

ORDER IN THE UNIVERSE

Veronica Ross. Stratford: The Mercury Press, 1990.

THE LEAVING

Budge Wilson. Toronto: Anansi, 1990.

BRIGHT'S CROSSING

Anne Cameron. Madeira Park: Harbour Publishing, 1990.

SALAD DAYS

Claire Rothman. Dunvegan: Cormorant Books, 1990.

TRAVELLING LADIES

Janice Kulyk Keefer. Toronto: Random House, 1990.

By Mari Peepre-Bordessa

These five collections of short stories only confirmed my conviction that Canadian short fiction deserves its growing recognition and (dare I say?) international reputation as Canada's own special contribution to world literature. Women such as Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood, and Marie-Claire Blais have paved the way for these new writers by showing us all what a unique and exquisite vessel the short story can be; they have proven that this medium above all can be shaped and perfected to give voice to our own particular female experience.

These new books of short stories were written by women who live in communities across the entire country, and their settings stretch even beyond Canada into Europe and South America. Their characters represent all walks of life and range in age from newborn to ancient; their styles of writing vary greatly from rough earthy humour to cool and polished sophistication. What is it, then, that connects these five collections, with their 54 stories, into a cohesive example of what's good about Canadian short fiction today? Well, first of all, the world in each case is viewed through a telescope held by a woman. And these five sensitive, highly articulate women can, in turn, adjust the focus and successfully interpret for us the lives we lead—they have given voice to our varied rites of passage, to our inner consciousness, to our multitude of experiences. And,

furthermore, they have invested their voices with a vibrancy and a resonance which at best is exhilarating and even at worst is worth reading.

Most of the voices in Budge Wilson's *The Leaving* are set in Nova Scotia and describe various rites of passage and moments of revelation as experienced by adolescent girls. They are perceptive explorations of the female psyche, written in a carefully controlled style which sometimes becomes perhaps slightly earnest in tone. My favourite was "The Metaphor," which describes a sensitive young girl's agony of doubt and guilt as she stands aside while her devoted teacher is driven to suicide by the careless cruelty of her fellow students. One of the most delightful stories in the collection is "The Pen Pal," which consists of a series of increasingly personal, girlish letters from a Canadian schoolgirl who pours out her heart to an unknown pen pal in Australia. The surprise ending cannot help but endear the stricken and humiliated adolescent to the reader.

The first two stories in Veronica Ross's *Order in the Universe* are set in Europe, but don't ring quite as true as the Maritime tales which follow. While mostly dark in tone, these stories are realistic but sensitive and range across a wide spectrum of human experience and suffering. "Joseph Kiel" is a subtle and intelligent story about a husband's ghost coming back to haunt his wife of 35 years, while "Siberia" describes the reluctant return home of a son when his father finally leaves their alcoholic and impossibly difficult mother. "Nels" was perhaps the best crafted story in this collection, using an indirect approach to reflect light upon a searing story which, in less able hands, could easily have degenerated into bathos and melodrama. A detached voice narrates the circumstances which have led to a mother's accidental shooting of her daughter, subtly suggesting the complex undercurrents of emotions which have led to this terrible episode.

Claire Rothman's *Salad Days* displays a versatility and dexterity as well as breadth of scope and her writing suggests a promising new talent who will be heard from again in future. These stories span the globe from Rothman's Montreal as far as France and Guyana, and reflect an unusual awareness of time and place, an ability to transport the reader to where and

when it happened. "Beyond the Pale," especially, catches the nostalgia of a Jewish girlhood spent in an immigrant Westmount family. The fragile balance between childhood innocence and mature understanding which this story captures is also evoked in several other vignettes, especially in "August," a touching, lyrical tale of a 13-year-old's summer of transition to knowledge. In "Jyoti," a young Canadian teacher is forced to face the "brutal, parching fate" of many Guyanese women, while in a very different story, "Wing-beat," a dying woman metaphorically sprouts wings and flies away to her death. Rothman's style is clean and direct, and her honesty forces the reader to engage with her characters.

Bright's Crossing by Anne Cameron is a collection of tales about victimized women who have drifted into a West Coast community called Bright's Crossing. Men, when they are allowed to intrude into these stories at all, figure mainly as brutal aggressors who force their women (especially "Pat" and "Lizzie") to run away and engage in a kind of (not always convincing) 'self-help' therapy. The stories often catch an earthy and humorous tone which rings true to the subject matter but at other times they deteriorate into what seems like rather excessive swearing and posturing ("Louella")—they often sounded to me more like unsuccessful attempts by Cameron to appropriate male language than successful renditions of the earthy vitality of 'real' women. Cameron does tell a good tale though: there's one about "Frances," a dying old lady who is saved by an extra-terrestrial being called 'Swoosh' and lives on forever, much to the chagrin of her greedy, uncaring son. Or then there's "Betty," who lets a seamstress off her fish hook one day and sets off a chain of charmingly magical events. *Bright's Crossing* displays the same vitality and exuberance which has earned Cameron praise for her earlier collections.

