selves explore the position of the female reader, and ask the question "Is reading good for women?" Helen Clare Taylor and Katherine Anne Ackley would both respond in the affirmative: Taylor finds libraries to be instrumental in the development of the intellectual and emotional independence of Pym's women characters, while Ackley observes that Pym's characters depend on reading as a source of strength, comfort, and humour. Anne Pilgrim explores the demands made upon the reader by the allusiveness of Pym's writing: she admires Pym's courage in risking misunderstanding even as she offers deeply textured layers of meaning, and especially irony, to the reader who has command of the literary canon.

The nine essays in the second section, "Literary Encounters", chart a wide range of ways in which Pym's novels both derive from and provided a variety of literary connections. Barbara Dunlap suggests the work of Charlotte M. Yonge as a useful pre-text to Pym's fiction; Dale Salwak reflects on the growth of Pym's literary reputation; and Janice Rossen posits Philip Larkin as Pym's most effective reader, based on the growth and importance of their friendship. Jan Fergus remembers affectionately a college class in which Pym surprised and delighted an eclectic group of students, and Jane Nardin takes her own introduction to Pym's fiction as a starting point for some gently ironic observations on the literary critic both in and out of the novels. Paul de Angelis contributes thoughts and correspondence from his time as Pym's publisher, while Ronald Blythe offers the reflections on the Oxfordshire seasons that Pym contributed to his anthology *Places*, commissioned by Oxfam, during the last months of her life. And on the most personal level, Hazel Holt remembers her years as Pym's close friend and reader, while John Bayley writes movingly of the comfort he derived from reading Pym's novels while nursing Iris Murdoch through her descent into Alzheimer's disease.

Taken together these essays are a felicitous union of the scholarly and the personal. The wide range of materials and approaches ensures that the collection will be of interest to both scholars and lay readers, and the standard of writing and scholarship is uniformly high. The affection apparent in the writing in no way detracts from the scholarly rigour of the articles, and the tribute never descends into sentimentality. Mrs. Walton closes her foreword with a confident speculation on "how much they would have pleased her." I'm sure she is right. It is an excellent collection.

Heather Campbell is Associate Professor of English and Women's Studies at York University. She is currently researching autobiographical writings by women in the seventeenth century.

MAMMA MIA! GOOD ITALIAN GIRLS TALK BACK

Maria Coletta McLean, Ed.
Toronto: ECW Press, 2004

REVIEWED BY MARION LYNN

Talking back! Being sassy! Strutting your stuff!

These methods have always existed as ways of resistance for women. Women have been speaking out against the status quo in poetry, drama, songs and stories throughout history. This "speaking out" can be found in music from the nineteen-twenties, dance from the nineteen-fifties, and movies and plays throughout the decades. Defiant behaviour—at the individual, cultural and social levels—brings about change for women in perhaps more effective ways than legal challenges and policy critiques. And it can be entertaining as well as subversive.

This collection of "speaking out" and "talking back" stories, written by Canadian women of Italian origin, reflects a form of resistance and defiance that is not commonly viewed as the private face of families of first and second generation Canadians. Like many other cultural groups within the Canadian mosaic, Italian Canadian families are assumed to be shaped by macho and patriarchal men who control the lives of submissive and tradition-bound women. These families are seen as places where the males learn to be dominant men marrying virgins from their own culture, and where the females are kept pure and obedient, so they will get husbands and produce sons.

Not so—according to these stories collected by Maria Coletta McLean. These writers were born in Italy or in Canada, are from their twenties to their seventies, and live in small towns and large cities from Vancouver to Halifax. They feel both privileged and constrained by their Italian heritage. They reflect the experiences of many Canadians with roots somewhere else in the world, identifying with the "old world" of their parents and grandparents, and yet yearning to be just like everybody else, like the *mangiacakes,* who seem to live uncomplicated lives. Although particular in their own ways, a number of themes run through the stories: intergenerational relationships; the centrality of food; physical appearance as difference; curses passed on from mother to daughter or through the evil eye; and religion as the final arbiter of what it is to be a "good girl".

"I grew up in the warm centre of a ravioli universe." Although unable to speak much Italian, this woman states that she "knew the names of all the pastas and the pastries." However, loving the smell, texture, taste, spices and ritual in preparing Italian food, is counter-balanced with the desire to be the same as other kids in

school and have tv dinners for lunch instead of thick bread and freshly-ground parmesan. But the tv dinner is a tasteless mash that passes for potatoes and chicken. Nutella, hidden under the bed of teenage girls, becomes the central source of conflict in one family. In another, mother-daughter disagreements over a divorce are temporarily resolved over a bowl of minestrone soup, "like Nonna used to make." According to one writer, family history is kept alive by retelling the stories of how her grandfather introduced the people of Calgary to the best of Italian food, opening his restaurant to the community to raise funds for the church or the local football team, providing a *piazza,* a meeting place for Catholic nuns, Italians, Jews, Protestants, as well as business executives, football players, and professional boxers.

