I had been there longer than I expected and I felt increasingly humble and apologetic. Finally, I could hold back no longer. "Tell me," I asked, "do interviews bother you?" "No," she answered, with a smile, "not when they are like this one, when they are on the human level." I was grateful for that.

Before I left I asked her if she would like to read the chapter in my thesis in its final form. She answered "no" and then explained her refusal. "I am pressed for time. That's why I don't read criticism, theses and things like that. I feel I may not have enough time."

Some years later, in 1976, I arrived in Quebec City to give a paper at the Learned Societies' sessions at the end of May. Gabrielle Roy was already at her country home at Petite-Rivière-Saint-François and, if I wanted to see her, that was where I would have to go. I rented a car and, despite the directions she had given me, reinforced by advice at the place where I picked up the car, I lost my way getting out of the city. The remainder of the trip was straightforward, except that she had warned me about a very steep hill requiring considerable caution just before I arrived at the village. Had I not been travelling behind a very big, heavy truck that inched its way downhill in painful slowness, I might never have arrived at my destination intact. The hill appeared to descend perpendicularly to the road.

I found the house, enclosed by a hedge and cedar trees, and as I got out of the car she came across the lawn to greet me. She wore dark slacks and a cream-coloured top. I had visited her several years before in her apartment on the Grande Allée but here, out in the open, casually dressed, she seemed so small and somehow so vulnerable that I wanted to shelter her in my arms from some unknown, pressing danger. She apologized for not having invited me for lunch (it was early afternoon) and explained that all her supplies were purchased at the beginning of each week at Baie Saint-Paul and, it now being Thursday, she was almost out of food. However, she offered me some "tartines" (bread and butter) and tea. We settled for plain biscuits which she dipped in her tea while we talked.

She told me that someone who had come to interview her had compared her to Carson McCullers and asked if I had read *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*:

> It is a wonderful book, absolutely wonderful. She describes all kinds of terrible things in it but with such innocence—how could she do it that way? She is a great writer.

One of my students had done an adaptation for the stage of *The Tin Flute*. Gabrielle Roy remarked that others had tried to make a play for the theatre or television out of the novel but had not succeeded. What was missing in these adaptations was the soul. The action is primarily interior. Once you try to compress the whole into "sets" which are necessarily limited, the essential is lost. One young woman had prepared an adaptation for television which Gabrielle Roy had refused to endorse because it was a series of speeches. "*Bonheur d'Occasion* is more than discussions on the war and other subjects of the time."

She expressed skepticism also about a proposed project to put her works into a computer which would sort out the key words and enable researchers to determine the dominant ideas in her writing. "What will that produce? Are the ideas not already there for whoever wants to discern them? Doesn't the work speak for itself? This process is in

the image of our modern life."

As we chatted, looking out on the river, she communicated to me her love for this particular spot. "It is peaceful here, and quiet, but there is also much movement, which I like. Motion invites reverie. The tide continually advances and recedes, advances and recedes." But the peace of the country is deceptive because it is steadily threatened by all sorts of practical matters that have to be attended to: pipes that become clogged, repairs which must be done. Her immediate concern was an invasion of ants in her house and in her neighbourhood. "The insects are going to conquer the world." So far no one had been able to locate their nest. She had put out poison but they continued to come. In the evening they seemed to withdraw into the wood which had absorbed the heat of the sun during the day. In the morning they reappeared.

A bird began to sing in a tree not far from where we sat. "Is it a blackbird?" she asked. She went in to get her glasses to see it more plainly. No, it was a catbird. The bird flew from the tree on which it was perched to a bush. Gabrielle Roy rose quickly to chase it away, for fear that it would eat a poisoned ant. "Ah! Poor little one!" she kept repeating, as she got up several more times to drive it away, preoccupied with the danger that threatened the innocent creature.

A larger problem that distressed her was the project to make a ski slope in the area. People in the village were unemployed. Formerly they built schooners from the wood on the mountain. These transported merchandise to and from Quebec City and other places. Now they have been replaced by big ships (we could see them from where we sat) and even the wood does not sell any more. Eels, which were another sustenance of the area, have lost their commercial value because of the high level of mercury in them; the water here is polluted:

> I have fought big battles to change this situation, to clean up the shore, to stop throwing waste into the water but there are very few who think as I do and now I do not have the strength to fight any more. The mayor of the village and myself face one another with drawn swords. He is like M. Duplessis. Before every election he makes promises, gives everyone something that he needs, which is why he is always re-elected. He controls the jobs around here so he is the centre of power in a village where there is no work.

At the end of March 1979, I visited Gabrielle Roy for the last time, though we could not know it then. I was staying at the Château Frontenac and, because the weather was exceptionally warm, I decided to walk from the hotel to her apartment on the Grande Allée. The sun's rays were so hot that I took off the brown duffel coat I had bought a few weeks ago on sale at the May Company. It hung heavy on my arm and I inwardly berated the well-meaning friends who had advised me to dress warmly because Quebec City is so much colder than Toronto. Springtime at the end of March? Ridiculous! But there I was, perspiring and burdened, regretting that I had not had the good sense to leave the coat at the hotel. As it turned out, it was a good thing I hadn't.

As soon as I entered the apartment Gabrielle Roy told me how much she liked my coat. "I had a coat like that for eight years and I've tried to buy another without success. I found one that is white but it soils so quickly, it won't do for everyday. I don't want to be sending it to the cleaners all the time because they ruin everything."

