

**Vignettes of Life: Experiences and Self Perceptions of New Canadian Women.** Catherine E. Warren, *Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1986. Pp. 128*

The title of this small book is fitting: a vignette, according to the Concise Oxford Dictionary, is a portrait showing only head and shoulders with the background gradually shaded off. A vignette is also described as being an "ornament in a blank space," not enclosed in a definite border. I cannot think of a more poetic description of the glimpses of the lives of 17 new Canadian women, coming from 15 different countries of Northern Europe, Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia, which we are invited to share by reading about them. In many ways, their fates are similar, it is the sum total of their experience in the new country which likens the chanting of the Greek chorus: a background murmur to Canadian life, even present, strong and audible, but not yet allowing for individual portraits of each woman, which would reveal to us their multifaceted personalities, their strength, courage and spirit.

No more than 3-5 pages are allocated for a sketch of the life of each woman, what it was like, back home, before coming to Canada, about their experience in Canada and, finally, how life might be developing in the future. This way, the picture presented to the reader changes with every sketch as if one looks through a kaleidoscope: the same small stones always present a different picture

Neither English nor French is the mother tongue of any one of these women, although a number of them have been a little bit familiar with one of the official languages before arrival in Canada. So limited is what they can say about their lives that overriding similarities provide the colours: the stories of these female immigrants (an immigrant, according to Canadian census definition, is a resident of Canada, who is not a Canadian citizen by birth) give us some insight into the sociological and psychological transition, which they all had to experience, when building a life in another country:

Every act of immigration is like suffering a brain stroke. One has to learn to walk again, to talk again, to move around the world again, and, probably the most difficult of all, one has to learn to re-establish a sense of community.

One has to be healthy, and preferably, wealthy, educated, better, young and skilled, when tackling success in another country. Life in Canada is no exception from this rule and the stories in this booklet reflect this: one

can overcome the loss of one's country, family, friends, home and cultural environment if there is success in finding a better life. The "better" life is defined for everyone differently, it is the absence of war, a better future for the children, the freedom enjoyed in Canada, the material well-being and sometimes the chance to develop your own identity in this country

All 17 women whose life sketches are presented in this booklet, have been associated with the Calgary Immigrant Women's Centre and many had taken part in "Making Changes," a course for new Canadian women offered through the Arusha Centre. Readers are encouraged to read these stories to gain insight and understanding for the special conditions into which immigration places women, regardless from where they come. Some preliminary analysis is attempted to explain the process immigration inevitably initiates: at the beginning, there is the loss of the sense of community. For many women, the urge to be associated with other people, and to belong to a community, is tantamount to many other needs. Therefore, language is the most crucial tool to be obtained to begin rebuilding one's social network.

Immigration resembles a second infancy; limited language skills provoke misunderstandings, feelings of rejections are common and the development of the social self, which needs interaction with others, proceeds but hesitantly. Immigrant women are not infants, however, they come here, usually carrying a heavy responsibility for a family and are expected to support their family by offering emotional support, and also, by seeking employment as soon as possible. Family ties and work-place experiences are working as transitional bridges, helping women to overcome some of the negative effects of not having full access to language and, consequently to the new community.

Achieving a Canadian identity is an even trickier process to be involved in. Canada's multicultural make-up allows for a number of sometimes opposite definitions of what a Canadian identity is: Chinese Canadians want their children to know what it means to be of Chinese descent, parents want their children to know and learn their heritage language and feel Canadian because of this. Above all there is frequently a clear sense that immigrants have to be better, to work harder and more, to be acceptable as new citizens.

The authors raise the question whether or not all immigrants—female or male, young or old—would have similar experiences? Although this is undoubtedly so, the

authors feel that, frequently, immigrant women are particularly vulnerable to a lowered self-esteem when leaving their homelands. Immigrant women "find in a foreign country, similar home responsibilities, but less help and less female adult companionship than in their countries." Very often, their status is less egalitarian at home than in Canada. Their husbands, struggling for social and financial survival as well, consider the traditional roles of females a safeguard for their own security. Therefore, consciously or subconsciously, they discourage their wives and other female members of their family and friends to adopt the ways of the new country, and to strive for an independent position in society, which Canadian born women come to expect.

This is one of the first publications devoted to the more precarious new Canadians—women immigrants. One message comes through all these life stories: the acquisition of language is crucial for new Canadian women. Without language skills, immigrant women must struggle for survival in their homes, on the job and in the community, without much hope of developing their potential as individuals, to form meaningful networks of support for themselves and to exist outside their ethnic surroundings. Their mental well-being may be at risk when forced to function in a world they cannot comprehend because of the language limitations. It is a human right to be able to communicate with people around you, it is one fundamental birthright of every human being on this planet. For immigrant women, learning the language of their new country can be the most crucial helping hand extended to them. Unfortunately, too often, women are not eligible to attend language classes and not enough emphasis is placed on filling this need. Readers of this booklet will not forget, that language is the key to new life.

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**Women as Elders: Images, Visions, and Issues** Marilyn J Bell, ed *New York: Haworth Press, Inc, 1986 Pp 90*

Until recently there has been a paucity of literature in the academic realm reflecting meaningful explorations of the world of aging women. Most of the gerontological literature reports research done of a comparative nature, attempting to discern gender differences in later life by using androcentric norms and methodologies. Bell, in her introduction to *Women as Elders*, reminds us that in women's studies text books, elderly women are merely footnoted with a few references to some facts about meno-

pause, depression and the empty nest syndrome. Even younger feminists are accused by their elders of ignoring the issues and concerns and the very lives of older women. Thus, the subjective experiences of aging women have been dismissed for seeming lack of relevance with the result that their lives are often hidden and invisible. This symposium attempts to bring to light and celebrate the diversity of the lives of elder women and to translate their concerns into a feminine context. It includes five essays, an annotated bibliography and a section devoted to book reviews, each by a different author.

A brief and engaging preface is written by feminist poet, Gert Beadle, herself an elderly woman and a member of a Web of Crones. Drawing on her own experiences as an activist in feminist issues, she shares with us a vivid and personalized image of the intrinsic nature and character of the Crone. She informs us that the Crone's accumulated and hard earned wisdom affords her an overview of the big picture, an acute awareness of what is important and hence, a world view that is at one and the same time realistic and visionary. Her journey is a more inward one, no longer concerned with political reform, but by no means does she withdraw from life. In fact, she is more active than ever. Her energies are now given to nurturing life in herself and others, whereby she builds connectedness between women and their common needs. She does not control life but has stripped herself of its excess baggage, whereby she becomes more vulnerable to the wide range and depth of human feelings. As a result, empathy is one of her hallmarks and becomes the strongest bond between she and other Crones. Her ultimate letting go will be in her confrontation with death, the aura of which is tainted with a characteristic of a patriarchal society—that of fear.

While Beadle encourages women to nurture the strength they find in one another, Nancy Breeze in the "Crone's Nest: A Vision" describes the conceptualization of a visionary community living arrangement for women elders. The issues which this project highlights—health care, housing and economics—are particularly important to older women since they are more likely than men to be widowed and living in isolation, suffering from more chronic illnesses and living close to the poverty level. The concept of shared housing for the elderly is not new as a means of minimizing isolation and pooling limited resources. However, the Crone's Nest according to Breeze, "envision[s] the home as a healing community providing alternatives for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health and growth." Even though this essay is unevenly written and the focus is not always clear, the proposed venture does stretch our