Janice Kulyk Keefer's highly polished and elegant *Travelling Ladies* certainly proves the promise she showed in earlier collections. She is clearly ready to move into that magic 'inner circle' of accomplished Canadian women writers. Some of these latest stories were gems of perception and lyrical precision. "Bella Rabinovich/Arabella Rose" and "The

Grandes Platières," especially, lived on in memory for weeks after reading. Both stories describe young girls in a first confrontation with mortality and both capture the fear, the rejection, and the struggles for comprehension of an incomprehensible world that mark our paths toward adulthood. Most of the stories are about Canadians travelling in Europe, and they catch well the atmosphere of passage through foreign places. The journeys are of course mostly metaphors for change, for growth, for sudden revelations—as good stories often are. If these stories left anything to be desired, it was for a more empathetic engagement with the lives of the characters. Kulyk Keefer maintains a certain academic, clinical distance from her travelling ladies, perhaps most strikingly in "Isola Bella," and this detachment can occasionally insulate the reader from the real flesh and blood of her characters and leave us wishing we cared more about their fates

WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Annabel Rodda. London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1991.

By *Brenda Cranney*

Women and the Environment is part of the Women and World Development Series developed by the Joint UN NGO Group. The Group was established in 1980 to organize the production and distribution of joint UN/NGO development education material. This series makes available the most recent information on development issues as they pertain to women.

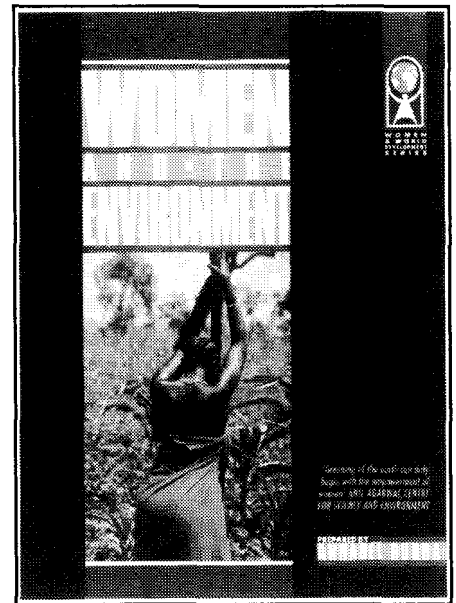
The book focuses on the relationship between women, development and the environment. In many developing countries women depend on the environment for fuel, fodder and water. The repercussion of development programmes in various areas of the developing countries has been an environmental crisis that has had a devastating impact on women from the poor peasant classes because of their close relationship to and dependence on the environment. Women's role as key agents in achieving sustainable development cannot be overlooked.

Annabel Rodda prepared the information in this book as a resource tool and also with the hope that it will enlighten, inform, and stimulate the reader to action. This is a very timely publication in light of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.

The stated purpose of *Women and the Environment* is to provide information and raise awareness. Chapter 2 presents a broad overview of the environmental issues in a global context. The information is basic and intended for those who do not have an extensive background in the area. There is a detailed bibliography for those interested in following up on specific issues. Rodda presents issues such as global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, desertification, environmental disasters and pollution. The information is easily understood by newcomers to the issues but at times diagrams that need further discussion are left unexplained.

The sections on population and environment, and political and economic considerations, are quite problematic. These issues are presented in a very superficial way with no consideration given to the power imbalances between nations, classes and ethnic groups. In the discussion on population and environment it is suggested that food production in the developing countries cannot keep up with population growth. Research has shown that there is enough food to feed the world. It is the distribution of food that is the problem, and not the production of it. Political and economic considerations are very important to environmental issues and need to be addressed in more depth.

Chapter 3 looks at the role of women as managers of consumption. Their function as food/fuel/water collectors as well as farmers and income earners is explored. This chapter details all aspects of women's lives, such as: water collectors and carriers, consumers and managers of the natural environment, farmers and farmworkers, wage labourers, workers in the formal and informal sectors, and family planners. Because of women's role as caretakers of the family it is necessary that they be part of development planning. Suggestions are made concerning women's involvement in programme policy at a local level, at the national level, and at the international level.



Chapter 4 focuses on the effect of the environmental crisis on the lives of women. Details of the increased workload of women due to the degradation of the environment is documented. As well, the impact on women's health and other social implications such as male migration and domestic relationships are examined.

In Chapter 5 the positive action taken by women is documented. Women are not seen as passive victims but as key agents of change. They have become very important to the environmental movements. Chapter 6 looks at project implementation and specific case studies that are intended to serve as models. Suggestions are presented for women's participation and planning of projects. The annexes provide a guide to education and action, lists of organizations, and key definitions.

This text provides a very thorough description of the environmental issues and how they impact on the lives of women. It shows how women can be a key factor in environmental change through their roles as educators and communicators. What is missing from the text is any kind of political analysis which is crucial to understanding the environmental crisis and its impact on women. It is not enough to include women in the planning and implementation of development projects. If power imbalances at an international and local level are not addressed, environmental devastations will continue.