

Book Reviews

THE NINE LIVES OF CHARLOTTE TAYLOR: THE FIRST WOMAN SETTLER OF THE MIRAMICHI

Sally Armstrong
Toronto: Random House Canada,
2007

REVIEWED BY SHELAGH WILKINSON

Sally Armstrong begins her story when she is on a bike ride along the boardwalk in Baie de Chaleur, northern New Brunswick. She sees a plaque (recently erected); she remarks such “government plaques do not usually resolve historical mysteries” but this one does. She discovers that this was the piece of land “not more than a sand dune” on which a brisk trade was established between Canada and the West Indies in the eighteenth century. In researching for details on the life-story of the matriarch of her family Armstrong had overlooked this connection. Now she is sure this is the place where Charlotte Taylor arrived in Canada—under the protection of Captain George Walker, trader, who brought her from the West Indies in one of his sailing ships to this, his trading depot. And so the incredible story of Charlotte Taylor begins—anchored firmly in Canadian soil by Sally Armstrong (Charlotte’s great-great-great granddaughter)—but ranging far away, across oceans and centuries, only to come back to “this place ... not much more than a sand dune.”

When I begin reading a biography—a life-story—(especially one written by a descendant) I expect the read to be a bit of a slog. But

from the introduction this book is a page-turner. Sally Armstrong gives such a vivid description of Charlotte Taylor’s life that I feel I am taking this incredible journey alongside this “tall woman with flame-red hair.” And what a journey it is: from England to the West Indies and from Jamaica to Canada—with all of this beginning in 1775 when Charlotte is only twenty years old, pregnant, unmarried but totally in love with the man who is the family butler and a West Indian. They elope to the West Indies to re-claim his family but after only five days on a Jamaican plantation Charlotte’s lover is ill and dying and she is left a “widow” for the first time. The “family” Charlotte expected to unite with is a figment of his imagination. And a woman alone, without a male partner, is totally vulnerable here. Charlotte has to use her wits to get away from a life-threatening situation. The intelligence, defiance, and courage that were obvious character traits on board the long voyage now define her character for the rest of the story. She may be only twenty but already she knows the politics of gender, has reckoned with economic realities, has no delusions about her vulnerability, and analyzes her situation calmly and with common sense. Charlotte is determined to become not merely a survivor but a woman who will live her life according to her own set of rules.

In writing biography the basic, and essential, requirement for a good story is to make the central character live—we want to become part of this life we are reading about and Armstrong quickly achieves this by creating a woman that we immediately relate to: Charlotte is savvy, she’s intelligent, passionate

and arching across the centuries we find a woman who is a proto-feminist.

Armstrong’s description of the two long sea voyages undertaken by Charlotte gives a vivid picture of what women had to cope with if they dared to set out on such perilous journeys in the eighteenth century. The lack of privacy, the constant proximity of sexually deprived, ship-bound men, the sickness, the dirt and hunger that increase as the long voyage drags on—become Charlotte’s reality. On the first sea voyage Charlotte begins her diary-keeping and this habit continues throughout her long life. With her arrival in New Brunswick her writing takes on a new significance. Although the diaries are fictionalized they are the catalyst that opens up Charlotte’s emotional and psychological reactions. Diary writing is an integral part of Charlotte’s life, and looking over her shoulder as she writes we share, rather than observe, her life. In fact we want more of her diary; we want her to keep on writing her life on the page ... because here she reveals what a woman must do to stay in control of her body (and her property). Through the diaries we know the negotiations she makes intellectually and emotionally before she enacts them. The barriers that these early women settlers had to negotiate and the compromises they had to make are their daily reality and we are privy to them. But Charlotte’s busy life keeps getting in the way and the diary writing is kept to a minimum. Armstrong’s skill at drawing us into Charlotte’s life is the basic and integral strength of this book. And the shock and pain that Charlotte feels at the end of her life when the

diaries are lost in the river, never to be found again, becomes ours as well. But Sally Armstrong is a clever author making sure that we can't go badgering after archival details from these documents. (Because from the first episode of diary-writing the reader quickly skips to the Index of source material and searches for an entry. None.) What we have is what we've got—a great story told by a great storyteller.

