

# Head Over Heels In Love With Literature \*

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un cours de littérature à 21  
femmes d'Aurora, en Ontario.

*Les femmes étaient enchantées  
du contenu du cours, et extrême-  
ment motivées. Une des étudiantes  
présenta un monologue dramatique  
sur son expérience d'étudiante, basé  
sur le style de l'ex-maîtresse des  
Belles Soeurs de Tremblay. Son mo-  
nologue fut très applaudi.*

In 1981-1982, I gave a second-year course in Canadian literature in Aurora to a group of twenty-one women who were enthusiastic, forthright, perceptive, and hard-working. Each week was rewarding and by the end of the year, all the women agreed that I really had made solid and encouraging progress.

We met Thursday mornings at nine and dismissed promptly at noon, when families, jobs, and the concerns of the larger world asserted their claims. The three brief hours we spent together each week, however, made for the best teaching experience I can remember. We spent much of our time in earnest literary discussion when my own modest errors or lapses in remembering the intricacies of the plot of a novel or the name of a character would be greeted by statements to the effect that my mistakes made the ladies feel better about their own. That observation offered a unique kind of comfort, I assure you. One student said that before the course began, she did not think she had much of an imagination, but that as the course progressed, she was not so sure.

Likes and dislikes were vigorously expressed — *Wacousta* was dreary, but Emily Carr sparkled; Susanna Moodie was a trooper, but modern Canadian poetry was definitely best understood by the poets themselves — and discussions were thoughtful, refreshing, and always punctuated with great good humour. Our high-school setting meant that before class began, we

encountered opening exercises — "O Canada" and the Lord's Prayer (the latter either in the standard or modern version). When, on the morning of the exam, amid considerable tension, the modern version petitioned that we be "delivered from the testing beyond our strength," the class dissolved into laughter.

As you can imagine, I will miss these people, but I have an unforgettable moment I would like to share with you. It comes out of a student's inventive mind and a French Canadian play that we read that year, *Les Belles Soeurs* by Michel Tremblay, in which a group of poor and oppressed women are brought together and featured in various monologues which dramatize the hardships of their lives. One of these women — the outcast — has spent her best years as the mistress of a no-good nightclub owner, Johnny, who has just thrown her out for a younger woman. Her bitter and outraged lament was adapted to this course by one of the Aurora students, Jewel Sacrey, and presented as a dramatic reading after a class lunch held to celebrate March break. I keep thinking that there might be in this monologue a tribute of sorts to the course.

## Les Belles Soeurs de Madness et Le Beau Professeur

I know what it's like to be educated. Look at me! When I was younger — seven months ago — I left my home, my children, my husband, and I enrolled in school. I didn't start at high-school level, oh no, I went straight to university. I knew where the challenge was.

When I left home, I was head over heels in love with literature. Johnny, the professeur, he made me waste seven months of my life. Here I am only thirty years old and I feel sixty! The things that guy got me to do! And me, the idiot, listened to him. Seven months I read for him, I explicated his paragraphs, I analysed his poems, I slaved over his essays. I read, wrote, rewrote, reread. For seven

months I sweated and strained for him. For seven months I shut myself off from my friends and family. My children starved because I didn't have time to shop. They lived in dirty clothes because I didn't have time to wash. Seven months of dust has clouded my home and turned it into a sallow gray dungeon. I've had it! All I've got left are my novels, my poems, my dictionary, my chopped-up essays, and my *Holman's Handbook to Literature*.

Oh, it's okay for the rest of them, they got all As. But me, what's going to happen to me? York won't take me back, my kids don't remember what I look like, my husband has found another housekeeper, babysitter, and mistress. I'm all washed up. A girl who's been at it for seven months is all washed up! I'm finished. I don't know what I'm gonna tell my mother, the one who had all the faith in me, the one who encouraged me. She'll never understand. I don't know what I'm going to do.

He failed me! Just like that! It's all over, he said. I don't need you any more. You're too incoherent, you're not concise enough, you have too many sentence fragments, and your punctuation is lousy. That Son of a Scholar, after all I did for him, hours of writing and reading and revising and editing. Seven months, seven months for nothing! That's enough to make you want to pack it in. What am I gonna do now, eh? What? Be a two-bit housewife? No thanks, cleaning house is fine for newlyweds and old ladies, but not for me. I don't know what I'm going to do. I guess I'll just have to sign up for "Irrationality."

As you can imagine, this *pièce de resistance* brought the house down.

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