normal. Her characters are viable, and even — to some extent — sympathetic.

Fortunately, through the efforts of small theatres across the country, more Canadian plays are being performed — Wendy Lill and Judith Thompson both have new plays at the Tarragon this season — and fortunately too more scripts are being published and preserved. As in other areas of Canadian literature, some of the most interesting and innovative drama is being written and produced by women. Women playwrights in Canada are at last, *pace* Hollingsworth, becoming a serious literary voice.

[1] Interview in *The Work:Conversations with English-Canadian Playwrights*, eds. Robert Wallace and Cynthia Zimmerman (Toronto: The Coach House Press, 1982), p. 93.

A MAZING SPACE: Writing Canadian Women Writing

Edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli. Edmonton: Longspoon/ Newest, 1987.

Julie Beddoes

The thirty-eight articles (plus editor's preface) in this great big book (427 large pages) are a long-overdue acknowledgement of the work in feminist literary criticism and theory that has been done in Canada for the past several years. As well, they are a good survey of the sorts of criticism going on in Canadian literature in general. That a book can be both at once is welcome evidence of the extent to which women writers and their work are becoming central to the Canadian canons, both of "primary" and critical texts. The contributors form almost a checklist of who are the critics to watch these days (with some important omissions of course) and it is heartening to see that so many of them are women and also that male readers are interested in women's texts.

In their introduction, Neuman and Kamboureli say that their collection,

> *reflects the eagerness of many Canadian writers and critics to re-read our literary tradition in the context of insights from feminist criticism and to bring recent theoretical formulations to bear on the question of women's place in our culture and our writing... In order to draw attention to the range of women's writing beyond that most commonly discussed in academic journals... we asked contributors to extend their dicussion beyond Margaret Atwood and Margaret Laurence ...Their texts are not those of the literary histories with their binary model of center and margin... Out of the margin they have made many centers... this does not mean that these critics speak with a unified voice: their methodologies range from thematics to deconstruction...*

The editors should be congratulated on their breadth of mind in including articles which, in their diversity, survey the possibilities open to feminist literary criticism, that is to criticism as a whole. The book begins with Sarah Murphy's generically unclassifiable "Putting the Great Mother together again or how the cunt lost its tongue," which might have appeared in a collection of fiction, followed by two more conventional essays discussing works which thematize female physicality. There are articles on drama, poetry, fiction, covering all possible periods and some possible origins, including Anglophone, Québécois and native women's work. There are contributions which, in my opinion, exemplify what is most valuable in the feminist literary project — and some which exemplify what I find most dismaying in criticism as a whole and which is by no means justified on the grounds that the authors and critics involved are women.

This is not a fair review. Only an essay-by-essay discussion could be fair to a book too long and diverse for summary. Here I can only talk about the contributions which reinforced or confronted my own critical concerns, with apologies to the many contributors whose work is not mentioned, and exhortations to readers to buy the book.

As the editors' preface implies, the obstacles which have been put in the way of women as professional writers have had the doubly marginalizing effect of keeping their work from view not only because of the gender of its authors but because they were obliged to write in such "nonprofessional" genres as diaries, letters and autobiographies. Criticism which brings to notice unjustly neglected writers in the conventional genres, and which insists on paying attention to the nonconventional ones, is almost by definition going to spend most of its time considering texts by women. My favorite group of articles in this book contains Marni Stanley's "Travelers' Tales; showing and telling, slamming and questing;" Bina Friewald's "'Feminely Speaking': Anna Jameson's Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada;" Heather Murray's "Women in the Wilderness." All three (as do many others in this large collection) pay attention to neglected writing in a way that makes clear the loss involved in such neglect. They, and other contributors, notably E.D. Blodgett, Linda Hutcheon, Janet Paterson and Fred Wah, also incorporate their theoretical underpinnings gracefully: these critics' knowledge of "recent theoretical formulations" has enriched the way they read and discuss texts and makes their discussion more valuable to other readers.

But can feminist literary criticism have any project of its own beyond the reformation of the canon? There is certainly consciousness-raising usefulness in thematic analysis from a feminist perspective but I would argue that it belongs under the heading "social science," not literary criticism — in spite of the damage reading fictional texts as sociological data does to the social sciences' claims of methodological rigour. But this kind of reading also refuses to see language as being capable of more than describing situations that exist independently of it. If there is a radical difference between thematic and deconstructive criticism, as Neuman and Kamboureli suggest, and if one espouses "recent theoretical formulations," how can one then continue to write, read and justify the old kind of "images of women" criticism that still slips by, even when introduced with an epigraph from Luce Irigaray and with quotes from Roland Barthes in the first paragraph? Personally, I prefer articles which launch straight into paraphrase without the trendy intro. *A Mazing Grace* has articles of both kinds and I will leave further identification of them to other readers.