Although this is a life-story it is much more than that because we learn about the politics, the economics, the historical reality, the feuds and the alliances of this early Canadian settlement. And Armstrong's research is impeccable. She gives the details of the slow—deliberate—dispossession of native lands and rights and the similar losses suffered by the Acadians of New Brunswick. Charlotte describes the support and interdependence of these two peoples in her diary: "As for their [the Acadian] relationship with the Micmac, in many ways one has become the other—in language, in clothing, in the food they eat and the ways they live. The best of each being borrowed as one's own." And she gives us a clear picture of the strengths of the Mi'kmaq and Acadian women who become her life-long friends. When Charlotte first arrives, holding the ship's rail, she swears to herself "I will make my own way." True to her vow Charlotte chooses to live with, and rely upon, the Mi'kmaq rather than accept the patriarchal protection of Captain Walker (with its implicit expectation of co-habitation). Because of Charlotte's choice Armstrong is able to weave closely documented facts into her fictionalized life. The details of how the first people house Charlotte, keep her warm with animal skins, teach her herbal healing and help in the birthing of her first baby—this West Indian child born in the freezing north—ground us in this place. It is in the welter of details about food gathering and

trapping, the building of dwellings to withstand snow and ice—in fact the daily grind of survival—that the research skills of Armstrong are obvious. And these facts are essential for a story such as this. Too much fictionalizing would have left the reader unbelieving; too much fact would have left us overloaded. Armstrong's even-handed approach makes for a story that moves along with clarity and energy.

Again drawing heavily on historic documents Armstrong demonstrates the land-grabbing and the shady deals that were part of the early settlements and into this she weaves Charlotte's swift recognition of how she too must become a landowner and take part in the shady dealing that is an essential part of life on the Miramichi river in the late eighteenth century. Life is chaotic for both settlers and native peoples; when the British-American war breaks out, the skirmishes and intrusions by the privateers and then the new influx of Empire Loyalists gives land allocations a more acutely political agenda. Charlotte quickly becomes a very political woman—a woman who knows that it is essential to secure land-rights, to understand and take part in the economics of this burgeoning settlement and be able and willing to face down men who would outwit her. She is an entrepreneur who sees the assets in a tract of land and is relentless in securing it for her family. In explaining the history of the settlement to her grandchildren she is "fully aware of her own complicity in displacing both Acadian and Indian." She is not always popular but she is acknowledged as a woman of will and tenacity and one who is equal to most men in establishing herself in the new world. Yet she has lived in the full "knowledge that everything she wished to secure for her family helped to undo the security of her friends." Armstrong may be writing fiction but in tying it down securely with facts she gives us an *entrée* into the lives

of women that is usually left unrecorded. This woman birthed ten children and not only survived but flourished—and so did all of her children. Sally Armstrong gives us the details of the underside of history, the daily negotiations that are part of all women's lives. Lives that are so easily dismissed, displaced, in the accepted historical accounts. In 1795 Charlotte writes:

I'll be forty years old this month. Hard to believe I've been here for twenty years. From wilderness to settlement, from isolation to community, from a girl to a mother of nine children and already a grandmother. And at last the new Elections Act says land-holding women can vote so I will cast my ballot with the men after all.

These lines are an example of how the diary-writing reveals the importance for single women (as Charlotte became again and again through widowhood) to achieve political equality. Charlotte is forty years old here yet she will have another child and lose the father of that child. While dealing with the daily hazards of life Charlotte has a political triumph by finally winning a vote for women like herself. And it is no small triumph—the importance of which is not missed by women of our own century. However, her story is not all political maneuvering, sensible marriage settlements, establishing schooling for children or even land-grabbing. Charlotte Taylor has a love in her life and it is finally consummated.

