

## MOTHER-MYSTERIES

Maren Tonder Hansen. Boston and London: Shambhala, 1997.

### BY MARIA BONANNO

This narrative is written in a journal-like style and Hansen introduces herself as a psychotherapist, Unitarian Universalist Minister, wife, and feminist who is having her first child after the age of 30. She is immediately identifiable as one of many contemporary women embarking on the new and exciting experience of motherhood. She begins her story with her first pregnancy and takes us through to the birth of her third child.

It would be a fairly safe to assume that Hansen has very strong Jungian leanings. Each of her pregnancies is peppered with vivid dreams which she interprets for us (and herself), using her insight and experience as a psychotherapist; she uses her knowledge of archetypes to illustrate her feelings of an expanding connection with Mother Earth. However, the exploration of Mother and/or Goddess archetypes is not the main premise of this book; it is really a personal treatise on her motherhood experience. The references to archetypes are subjective and are used only in relation to her own personal journey. For example, she frequently refers to the goddess Artemis in relation to the Mother archetypes, but does not mention that Artemis herself was childless.

As a story of personal growth, *Mother-Mysteries* is notable for its intensity. Hansen has obviously put her heart and soul into writing her story, eagerly sharing her private life with her readers, and there are some moments of genuine humour: false labour in the grocery store, keeping her placenta in the freezer for two-and-a-half years, and considering a ritual that transfers labour pains to someone other than the birthing mother.

Hansen identifies herself as a Berkeley feminist and her feminist

leanings clearly fall into the "cultural" camp, but she makes some statements which must be examined. (I get *very* nervous when the words "biology" and "destiny" are used in the same sentence.) She experiences pregnancy, childbirth, and motherhood as a mystic journey and seeks to convince her readers that mothers are the embodiment of all that is natural, moral, and spiritual. She feels a great affinity with Mother Nature because her body has been used as a vessel for the recreation of life; she has entered into a "sacred agreement with nature." "Once a female is inside this covenant, she is one with all mothers, regardless of nation, race, or socio-economic division, and even regardless of species. Mother deer entered into the same contract that I did. So did mother quail and mother cats. I cherish their babies in a new way now, similar to the way that I cherish my own baby." As much as cherishing nature and all its creatures is a noble sentiment, it would appear that Hansen's affinities lie closer to quail mothers than to human nonmothers.

Hansen's strident ideas echo previous ideas about women and motherhood. *The Practical Home Physician* (PHP) is a reference book originally published in 1892 for the layperson, and it may be a useful exercise to compare statements from this book (now over 100 years old) with statements from *Mother-Mysteries* (MM).

"It is the biological destiny of a woman to become obsessed with wanting a baby" (MM). "Woman's entire being, therefore, mental and moral, as well as physical, is fashioned and directed by her reproductive powers" (PHP).

"When the desire to create a new life, to nourish and love a baby, cannot grow in its natural way, then this instinctual urge gets twisted, ingrown, sick, so that a woman will either choose not to bear a child at all or, in extreme cases, kill her children to protect them" (MM). "It is easy to understand, therefore, that if these [reproductive] powers be never completely developed, there will and must be an arrest of development of her

mental and moral nature" (PHP).

"I am no longer in control of my body or my mind. The woman I used to refer to when I said 'I barely exists anymore' (MM). "The pregnant woman[']s ... [m]ental characteristics also are sometimes changed remarkably. An unsteady temper, marked by fits of peevishness and irritability, often nervousness and even hysteria are developed in the earlier months" (PHP).

It is alarming to think that Hansen believes pregnant women are generally not in control of their faculties, that nonmothers are twisted/sick, and that biology rules women. Mothers are the cornerstone of the earth; they are those within the family of women who create, nurture, and sustain life. Their lives as intelligent beings with an intimate knowledge of creation should be appreciated and their contribution to our collective social and psychic health cannot be minimized. However, Hansen's exceptionally strident views are divisive and (ironically) counterproductive, echoing the archaic and repressive beliefs of the nineteenth century.

## CUNNILINGUS, OR HOW I LEARNED TO LOVE FIGURE SKATING

Cathy Ford. Salt Spring Island, BC: {m}Other Tongue Press, 1997.

## LETTERS TO WILLIAM BLAKE

Susan McCaslin. Salt Spring Island, BC: {m}Other Tongue Press, 1997.

## A WOMAN'S FINGERPRINT

Kate Braid. Salt Spring Island, BC: {m}Other Tongue Press, 1997.

## BY SHERRILL CHEDA

Beautifully designed and produced by British Columbia women who love language, each of these poetry

chapbooks incorporate exquisite paper, handsome endpapers, and interesting design elements, such as tipped-in photographs, original linocuts or folded paper, to make these limited editions distinctive and collector's items. {M}Other Tongue Press uses the raised stamp "Beautiful books make the heart sing" both as its logo and its motto and describes itself as "a private press specializing in beautiful limited signed editions of poetry, letterpress work, and book art." I could not agree more both with the singing heart and the description.

