

Book / video reviews

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Alanis Obomsawin: The Vision of a Native Filmmaker. Randolph Lewis. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 2006; illustrations; xxvi + 260 pages; ISBN 0-8032-8045-9; \$21.95US (paper)

Alanis Obomsawin has carved out a significant place for herself in Canadian cinema, from her early days as a consultant and director of short films to her current position as director of major documentary works, notably *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (1993). A behind-the-barricades account of the Oka crisis of 1989-90, in which Mohawk warriors stood off the Canadian military over a land-rights dispute, the feature-length documentary garnered awards in film festivals around the world and is now a canonical text in studies of Canadian cinema.

Obomsawin was raised in an Abenaki village near Montreal. She knew anti-Native prejudice as well as her own traditions from early on and as a beautiful and talented young woman she began a career as a folk-singer and story-teller. She soon became ensconced in the 1960s Montreal art scene, where Leonard Cohen's revolutionary novel, *Beautiful Losers* (1966), modeled the motif of Mohawk Saint Takawitha on Obomsawin's childhood memories and adult personality. When the National Film Board (NFB) embarked on a documentary to be filmed on a remote native reserve, they called her in as consultant. As the first Native person on staff at the NFB, it was a while before she got to move behind the camera. When she did, it was for a short film, *Christmas at Moose Factory* (1971), an animated short based on children's drawings of reservation life. Obomsawin never looked back.

Lewis's book offers useful biographical details as well as historical and political contextualisations of Obomsawin's films. His writing in these accounts is journalistic and compelling, pulling no

punches about either Obomsawin's or his own political perspective. The chapter on *Kanehsatake* is especially lively and replete with well-researched information about the historical background of the dispute, analysis of media coverage, details of the Mohawk arsenal, production information about Obomsawin's institutional struggles with the NFB and her acts of courage (she endured near-battle conditions for seventy-eight days behind the lines). The chapter also offers a detailed reading of the film that acknowledges previous scholarship and assesses subsequent reception.

Where the book falls apart is in Lewis's forays into theoretical analysis. His chapter on "A Gendered Gaze?" examines the few films Obomsawin directed in which she dealt specifically with women as subjects (*Mother of Many Children*, 1977; *My Name is Kahentiosta*, 1996) and he deals only in the antiquated discourse of simple stereotypes. Why is the masculine subject not examined? Why is gender not brought to bear on all of her work? Or why at all? If she were male, would this be an issue?

Nevertheless, this is a work of located scholarship, and - more crucially - the first book-length study of the work of a pre-eminent Canadian filmmaker.

Kay Armatage
University of Toronto

Still Going Strong. Janet Amalia Weinberg. Binghamton, New York: The Haworth Press, 2006; xviii + 293 pages; ISBN 0-7890-2871-9; \$22.95US (paper).

Janet Amalia Weinberg's edited collection *Still Going Strong* is a spirited work comprised of memoirs, stories and poems about uniquely talented mature women. Women's strengths, challenges and joys are the major themes in this book, functioning to offset the demeaning

stereotypes of older women and advising women of all ages to unsubscribe to the misogynist and ageist beliefs imposed by cultures that are so often male-dominated and youth-centered. There is no grieving for "being old" or for the feeling of "getting into a dead-end" in this collection. Rather, each page is about celebrating women's experiences of "conquering Mt. Everest," acquiring wisdom as one ages, engaging in just causes, self-definition or counting blessings. Compassion, creativity and hilarity are vividly written on every page of this book.

On the whole, readers can witness women's personal growth and fulfillment in each piece included here, illustrating the positive aspects of being aged and contesting popular images of mature women as fragile, dependent, disconnected, malicious and/or unproductive. Indeed, the stories and poems documented in this collection exemplify and broaden feminism; they tell stories about the "I am" or "we are" rather than about what others think or say about "us." In cultures where definitions of women and women's values are so often based on their looks, physical attractiveness to the opposite sex, reproductive capacity, ability to comply with socially constructed sex roles and the size of the "supplementary" paycheck that a woman can bring home, women's subjectivities, mental powers and a whole range of other admirable qualities - sharpness, wittiness, persistence, humility, perseverance, assertiveness, expressiveness, and joyfulness - are very often dismissed. Being able to define who one is and to talk about aging in ways that are both humorous and victorious appears to be a liberating process for older women. This sets the stage for women located in other social categories to find liberation in refusing the socially constructed meanings of their "woman-ness"; be it in relation to age, racialization, sexuality, or ability.

While many authors in this collection acknowledge some of the limitations and losses that go along with

being "older," the title of this book - and the title of one of its collected pieces - suggests that getting older means "Still going strong." This, it is implied, is a true "declaration of independence" for women.

Josephine Fong
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Swooning Beauty: A Memoir of Pleasure.

Joanna Frueh. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006; xiii + 289 pages; ISBN 0-87417-672-7; \$29.50US (paper).

In Freud's poetic "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), he tells us that mourning is a painful labour in which the mourner retreats deep within her interior to process the loss of a person or ideal by sifting through her memories. We do this work to prepare for new connections with the world and for loving once again. *Swooning Beauty* is a luscious delicacy that documents art historian Joanna Frueh's passage into her grief following the deaths of her parents and the dissolution of her marriage over a two year period. This book chronicles the epic journey of a hero who is supporting herself through these great losses by clutching pleasure close to her heart and then letting go, opening herself to blissful new possibilities. It is a testament to the hard and exhausting work of mourning that honours the deep and difficult knowledge that can come into being only through bereavement.

The essays in this memoir are enrobed in chocolate, an actual and figurative object that trumpets the virtues of beauty and eroticism in the flesh that are experienced through eating, sex, gardening, spending time with animals, exercising, friendship, learning and art. Chocolate is a physically, emotionally and intellectually nourishing and comforting substance that is an anchor to the hope and fear that new joys and happenings can emerge from beyond the dusky devastation of grief. With a memory that is finely tuned to the opulence of sensory experience, Frueh explores the history of her family, girlhood,