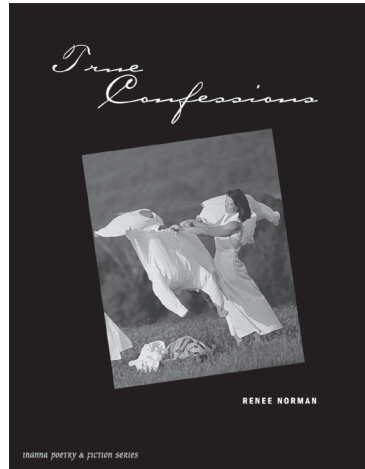
Charlotte's deepest pleasures in life seem to come from her early reliance on, and genuine respect for, the first people and the Acadians. Without them she knows her life would have been much more restricted. But for one man she feels more than respect and compassion. Wioche, the Mi'kmaq who was her immediate help-mate when she first arrived has been the passion in her

life—a passion that she has always had to deflect and hide. He is the one who taught her how she—and her new baby—could live off the land with little help from white men. It is Wioche who remains her friend and defender throughout her long life. And it is Wioche who guides her over the frozen land to Frederick Town to settle her land claims when she is without other male protection. This is a hard journey but it becomes their love tryst. Fiction? Yes, but great story-telling—and a lovely detour from the grinding facts of early emigrant experience.

Although the book is filled with action and unexpected twists of plot, and although fate seems almost to overwhelm Charlotte Taylor, we never hesitate in our belief in this life. This woman develops a will of steel because she has to: such a harsh environment demands a harsh response—especially from a “mere” woman. But finally Charlotte Taylor has established herself and her family in the most favourable acreage at Tabisintack; she loves the Point, she has secured the land here for her clan and it remains theirs to this day. “She celebrates her eighty-fifth birthday at Wishart’s Point” with “more than seventy grandchildren, eight of them named Charlotte” and so the saga of this matriarch comes full circle. Back to Sally Armstrong, to “this place ... not much more than a sand dune” really. It took a very strong woman to write this herstory and who better than a descendant who is herself a fearless proponent of women’s rights. Sally Armstrong is another woman who did not hesitate to cross the world to give us the stories of the women of Afghanistan—not as victims but as *The Hidden Power of the Women of Afghanistan*. Charlotte, Sally, the women of Afghanistan: all powerful women—different lives, different countries, different centuries but HER stories that must be told.

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TRUE CONFESSIONS

Renee Norman
Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2005

REVIEWED BY WANDA HURREN

Renee Norman’s award winning collection of poems, *True Confessions*, is a celebration of words and women. Throughout this collection, the particular in everyday events (school field trips, cooking soup at the stove, checking the doors at night to make sure they are locked) mingles with the universal, in that Norman refuses to be silent regarding the place(s) of women in a patriarchal society.

True Confessions is divided into four sections, and each begins with a black and white family photograph. The sections are organized in a way that is almost chronological, but not quite; almost seasonal, but not quite; and definitely confessional. In the opening poem from the first section, we are drawn in to the not always suppressed tensions shared between a mother and daughter. Norman calls

up that crazy ambiguous positioning of being a mother with daughters of her own, yet still and also being the daughter in her mother’s house (even when Norman’s own daughters are present). The tensions that exist around these roles are called up: *these summer visits home are like waiting for the other shoe to drop*. Much of the tension seems to be located between an aging mother and daughter, and Norman writes more tenderness into the relationships with her young daughters. Yet there are also moments of tenderness located in her lines about her relationship with her mother. When she discovers her mother at the stove with her shirt on inside out (*migod, her shirt is on/ inside out*), Norman tells us, *i lift her shirt off her shoulders/ the way i undress my youngest child/ when her head is stuck/ my hands radiate/ tenderness and humour*.

A major theme present in the poems from the second section, *If I Call Myself*, is that of women and their positioning in a patriarchal society. Norman calls on her experiences as mother, daughter, student, teacher, and above all woman, to highlight society’s gaze upon women, men’s privileged positioning, and how middle age plays into the mix. Norman rises up in her middle age, letting us know that she no longer sits with her *feet folded under another table*, waiting for a man to ask her to dance. Within the educational world where Norman has lived as a student and teacher for many years, she champions women who go against the grain: like *fleas in the fur of university departments/ we burrow in*. Regarding the gendered inequities in the educational world, she writes of *choruses of women/ chanting the mantra of men/ between school board walls*.

Norman’s third section, *When Geese Fly*, sometimes performs a type of humorous interlude in the everyday, while time passes and families age. There is also a preoccupation with death and dying in this section. Sad endings to stories and lives are recounted—this is a group of poems