

*The Muse Strikes Back* does not confine Hédi Bouraoui's narratives, rather Elizabeth Sabiston allows these narratives to reclaim their open endings where the role of the female muse crosses genders and cultures and breaks free of stereotypes. Instead of trying to find the man or the author behind the text, Sabiston emphasizes the unique position the narrator/muse has in Bouraoui's work, being subject and object simultaneously. *The Muse Strikes Back* is a great introduction to the complexity of Hédi Bouraoui's work and for those who are unfamiliar with Maghreb literature in general. It is a must read for those interested in the narratology of gender along cross-cultural lines, and a welcome addition to the study of Maghreb literatures.

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## WHAT CASANOVA TOLD ME

Susan Swan  
Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2004

### REVIEWED BY ANN (RUSTY) SHTEIR

This is a delightful novel about transformation by travel and by history. Susan Swan tells a story with a double plot-line in which the present parallels the past. Luce Adams, a 28-year old Toronto-based archivist, travels to Venice to deliver family documents to a library. She travels via Athens on to Crete, and her journey ends in Istanbul. In 1797, her American

Puritan ancestor Asked For Adams (whose mother who had dearly wanted a female child) had also traveled on a family matter to Venice in the company of her father and stolid fiancé. Circumstances bring her into acquaintance with Jacobo Casanova, legendary late eighteenth-century Venetian traveler, writer and memoirist of his own adventures, and they go off to Athens and Constantinople and into a new life together.

Swan crafts the geographical mirroring of the travels of Luce and Asked For Adams so that the overlaps between the women are inevitable and satisfying. Both women cover the same ground and encounter the same smells and foods, take in the same warmth, and with the same effects on spirit and body. Sexuality is part of the story of early twenty-first-century Luce, pale, timid, and very soft-spoken, and late eighteenth-century Asked For, a sturdy and large-bodied woman who was raised on the Roman Sticks and thought herself plain.

The agent of transformation in both cases is the iconic lover Jacobo Casanova, aging in years, but not in his hunger for bodily connection and zest for life. The journal of Asked For Adams details her encounters with Casanova and the surprise of their powerful attraction to one another. Casanova passionately believed in female intelligence and women's rights to seek sexual enjoyment and mutual sexual pleasure. Susan Swan's depiction of Casanova recuperates the aging lover from charges that he was a selfish and patriarchal predator on women. Based in his writings and multi-volume memoirs, her account is empathetic and humanizing.

"What Casanova Told Me" is the title of Asked For Adams's own journal, and writing and reading are central features of plot development in the novel. Under Susan Swan's deft tutelage, we watch Luce reading her ancestor's story across a series of documents: journal entries, letters to her from Casanova,

and then a manuscript in Arabic that details how Asked For Adams's life unfolded. A highlight of the novel is Casanova's "Ten Primary Principles of Travel," a document whose inspirational tone extends across the centuries to readers and travelers now. Three examples must suffice here:

- 1) Do not set out in a spirit of acquisition, but go forth in the utmost humility, experiencing the same fervour you feel when choosing a lover, knowing a world of possibilities awaits you.
- 2) Write down what it is you desire and tear your wish into a dozen pieces. Then fling the scraps into a large body of water. (Any ocean will do.)
- 3) What you desire always awaits you if you are brave enough to recognize it.

Women's Studies audiences will enjoy how Susan Swan integrates the contemporary goddess movement into the plotline of *What Casanova Told Me*. Luce's mother Kitty was a celebrated and peripatetic scholar who had published widely in the area of Neolithic religion. Letters take us into Luce's relationship with her and also with her mother's lover, Lee Pronski, another goddess scholar and devotee of the Venus of Willendorf. Susan Swan is adept at light social satire, and the world of goddess religion and ritual practices provides some bemused moments. However, Swan also understands the convictions of the goddess movement and is versed in the scholarship that has developed in recent years. Key moments take place around a sacred stone and in a sacred cave. A sign of Luce's own transformations over the course of the novel is that Luce herself, skeptical about her mother's beliefs, and uncomfortable with her mother's acolytes, comes to accept some of what this all represents. Learning a new sense of possibility, Luce travels

