Book Reviews

NEW POWER

Christine Lowther. Fredericton: Broken Jaw Press, 1999.

BY SHELAGH WILKINSON

The preface to this book is terse, simple and overwhelming: "At the age of seven, I lost both my parents when my father murdered my mother. Both wrote poetry."

And now it is through poetry that Christine Lowther faces the terrible facts of her childhood using the transformative power of language in order to face and tame the terrors within. The act of breaking a silence and giving voice to the inner turmoil may reduce it, but it does not necessarily heal. It is surely the metaphorical process, the metamorphisizing, during which the imagination remembers and simultaneously selects, and re-visions, the shattered parts into a coherent whole that is the catalyst for the healing to begin. This is what we witness in *New Power* as Christine Lowther sifts through the shards of her life picking out the small joys and facing the devastating terrors with courage and honesty.

The subtext of this collection is the claiming of the name of poet for women. Christine Lowther, speaking from the experience of her own life, makes clear the fact that the woman (in this case her mother) who dares to assume that she has the right to conjure language, may have to suffer the consequences of her temerity. Christine asks of her father-poet: "Did she steal your name and make it holy?" And of course Pat Lowther did—and was murdered for it.

But although the poetry allows us to experience the feelings of the little girl betrayed, violated, by an abusive father, the poetry here is also "holy"

in the many nuances and associations that this word throws up. It speaks, to our memory, of the wholeness we shared with the mother and our loss when a terrible sundering takes place. "My first sight was my mother's blood,/my nourisher, her pain, our connection of love."

This book of poems is essentially an act of love remembering our links to the "blood of the Goddess" who birthed us all. More, even through all of the terror that Christine's childhood evokes, her poetry still finds the metaphors to rejoice in the restoration that her connection to the land provides:

> there is no fear
> in showing her true self
> to her green friends around
> her...
>
> In the forest
> she can be a monster-human
> walking slowly,
> dreadfully
> with new
> power

There is clarity of mind running through the poems that is daunting in its ability to see to the very bone of the issue and not to flinch. The second section of the book begins with a prose section that helps us to see the action through the eyes of a seven-year-old. These three pages gave me a space to get closer to this little girl and it provided a momentary separation from the legacies that are recounted in the first section. As a reader I needed that space because this poetry is not easy to read; after the book is put down, it haunts the mind. This is Christine Lowther's answer to what could have been a total desolation and a disintegration of the self. Instead we have a new voice that is strong and uncompromising. It goes sifting through the facts of disclosure, police, media, school years, bullying, foster homes, and always with a constant shame colouring every facet of life; the shame of the imprisoned man who is the father-murderer. We feel the implications of his impending release, the paralyzing terror of this violence being free again to batter and to kill, and then the news of his sudden death in his cell and the "racked sobs of joy because you can finally change *is* to *was*./ He was your father. It's over./ Get on with your life."

And this is the feeling we are left

with, that Christine Lowther is getting on with her life and is doing it through the redemptive power of language. This is a book of poems to rejoice in—even though the facts they reveal are horrendous. Christine Lowther is indeed her mother's daughter and the gift of language has surely been received.

WINDWARD HEIGHTS

Maryse Condé. Trans. Richard Philcox. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.

BY CHRISTINE SINGH

As *Jane Eyre* has its *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *Wuthering Heights* now has its *Windward Heights*, a new novel written by the esteemed Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé. Published in French in 1995, and translated into English in 1998, *Windward Heights* resembles Jean Rhys's novel in that it is set in the Caribbean, partly in Cuba, but mostly in Guadeloupe, yet it differs completely in direction. While Rhys invents a history for Charlotte Brontë's character Bertha, thereby writing an entirely different story from *Jane Eyre*, Condé re-writes Emily Brontë's novel using the same story, only setting it in the second half of the nineteenth century, just after the abolition of slavery. Unlike Alice Hoffman's *Here On Earth* (1997), a twentieth-century version of the original *Wuthering Heights*, Condé keeps with the post-colonial genre in which Rhys writes, thereby adding another dimension to the novel's complexity—that of race relations.

Heathcliff becomes Razye (a sort of French amalgamation of the words "heath" and "cliff"), a dark-skinned outsider, with long curly black hair, and an unknown history. The Earnshaws become the Gagneurs. Mr. Earnshaw becomes Hubert, "a tallow-coloured mulatto who had inherited from his white Creole father his pretentiousness and l'Engoulvent (a sort of French interpretation for 'Wuthering'), an overseer's house almost in ruins...situated on the Windward Heights." Hindley becomes Justin—"somewhat sad and taciturn, with a fair skin, fair enough for him to earn a place for himself in white folks' company through sheer hard work." Catherine becomes Cathy—"she was the colour of hot syrup left to cool in the open air, with black hair like threads of night and green eyes." And the Lintons become the Linseuils, with son Aymeric (Edgar) and daughter Irmine (Isabella), a rich white Creole family whose estate, Belles-Feuilles (Thrushcross Grange) is a plantation.

Condé, it seems, parallels the class relations in *Wuthering Heights* with West Indian racial relations. It soon becomes obvious that the whiter one's skin and features the higher one's social position. As Nelly Raboteur (Nelly Dean's counterpart before Aymeric fires her) says in her narration: "The abolition of slavery hadn't changed anything at all, you know. It was still the rich white planters who laid down the law and the blacks who lived from hand to mouth." So the white Creoles form a superior social class, which is also based on race and further enhanced by financial status, while the dark-skinned Blacks, freed slaves who have little money, are at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Race is also present in the plot changes that Condé makes. Like Rhys, Conde tries to give marginal characters a voice. While there are far fewer characters in Brontë's novel than in Condé's, the servants, especially at Thrushcross Grange, who stay in the background, are brought to the foreground in *Windward Heights*. While they do not alter the original story line drastically, they are given crucial roles as narrators. Chapter headings, such as "Mabo Sandrine's Tale" and "Sanjita the Housekeeper's Tale" are the outcome. Other modifications from the original novel are manifest: Lockwood, for instance, is not present in *Windward Heights*. Instead there is a slew of different narrators, who not only relate the story, but divulge their personal histories as well; Razye/Heathcliff's three-year absence is examined in Condé's novel; he spends the time making money and joining rebellions in Cuba; Razye/Heathcliff also becomes a socialist rebel in Condé's re-writing; Hareton becomes Justin-Marie, who is feminine and dies early, while Linton becomes Razye II, a strong, ragged brute; and Irmine/Isabella in *Windward Heights*, lives until the end.

Aside from these creative changes, as well as others scattered throughout the novel, Condé mostly conforms to Brontë's original *Wuthering Heights*. While the numerous new characters, and new sub-stories that accompany those characters, can add confusion to an otherwise smooth narrative, Condé's richly descriptive prose and powerfully evocative characterization is still able to preserve the emotional power of Brontë's original novel. By using race, however, to show different perspectives and outcomes of the same emotional conflicts faced by the original Brontë characters, Condé perhaps achieves an even more heightened narrative than Brontë, for she not only examines class issues, but racial ones as well. It is also possible then that Condé touches the concerns of a wider readership. Whatever the case, not only does Conde masterfully rewrite *Wuthering Heights*, but she also gives *Windward Heights* a stamp of her own, for that exotic, rich, textured prose is unmistakably Maryse Condé's.