

## Book Reviews

### WEE GIRLS: WOMEN WRITING FROM AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

Lizz Murphy, ed. Victoria, Australia:  
Spinifex Press, 1996.

by *Shelagh Wilkinson*

The title of this collection of short stories, essays, poems, and autobiographies might put the reader off. I know I was skeptical. Would “wee girls” mean yet another gathering of *Bildungsroman*—a genre dealing with the process of growing into maturity that has certainly been explored (and exploited) in writing by and about women? As most of these pieces are reprints, I had reservations, especially when I noted Mary Daly’s inclusion (she is over represented in many anthologies). When I started to read I did not expect to be writing this book review; then I found myself unable to put the book down. Once I began talking back to the writers in notes in the margins and on the fly leaf, I knew I was hooked. And most of the writers were new to me.

I was hooked first by the obvious love of language apparent on every page. And also by the scope of the experiences recounted here, by the intersection of tradition and myth with current realities and factual data, by the irreverence and wit with which these stories are told. The writers share a gift of integrating seemingly disparate aspects of their lives into new wholes. Naturally with stories coming from all over the world, there is an overall complexity of causation and effect, but each woman tells her story with clarity and there is a joy, or perhaps it is a hope, in the very act of telling that is inviting and infectious. (I even enjoyed re-reading Mary Daly’s account of “Spiraling Back” to grade school and her assessment of

the cruelty of a nun who mocked a boy “Abram Spoor . . . and he is poor.” (Daly’s later passion for s/word play is obvious in this early awareness).

Lizz Murphy has selected writing by women who come from very diverse cultures, even though they have some ties to Ireland: Australia, New Zealand, England, Ireland, the United States, and Canada. So I assumed that “growing into womanhood” would be the linking theme—especially given the title. But I was wrong. For me, it is the experience of exile, with its complex resonances of fear and hope, bitterness, and joy.

As women we are all exiles: by geographical dislocation, ruptured familial ties, loss of mother tongue, and even the most basic exile of all—from our own bodies and our intrinsic knowledge and love of self. The ingathering of these stories triggers an immediate response even though the reader may consider the tag of “exile” as too excessive for herself. There are the reminders of how hypocrisy, bullying, acquiescence, and forced conformity distance a woman from her self—shaping the future responses that catalogue us as “over-zealous harpies” when we are demanding only what society would consider to be fundamental human rights.

Ailbhe Smyth, in a pithy narrative poem intertwining archetype, Catholic liturgy, folklore, aphorism, and just plain gossip, uses language that sings and sears her way through a self-exile passed on through the motherline. She analyzes it, understands its tenacity, and discards it for her only daughter, whom she hopes will be “left whole and entire / to be.”

And, in a similar way, Siobhan McHugh wonders in an autobiographical essay at her own being. Here she is a single woman, in Australia, confronting “a bunch of bikies in a pub” and immediately realizing with great wonder that this “lunatic cour-

age” comes from her mother—even though her mother suffered years of abuse.

In many of these stories and poems the roots of the writer’s own exile serve as catalyst for language, metaphor, and symbolic construct. Juxtaposed with this is the often tortuous journey, geographical, and/or psychological, that is necessary to regain an integrated self. These women explore the courage and strength which women across ages and cultures have discovered in themselves in order to realize their human potential.

But we have rarely named this exile and we have rarely shared the longing for, and the agonies of, our own passage to integration and the sheer joy of attaining wholeness—perhaps because not many of us come to it. And that is why this book is so important.

This book is not boring and didactic. None of the writers takes herself too seriously—the stories are witty, ironic, poignant but never sentimental, sad but also funny. In “Loop the Loop,” making “newspaper babies” out of packages of chips, hot from the fryer, doused in vinegar, soggy, a balm for numb fingers, the “baby” pressed against a cold skinny body—*on a foggy Liverpool night?*—but this story comes from Queensland, Australia! Never mind, it’s mine and it makes me laugh.

My overall experience of this writing is the exuberance in its joy of language (the writers’ names alone: Maeve, Robyn, Muala, Medbh, Eevan—read like a poem for me). For Jill Jones,

the oral song  
avid as superstition  
layered like amber in  
the wreck of language  
and the remnants of a nation

gives us the loss of mother tongue and the dislocation and ravages of war.

The "oral song" also brings into focus the final words of her essay: "Most of all there is the centrality of poetry" that is indeed "layered like amber" throughout this book.