I suggested that I could buy one for her; there had been a number of coats on the rack at the May Company not so long ago. She tried it on for size and it fitted her perfectly. Then she tried it on with a sweater to be sure. She looked at herself in the mirror and asked me if I thought it was too tight. Then she asked me to buy her one just like it. She wanted to write me a cheque on the spot but I preferred to wait till after I had sent it to her. She loved the warmth and durability of duffel coats, especially in the country on chill nights when the wind was strong.

I returned to Toronto several days later and rushed to the May Company at Yorkdale where I found the coat she wanted. As I gave the saleslady the address to which it was to be mailed, I kept stressing excitedly: "It's for Gabrielle Roy! It's for Gabrielle Roy!" She stared at me with her jaded saleslady's eyes and said nothing.

In her letter of the fourth of April Gabrielle Roy thanked me, adding "this is the kind of favour that goes straight to the heart." She also inquired anxiously whether the cost of mailing the coat had been included in the bill. When I received her cheque for the amount, I was reluctant to cash it immediately because it bore her signature. So I slipped it into my wallet and left it there. From time to time I took it out, almost ready to go to the bank, then decided against it. One June 6, she wrote me in great distress, concerned about what had happened to the cheque. Had it gotten lost in the mail? She was afraid I would think she had taken advantage of my good will and assured me that she had really sent it out. Repentant, I went to the bank immediately.

On that day in March when we negotiated the purchase of the duffel coat I spent three hours with her and we covered a wide range of topics. She had been sick after her return from Florida where the air was too damp for her but still better than Quebec City in the winter and she looked tired. At times her mood dipped into sadness.

She spoke about the life of a writer. People make too many demands. "There is too much mail. I can no longer answer everybody. They tend to ask childish questions to which they could find the answers elsewhere without writing to the author. I don't have enough time for my own creative work."

The life of a writer is hard from another point of view. "It's a little like the horizon I have described in my work, which recedes every time you seem to be advancing towards it. There are very few happy moments in the life of a writer."

She then described one of these moments. On Christmas Eve she received a letter from a woman in the West who was tired of buying presents for children she considered selfish. When she read *L'Enfant de Noel* (*The Christmas Child*) the woman felt encouraged and, in a sense, compensated for her efforts; the teacher, the child and the handkerchief in the story restored to her moments of a time which she had thought lost forever.

> You make contact with your readers when they find something in your work with which they can identify. It is sometimes easier, this love of people you do not know, than the friendship or love of those who are nearer to you. The writer often experiences a lack of comprehension and a feeling of solitude.

We talked about her beginnings in the theatre. She admitted that she had perhaps abandoned a career in the theatre because it does not allow for introspection.

> Except for the monologues of Shakespeare, dramatists are not successful when they deal with introspection. I've tried to write some plays myself but I did not have the gift of dialogue. Even in my novels there is very little dialogue—short pieces only.

Then, recalling her experiences in Europe, she repeated several times: "What a strange journey I've travelled, from Saint-Boniface to Europe to Saint-Henri!"

Since Saint-Henri suggested *Bonheur d'Occasion* I asked her why, in her speech before the Royal Society of Canada, where she followed Florentine into the post-war era, she made no mention of Florentine's baby. It is a question that students have often asked me. She replied that she had never even noticed the omission; it had never occurred to her.

> You should ask them why. Ask them why the author has omitted it? What reasons do you think she could have? At bottom, it's that an author does not know everything about the characters he or she creates. You give the impression of knowing everything about them but it is not true. Perhaps the child died. Or, if it is alive, Florentine loves the child but not passionately. I do not see Florentine loving her child with passion. And, since she works, it is probably Rose-Anna who looks after the child. In any case, writers do not know everything about their characters.

She told me that a number of people prefer *Alexandre Chenevert* (*The Cashier*) to *Bonheur d'Occasion*. *Alexandre Chenevert* was a painful novel to write because he is the man of our time, who must be preoccupied with all the horrors that take place in our world. He knows what is happening but can do nothing to change it. This feeling of helplessness is certainly characteristics of our time. "Certain of my novels, I approached them with fear, afraid even to write them, like *Bonheur d'Occasion* and *Alexandre Chenevert*, but I could not help writing them. I had to."

Gabrielle Roy met Margaret Laurence for the first time at a conference in Calgary.

> It was a wonderful meeting between two writers who had already written to one another, but who had never had the opportunity to get to know one another before. We felt a great deal of sympathy for one another. We fell into one another's arms. Then, since she is bigger and more robust than I am, she undertook to protect me, to watch over my frail health. 'Are you tired? Do you need to rest?' and so on. She is very warm-hearted. I like her very much.

Her most recent book, *Ces enfants de ma vie* (*Children of My Heart*), was well received in Quebec but not in English Canada. She wrote it very quickly, while she was in the country. Generally, she wrote in the morning, then went to visit her neighbour. This time she continued into the afternoon, which surprised her. "I wrote this book as if I was in a terrible hurry, as if I would never have enough time."

I recalled then that when I first met her in 1969, at the Westbury Hotel, she had concluded our interview with the same words as I stood at the door. "There isn't enough time. I am pressured for time."

Her presentiment about time escaping her was, alas, only too accurate. There had never been enough of it. There would never be enough.

DONNA JAMES