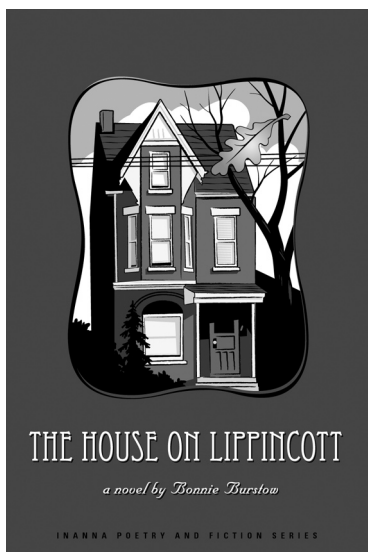
a path whose milestones are emancipation, sexual discovery, connection to her mother, and connection to feminist history.

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## THE HOUSE ON LIPPINCOTT

Bonnie Burstow  
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REVIEWED BY MARK  
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Since beginning my graduate work, I have put aside any hope of reading fiction until I'm done. There is simply so much heavy reading to do in the course of a doctoral degree—not to mention ancillary reading and research for lectures and talks—that fiction would seem like the proverbial busman's holiday. I did, however, make one exception: Bonnie Burstow's remarkable book, *The House on Lippincott*, published this spring by Inanna Press.

The book is at once profoundly moving and intellectually challenging as it recounts the life and times of the Himmelfarb family, perceived through the eyes and heart of Miriam, the second eldest daughter, in the role of narrator.

I love this book for a variety of reasons.

First, I know these characters. Not only do they represent people who have passed through my life at one time or another, Burstow has created characters with such nuanced depth of personality that they are, indeed, real. Even the minor characters correspond faithfully to my experience and memories of those who have been on the periphery of my life.

Second, in the three daughters, Sondra, Miriam and Esther, Bonnie has explored three very distinct responses to the family life of Holocaust-survivor parents. None is a caricature, yet each in her own way, captures the unique mentality of a child—and later adult—attempting to make sense of the incomprehensible as it infiltrates her own life.

Third, without revealing the end of the story, the final scenes represent the ultimate triumph of the human spirit over the evil that was perpetrated during the Holocaust, even in the inevitable decline of that spirit. The resolution of the story, facilitated by Eema (mother) in her final days, stands in stark contrast to the ultimate defeat of her husband by the ghosts of the Nazis that tormented him throughout his life, and through him, I would say, tormented his daughters.

Fourth, there is an important process of witnessing that occurs throughout this story that I have not encountered elsewhere. In particular, the gendered experience of the Holocaust represents a set of experiences that have not been widely publicized, that are important to chronicle. Throughout history, the tragic experience of evil and depravity has always been, and continues to be, a gendered phenomenon. It

is only relatively recently that the awareness of this divide has reached the mass media and popular consciousness. In my own reading about the Holocaust over the years, and through the representations and narratives contained among Holocaust memorials and museums that I have visited, I had only heard very few of the experiences in the camps that were uniquely experienced by women and girls.

Fifth, and perhaps most important, this book is the story of the particular heritage of the Canadian Jewish community. While it starkly confronts the reader with images from Auschwitz, it equally confronts the reader with images from countless homes across Toronto and, I would expect, Halifax, Montreal, Winnipeg, Edmonton, and the various smaller centres that were the final destinations of thousands of post-war, Jewish refugees. Albeit a fictional account in which the characters are all amalgams of life stories drawn from both research and Burstow's clinical practice as a trauma therapist, these stories are important for Canadian Jews to know. Irrespective of whether readers share their generation with Miriam, Sondra and Esther, or whether they are the children of that generation, the book is one of the ways to understand our own psyche.

*The House on Lippincott* is a starkly beautiful, and profoundly moving novel. Bonnie Burstow has peered into the hearts and souls and minds of countless Holocaust survivor families to richly bring the fictional Himmelfarb family to life. Through them, she weaves a tale that captures the unique experience of late twentieth-century Canadian Jews. If this story touches your heritage, you owe it to yourself to read this novel. And if this particular story is, for you, foreign, it is still worthwhile: *The House on Lippincott* illuminates an aspect of contemporary Canadian society that has substantially influenced and shaped its current multicultural