This centrality, this searing focus that only poetry can achieve (even when the form is prose) makes this collection compelling. In much of the writing here, we have language that is "controlled"—controlled so completely that it makes chaos clear, lays bare to the very bone truths too difficult to think of; and it does so with an ease that includes the reader.

As I read, I find myself nodding my head, scribbling my question, setting my own answers beside theirs. Suddenly my own exile is very clear to me. As a wee (city) girl in Liverpool—that outport of Ireland—sent away at eight years old as a wartime evacuee from a lovely, dirty, big port to a "safe haven" in a Welsh village and told to be grateful, to be good, to mind the farmer, to brush my teeth and say my prayers every night. How else to respond but by rebellion?

And my rebellion has never really ended. I lost my self on that short train journey in September 1939. My losses included tradition, language, place, family—privations that writers here explore—and although I ran away four times to get back to those realities I could reach out for, I was an old woman before I got myself back. This book helped me retrace my journey and it will do the same for many women. For me, Nuala Archer's "Sheela-Na-Gigging Around" says it best:

She's important enough  
to be left out  
powerful enough  
to be hidden away  
alive enough  
to be killed  
poet enough  
to be censored.

Here's to the *Sheela* in us all and our stories to be told and our lives to be shared. Read this book, then start to tell your own story.

## DAUGHTERS FOR SALE: POETRY AND PROSE

Gianna Patriarca. Toronto: Guernica, 1997.

## STAINED GLASS: A NOVELLA

Concetta Principe. Toronto: Guernica, 1997.

by *Eva C. Karpinski*

Guernica Editions, a Toronto-based small press publishing house founded by Antonio D'Alfonso, has done a lot in the past 20 years to promote Italian-Canadian and other ethnic writing. Despite government cuts, this year Guernica has managed to publish several new titles, among them these two books by Gianna Patriarca and Concetta Principe.

Although one is a collection of poetry and prose and the other a novella, they have many common threads. The issue of ethnicity is thematically central to both books as each writer, by creating different literary personae, is trying to come to terms with a cultural rift caused by immigration and/or living between two cultures. Italian and Canadian influences also commingle in the formal and stylistic choices made by the authors, from Patriarca's orchestration of distinctly Italian-Canadian voices and her echoing of Elizabeth Smart and Dorothy Livesay, to Principe's experimental conversion of the novella into the genre of modern-day hagiography. Both rely on a personal, confessional mode, which invites autobiographical reading. Finally, they both use "small" personal experiences to address "big" questions concerning the meaning of human life and the need for connectedness.

A little girl about to leave for Canada, clinging to her grandfather's knees in her refusal to go—the first image conjured by Patriarca in an autobiographical essay that opens *Daughters for Sale*—already foreshad-

ows the themes of other pieces: the importance of ancestry, immigrant identity and difference, generation gap, and gender trouble in immigrant families. The voices we hear—often complete with their accents felt in specific speech rhythms—are arranged into dramatic monologues or portraits. Sometimes it is the authorial persona, but most often the speakers are women, from young to very old. Patriarca's world is predominantly the world of women whose beautiful names reverberate through her poems. Men usually remain nameless and tend to be defined by their relationship to women: my husband; Caramela's man; Celestina's son. However, the motif of women's isolation in a patriarchal world, both old and new, is punctuated by moments of female bonding and solidarity, as in "Birthday Poem: Rosina."

Patriarca does not aspire to become the voice of her generation, insisting that all voices are individual; nevertheless, her writing seems to capture the experiences representative of "a whole generation of Italian-Canadian women who grew up in Toronto in the 1960s and 1970s." Brought up in the shadow of the Catholic church, they learned fear and guilt related to their sexuality. Torn between conflicting values, she describes them as "the in-between women who fit nowhere very comfortably." They are those immigrant daughters for sale, evoked by Patriarca's title. In fact, there seems to be the possibility of seeing immigration as always a collective betrayal of daughters. In the poem that gives title to the collection, the metaphor of the body which is out of its element ("i was born a fish") suggests the tension of displacement and the incongruity of the past and the present.

Patriarca, like one of her characters, Rosa from the story "Stealing Persimmons," is "intimate with time." She is preoccupied with the passing of time and the inevitability of death. In addition to her fascination with old age, her poems convey nostalgic glimpses of the past caught in black and white photographs. Much the