Each of these authors has contributed poetry to *Canadian Woman Studies*. Cathy Ford, the most seasoned of the feminist poets represented here, has previously published ten books of poetry. Part of *Cunnilingus, or How I Learned to Love Figure Skating* was performed at the "Second Annual Salt Spring Erotic Literary Evening" on Salt Spring Island in 1996. The work is a stream of consciousness ode to the sensuous body and mind using a creative compression of words to evoke young love, adult love, passion, sexual ecstasy, and the tensions of love. The poet skates in the heavens with "skin cold as ice" among "bodies that left me cold" with poems which sing with the rhythms of music. Using startling images such as "if you stick your tongue to a skate blade it will freeze in place" and rich, lush language such as "in the frosted glass greenhouse conservatory of our past life memory," this poetry mesmerized me into a language-induced trance, from which I had to shake myself at the end of the book. It is rare that writing of any kind can draw us completely out of ourselves and into the world of the writer. Cathy Ford is such a powerful writer.

Susan McCaslin won the first prize in the Third Annual Poetry Chapbook Contest for these poems, *Letters to William Blake*, and I can see why: they are original, cheeky, "with it," from the heart letters of a poet to her muse. In the days of TV reruns, Starbucks coffee, teaching as a "marketable skill," and doing the laundry,

she says "Ah, Sunflower! I cling to your roots while dangling over the abyss." She also argues with Blake about his views on females, wonders about innocence and religion, congratulates him on Glad Day yet brilliantly brings it all back to Port Moody, clear-cuts, and her life as a poet, mother, and teacher.

Kate Braid won second prize in the Third Annual Poetry Chapbook Contest for *A Woman's Fingerprint* (Georgia O'Keefe Meets Emily Carr), drawn from O'Keefe's fictional journal of a trip she and Carr might have taken in 1930, in both New Mexico and British Columbia. Although inventive in concept and execution, if you know the work of the two artists and have seen the connection in their painting styles, words (even poetry) seem one dimensional in comparison to the painted canvases. Neither the language nor the scenarios convinced me of a true connection between O'Keefe and Carr.

If you love imaginative language and beautiful book-making, you will enjoy these engaging chapbooks, full of original thoughts, reflecting the lives of women. Cathy Ford's *Cunnilingus, or How I Learned to Love Figure Skating* gets the closest to the sensation of deeply felt and perfectly conveyed emotions. *Letters to William Blake* is fun and contemporary while *A Woman's Fingerprint* is an interesting intellectual exercise.

#### LE DOT DE SARA

Marie-Célie Agnant. Montréal: Editions du Remue-ménage, 1998.

#### PAR MONIQUE ROY

Née en Haïti, Marie-Célie Agnant vit à Montréal depuis 25 ans où elle travaille comme interprète culturelle auprès des communautés haïtiennes et latino-américaines. C'est dans le cadre d'une recherche sociologique sur les grands-mères haïtiennes de Montréal qu'elle a écrit ce premier roman, hommage aux « survivantes ... » de son pays d'origine. Dans une langue sobre et accessible, l'auteure

met en scène quatre générations de femmes, qui, avec la même passion déterminée, souhaitent « pour nos enfants une part de ce que la vie nous avait refusé... ».

Sa mère étant morte à sa naissance, Marianne est recueillie par sa grand-mère Aida qui lui transmet ses valeurs: fierté, honnêteté, courage, indépendance. La fillette retient les leçons et quand, à 17 ans, elle met au monde une fille—dont le père s'est éclipié—elle décidera de l'élever seule en s'esquintant sur une vieille machine à coudre Singer pour lui payer des études. Giselle quittera Anse-aux-Mombins pour « ... la vie qui se vit ailleurs ... ».

Pendant vingt ans, les trois femmes vont vivre ensemble, à Montréal, où Marianna, tout en s'adaptant tant bien que mal à l'hiver trop long, au métro qui l'effraie, au café qui ne goûte rien, à l'autorité familiale relâchée, va créer un lien précieux avec sa petite-fille à qui elle lègue l'héritage de son aïeule Aida.

« J'écrirai ton histoire, elle ne finira jamais, elle sera éternelle, belle et éternelle », promet Sara à Marianna, quand cette dernière repartira dans son pays « retrouver ce parfum de campagne ... cette odeur de canne brûlée ... » et, sur la galerie de sa vieille maison, attendre Sara.

#### A SOCIAL HISTORY OF WET NURSING IN AMERICA: FROM BREAST TO BOTTLE

Janet Golden. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

#### BY KRISTA SCOTT

The role and function of the female breast has been a subject of intense discussion and fantasy in western history, since stories of the breast are entwined with debates about mothering, sexuality, and the place of women. Carolus Linnaeus, the eighteenth-century originator of modern zoological nomenclature, decided that