In spite of the editors' claim that they told potential contributors of a "preference for essays that addressed questions of language in women's writing," very few articles claim that there is a "women's language." I have never been persuaded to believe that such a language exists, although the French writer Luce Irigaray claimed in a recent interview in *Border/ Line* that she would shortly produce some. The amazing thing to me is that, given the immense difference in the experiences of those reared as women and those reared as men, gender-specific differences are not as obvious as those relating to class. This might be evidence of the

extent to which language is what constructs, rather than describes, us. I've had a particularly hard time with women's writing that found something essentially female in etymologies or putting hyphens, slashes and spaces in funny places. The title of the book gave me an instant's dismay (as did its designer's use of the now somewhat hackneyed shell images) but its contents give me hope that this phase is now over.

I confess I have to do a lot more reading of and thinking about such writers as Daphne Marlatt, Nicole Brossard, Lola Lemire Tostevin, and the group of articles about them toward the end of this collection, to be sure I am not being unfair in accusing them of biological essentialism, or even if they would reject the label themselves. I imagine that Carolyn Hlus would not reject it when she says at the end of her article "Writing Womanly," "Canadian feminist writers writing womanly, lending their writing to the slow process of unravelling. Exposing woman's imagistic unconscious. Her concrete imagistic unconscious. Her natural imagistic rather than analytical thinking. Women writing womanly, turning the text inside out."

My position so far is that work which claims some kind of natural biological determination of anything so culture-specific as language is itself evidence of the extent to which our experience of our own female bodies is mediated, even produced, by language, a result of social, as well as biological, conditioning. If one sees the very notion of what a woman might be as a cultural/linguistic product, then how can one say, as Jennifer Waelti-Walters does, in her article "When Caryatids Move: Bersianik's view of culture," that "women have been excluded from culture"? How can she talk about women's "historical non-identity" when it is the very identity created by history (and in language) that one presumes it is the feminist project to change? Waelti-Walters reads fiction by Louky Bersianik as representations of an external reality, a critical method that assumes a relationship between word and meaning which deconstructionists argue is the basis of that *status quo* which she — and Bersianik — insist must be overturned. This is the *status quo* that has seen the oppression of women, as well as of Blacks, Jews, the sexually marginal, as a "natural" rather than cultural phenomenon. This article, as well as that by Hlus, seems to assume the existence of some natural, non-linguistic, non-historical female identity awaiting recognition, rather than a historically-produced, language-dependent notion of woman, changing as our understanding of language changes. Acceptance of critical theory that insists that language is the very material from which experience — and sexual identity — is constructed should make this kind of criticism impossible. A criticism that fails to challenge all our culturally received notions of naturalness, in the relationship of language to meaning as well as of men to women, cannot promote a feminist reading on any but the most trivial level of thematics.

Is a specifically feminist textual criticism possible for those who have read some deconstructionist theory? I find the question is not answered to my satisfaction in this collection, but Donna Bennett's contribution, "Naming the Way Home," offers a fascinating account of the progress and politics in feminist theory that have led to this impasse. While I could have done without the anecdotal framework in which she sets her critical discussion, I would recommend readers to turn first to this most valuable survey and then read the rest of the essays through and with it.

UNIONS · PEOPLE · IDEAS · ACTION

OUR TIMES

is a monthly magazine where working people come together to share victories, exchange new knowledge, and compare fears and insights.

We celebrate the vitality and strength of the union movement in Canada today, and believe our future potential is measured now in our diversity and solidarity.

PROGRESSIVE JOURNALISM MEANS GIVING PEOPLE A CHANCE TO SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES.

$15 for 10 full issues ($25 institutions).

Name _____

Address _____

_____ **Postal Code** _____

Send to: Our Times 390 Dufferin St. Toronto, Ont. M6K 2A3

RFR DRF RESOURCES FOR FEMINIST RESEARCH DOCUMENTATION SUR LA RECHERCHE FEMINISTE

The Lesbian Issue

- An examination of the lesbian experience in Canada
- Guide to lesbian organizations, periodicals; bibliographies
- Discussion forums on important issues for research and activism
- with Jane Rule, Nicole Brossard, Mary Meigs and many others

Feminist Practice in Quebec

- A look at issues, research and activism in Quebec
- Research on publishing and pornography, mothers and medicine
- with Micheline de Seve, Louise Vandelac, Yolande Cohen and many others

To order your copy of The Lesbian Issue, or Feminist Practice in Quebec, send $6.50 each to: RFR, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6, Canada.