Physical appearance is one of the things that separates us into different cultural groups in Canada, and provides both a self-identity and a way of being stereotyped by others. To be blond and blue-eyed is the ideal for many young girls, and is especially difficult for those with dark hair, swarthy skin, and a Roman nose. Like so many stories in this book, there are two sides to this self-evaluation: the appearance that is admired in other family members but rejected in herself, is later celebrated when she sees her beautiful children—who look just like her and represent the continuation of her family heritage.

As in many cultures, religion plays a dominant role in keeping people in line, reproducing the social structure and regulating everything from sexuality to family rituals. In having to confess sins that did not exist one eight-year old girl realized that it is easier to lie—not considered as much of a sin—rather than claim to be without sin. As sexuality develops, sins are more likely to be real, and the guilt of sex outside of marriage has to be reconciled with finding a good husband when no longer chaste. As one young woman who had no dowry

was warned, "your wealth is your virginity." Marriages of the past generation are poignantly portrayed as contracts with men one barely knew, marriages agreed to in order to help other family members leave the poverty of post-war Europe for the greater possibilities of Canada. And divorce is seen as breaking up the family—not just the marriage of the couple, but the entire family.

To choose not to marry goes against every value in Italian culture and religion and is shown as an intergeneration struggle in more than one story. One woman talks about the on-going yet eventually resolved struggle with her mother, when she moved away from home, became a writer, and did not marry. Another talks about the difficulty of explaining to her non-English speaking grandmother that she has a "PhD" after her name rather than a "Mrs" before it. For another family, to have a daughter remain unmarried because she is lesbian is a secret that cannot be revealed to an extended *famiglia.* As with birth and marriage, death is a part of the lives of these women: too early loss of mothers; husbands killed in the dangerous work of Canadian construction sites; death of a sister that can never be talked about because it is seen as a source of failure to provide; saying goodbye to the older generation—some taken back to Italy to be buried—with their history, dreams, and stories.

Like many in the Canadian population, the heart and soul is still in the country of birth. One woman realizes that although her mother came to Canada 40 years ago, "she remained in Italy emotionally." For many of these writers, visits to Italy provide confirmation of who they are, in some cases as they meet aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents for the first time—and return to Canadian schools much prouder of their heritage, rather than anxious about being different. For another woman the pattern of returning every summer to the family home near Lake Como with her children helps them to keep in their imagination over a cold, Canadian winter, the "smells and tastes of the place" that they consider their second home.

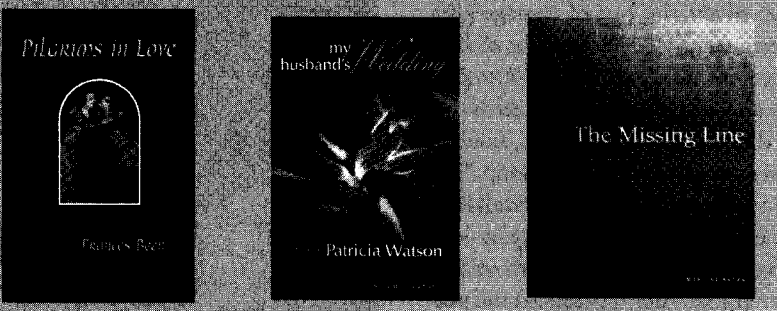
These stories of sassy girls and strong women are funny and sad and draw the reader into the world of the Italian Canadian. They are written by strong women about strong women, who did not just respond to the restricted world around them, but helped re-shape their personal and family lives, and hence the Italian community in Canada. The girls and women in these stories are not afraid of conflict, of breaking away from tradition, of defying the demands of parents and community. They married in defiance of their parent's wishes, or not at all; they went to university instead of joining the family business; they moved across the country instead of into the house next door.

In spite of the changes brought about by these women, I am struck by the ways in which we bring our family history with us, and how it informs our daily lives in small and large ways. And I am struck by—not the differences—but the similarities in stories of "new Canadians." I have used some of these stories in teaching. My students are not Italian Ca-

nadian, but are from Mexico, Albania, Somalia, Jamaica, Tanzania, and Iran. They think the stories are about their lives: immigrating from half way around the world; intergenerational conflict over cultural values; opportunities they never would have had in their original countries; loss of contact with home and family that is too painful to talk about; joy of birth, marriage, and family meals; sorrow over what might have been had they made other choices. I was born in Canada, but grew up with stories and songs about my Irish heritage. I think the stories in *Mamma Mia!* are my stories. And you will too.

Marion Lynn is one of the founding editors of CWS/cf. She currently works as a research consultant and teaches a Bridging course for women in working-class communities in Toronto for the School of Women's Studies, York University.

HAVE YOU READ THESE GREAT BOOKS?



DON'T MISS THE

INANNA POETRY AND FICTION SERIES

www.yorku.ca/inanna

Essential reading for feminists the world over!

Canadian Breast Cancer Network

Réseau canadien du cancer du sein

www.cbcn.ca

1-800-685-8820

The National Network & Voice of Breast Cancer Survivors

Le réseau national et le porte-parole des survivantes du cancer du sein