

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

same as the changing of seasons in the poems "Winters" or "The Last Season," she registers and contemplates bodily changes, trying to make sense of life in the face of mutability and death. Dedicated to her deceased friend Marisa, Patriarca's book is literally a book of memory which functions as both a link to the past and a site of mourning. But this rather sombre tone is constantly subverted by her sense of humour and occasional playfulness, as for example in "Ode to Balls."

Writing about childless women, intercultural marriages, traditional gender roles, patriarchal families, infidelities, marriage break-ups under the strain of immigration, Patriarca reveals phenomenal empathy for her subjects. Her irony is always tempered by compassion. Indeed, the listening and caring mentioned in the motto she borrows from Nikki Giovanni seem to be the most important gifts from the older generation. Patriarca's ethics make us aware that even the most "ordinary" life is a fascinating mystery that can be unlocked for contemplation.

In the final analysis, rather than "the split subject" of her immigrant experience, the subject that emerges from Patriarca's writing is the feminist "subject in relation." Even the way she defines herself through her gender ("I am a married woman i am a mother") confirms such self-recognition. Her feminist consciousness is articulated in the poem "Donna/Woman," which recapitulates in a capsule the classic Irigarayan reading of sexual difference, where the rigid male/female binary serves only the male. Most important, however, she conceives of her writing in terms of a mission, set antagonistically against "the peacefulness of stupidity," ignorance, and "averageness" exemplified by popular women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*.

Concetta Principe's book is a short but textually-rich, close study of a woman's mental disintegration and fall into madness, exploring her personal obsession with love sacred and profane, reminiscent of Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," as well as Smart's *By Grand Central Station*. The motif of descent is underscored early by the epitaphs from Dante's *Inferno* and Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*. The narrator is another split subject who knows the meaning of being divided between ethnicities, languages, families, and even between sanity and madness. Alienated from her divorced parents—her Italian father and Irish mother—she aspires to become a painter in Montreal. This city is the setting of her intense relationship that leads to her breakdown, in contrast to sober Toronto where she tries later to recover her grip on reality. All these multiple splits are also reflected in pronominal shifts, as the narrator's "I" shifts to "she" and "you" when talking about the past. Such use of pronouns parallels her arriving at a sense of self through religion, namely her conversion to Catholicism, which she experiences as rebirth. Baptized as "Clara," in reverence to the tradition of visionary and ecstatic writing of medieval women-saints, she takes on the qualities of a mystic—anorexic, haunted by visions of Mother Mary, obsessed with the presence of miracles in her life.

Her choice of Catholicism is primarily an aesthetic, symbolic gesture. It represents the movement from the profane to the sacred, enacted by the plot of the novella. It also points toward the narrator's need to reclaim her childhood with its lost language and her Italianness. Her central trauma, a miscarriage, becomes a metaphor of her loss: not only "the promise of the child which died in [her]," but also a little girl she used to be. The narrator's Catholicism also accounts for her persistent coding of characters in terms of Christian symbolism (her lover's name is Christophe while she herself is referred to as "x"). Throughout there are associations of Christ with sacrifice, a necessary part of progression from empty, sterile life to spiritual fulfillment, from sexual politics to love.

Not accidentally, her search for love coincides with her search for

God, who has abandoned the world, or, as she puts it, "has come and gone." The absence of God creates a sense of apocalypse and doom, which is further reinforced by the linking of private and public suffering. The narrator's personal crisis unfolds against the backdrop of the 1990s, global political and economic crisis, including the threat of Quebec's separation, the Oka standoff, the impending Gulf War, and record unemployment. It is as if the narrator's body has internalized hunger, desert, betrayal, and war raging around her, offering her a devastating discovery of "how little love there is in the world [and] how much of the stuff we need."

In this context, the metaphor in the book's title can refer to this imperfect vision of reality, marred by pain like a window stained with tears. But stained glass is also a mosaic of pieces and as such it can stand for the book's theme and composition. Principe combines intertextual allusions and images from mythology, the Bible, dream analysis, the history of painting, fairy tales, lives of the saints, the news, even movies. Taken as a portrait of the artist, the novella seems to suggest allegorically that the stained glass vision may be an inescapable condition of the ethnic writer.

FALL ON YOUR KNEES

Ann-Marie MacDonald. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.

by Patricia F. Goldblatt

Stories about families fascinate us. We want to be voyeurs, peering through lacy curtains into the dark recesses of people's living room parlours, kitchens, and bedrooms, examining the tenacious relationships that are enjoyed and enjoined by blood. Like archaeologists, we search for the fragments that explain the cracks and ruptures of aberrant behaviour. *Fall On Your Knees* by Ann-Marie MacDonald is the chronicle of the tangled, twisted Piper family.