

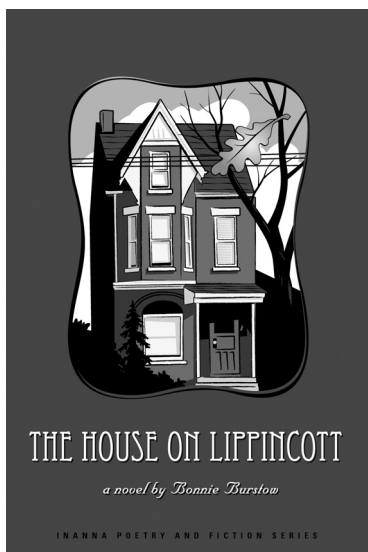
a path whose milestones are emancipation, sexual discovery, connection to her mother, and connection to feminist history.

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THE HOUSE ON LIPPINCOTT

Bonnie Burstow
Toronto: Inanna Publications Inc.,
2006

REVIEWED BY MARK
FEDERMAN



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

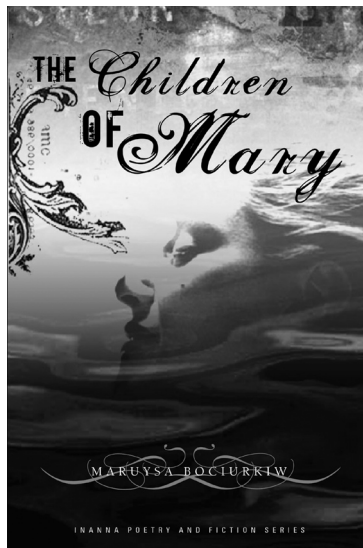
is only relatively recently that the awareness of this divide has reached the mass media and popular consciousness. In my own reading about the Holocaust over the years, and through the representations and narratives contained among Holocaust memorials and museums that I have visited, I had only heard 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

sensibility. Whether it is your story or not, read this book.

Mark Federman is completing a Ph.D. in Adult Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. In addition to teaching at University of Toronto, he has been a visiting professor at the Fachhochschule in Kiel Germany, and is regular guest lecturer at Högskolan för Lärande och Kommunikation in Jönköping Sweden, and elsewhere. He is the co-author, with Derrick de Kerckhove, of *McLuhan for Managers*—New Tools for New Thinking.



THE CHILDREN OF MARY

Marusya Bociurkiw
Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education Inc., 2006.

REVIEWED BY CYNTHIA FLOOD

A ghost sister. A herbalist Baba. A mother who dreams of floating in the Red River, the water warm as the Mediterranean. These, plus a sister who's very much alive—rebellious, loving, lesbian, grief-stricken, angry, heavy with memory and hope—are all embodied in the title of Marusya Bociurkiw's new book, *The Children of Mary*. She has a way with titles! Earlier works are the short-story collection *The Woman Who Loved Airports* (Press Gang 1994) and the poems of *Half-Way To The East* (Lazara 1999). I admired these and looked forward to reading Bociurkiw's first novel, set in Ontario and Manitoba from the 1930s to 2000. This novel is about loss—but it's not sad. Rather, it is, yet life and energy and courage ultimately transcend that sadness.

Grandmother Maria, mother Tatyana, daughters Kat and Sonya: all three generations of women in this Ukrainian family are compelling and multi-dimensional. Maria and

Sonya tell the story, alternately, in first person; sometimes dream-sequences in third person give Tatyana voice. Perhaps she is worst off? She's born far from the homeland yet can't access Canada's possibilities, and unlike her mother and younger daughter she lacks willpower. However, the stringent limits imposed on Baba's existence amount to bondage. A hard, hard life she has—yet a core sweetness in her and a driving intellectual curiosity repel despair.

As for Sonya, she's rejected, even loathed by her mother for being lesbian. Her grief for Kat paralyzes her so that she can't form honest emotional bonds with the living. She runs away, runs, runs. Not until she's understood all that she can about her dead sister and their family history can Sonya change. Kat too gradually gains presence, as over the years those who knew and loved her react to her mysterious death.

In addition to these central figures, there's a long roster of minor yet complex characters. Baba's socialist husband Nestor has a completely different view of the world from hers, one that has its own legitimacy even though for good reason she can't see it. The evil of Tatyana's husband is shaded and shielded yet still exposed by what other people say of him. Sonya's friends, past and present, old and young, gay and straight, and her various lovers are all much more

than mirrors set up to reflect her various qualities. They have agency and impact, and the big Christmas Eve dinner scene that brings many of them together at the same table is marvellous.

These women inhabit settings that Bociurkiw makes vividly real through her presentations of public spaces (bars, restaurants, workplaces), of domestic furnishings, of clothes and cars, and of popular culture, particularly TV. These descriptions don't just sit there on the page as set-pieces; they're dynamic. And food! Bociurkiw does amazing things with food, showing a rainbow of attitudes and emotions in what people cook and eat and drink -- or don't, or won't, or can't. (Her next book, by the way, is a food memoir, *Comfort Food For Break-Ups*, due from Arsenal Pulp in spring 2007.)

Another fine feature of *The Children of Mary* is its use of landscape. Yes, in Canadian novels both big-city neighbourhoods and prairie skies are commonplace—but Bociurkiw's descriptions are definitely not. I especially admire her treatment of rivers. They begin and end the book, in Maria's and Sonya's voices. Powerful visions, both—I've read each several times. From the flooding Red River to tiny buried Taddle Creek, those running waters shape the story, and Torontonians can get a whole new vision of their city as underwritten by an entire language of lost streams.

And I still haven't said anything about *The Children Of Mary's* treatment of Catholicism (dire), or of herbalism (fascinating), or of lesbian movie festivals (laden with irony)—nor about much else that this richly-flavoured novel offers. So go read! And be sure to notice the chapter titles. They're beautiful, too.

Cynthia Flood's short fiction has won the National Magazine Gold Award, the Journey Prize, a Prism International Prize, and the Western Magazines Gold Award. Her novel, Making A Stone of the Heart, was nominated in 2002 for the City of