

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.

Through many windows, we glimpse the stories of a family doomed to isolation and sadness. The story begins much like a fairy tale,

A long time ago, before you were born, there lived a family called Piper on Cape Breton Island. The daddy, James Piper, managed to stay out of the coal mines most of his life, for it had been his mother's great fear that he would grow up and enter the pit. She had taught him to read the classics, to play piano and to expect something finer in spite of everything. And that was what James wanted for his own children.

From this hopeful beginning, James Piper emerges. At age fifteen-and-a-half, he has played his last "Moonlight Sonata," doused the piano with a bottle of spirits, set it ablaze, and deserted the home of his parents forever. He travels to Sydney, Nova Scotia, where he believes there will be many pianos to tune. On New Year's Eve, the night that magically ends one year so another can begin, James Piper is called to the Mahmoud house to tune their piano. He catches sight of 12-year-old Materia Mahmoud with her "[s]ummer skin the colour of sand stroked by the tide, [s]lim in ... green and navy," and is enchanted by the lovely girl. Perhaps beckoned by her dark Arabian eyes, her lisping child's speech, or a desire to release her from the ways of an old world ("She really was betrothed to a dentist, promised when she was four"), James woos and pursues a willing Materia, eloping with her through a bedroom window when she turns 13.

Not surprisingly, Materia's father, in spite of the fact that he, too, had absconded with Materia's mother at an early age and against her parents' wishes, banishes his own daughter to a small mining town called "Low Point," bestowing curses on her and all the children of her womb.

The curses quickly come to pass as James's delight in his young wife yields to disinfatuation: he finds her dull,

stupid, and her thickening body repellent. Like *Peter, Peter Pumpkin Eater*, he keeps Materia alienated, cut off from "strangers." Crying all the time, she wanders the shore, lonely, later retreating to her attic and her hope chest kept "empty on purpose so that nothing could come between her and the magical smell that beckoned her into memory." The smell of the cedar box triggers and recaptures a world of earth and olives, her mother's loving hands redolent with parsley and cinnamon: the world of simple, safe childhood memories. In these ways, she attempts to avoid James' insults: "you ... lump of dough." Eventually, he will even forbid her from conversing with her own children. Silenced and separated forever from her family first by her father and then by her husband, Materia's girlhood withers, and she finds herself in Cinderella's kitchen.

When a child is born, instead of repairing the rifts between husband and wife, the child, Kathleen who resembles James's mother, drives the couple further apart. Kathleen, red-golden haired, fair and fragile, is the princess to Materia's dark, hulking peasant. Kathleen's burgeoning singing talent affords Materia no joy since her own few words of communication muttered in a foreign tongue are reviled and ridiculed by James. Materia, quite aware of the absence of love she feels for the child, prays fervently to God, "[M]ake me love my baby." Yet, later in the story, she kneels in Mount Carmel Church, gazes deeply into the red eyes of the serpent and presents a bribe to the demon to take Kathleen. Drawing deeper into the cave of herself, Materia only rarely speaks. She is glimpsed by her Jewish neighbours as she sits at the edge of a cliff, a small, isolated figure. Mrs. Luvovitz takes pity on Materia, drawing her out with cups of tea, teaching her Jewish recipes, playing a surrogate mother to the lost child. Hardly a fairy godmother, Mrs. Luvovitz does provide some small token of love and sympathy for Materia in her tarnished world.

With cursed beginnings of forbid-

den love, an irate father and a family already dysfunctional in its inception, it is no surprise that the lives of the Piper family fulfill their bitter destiny of sorrow. With James Piper having metamorphosized from the ardent lover to the manipulative and repressive parent, his authoritarian tactics dictate the lives of his small, but estranged family. Cast as the ogre, James gradually reveals his unnatural behaviour that resides at the heart of the story. His Midas touch scars and destroys all that it touches.

As Kathleen continues to blossom in beauty and talent, James commences to direct her future, keeping her a hothouse flower, aloof, protected and solitary from neighbours and the town's residents: she even has her own driver, a black man named Leo Taylor, who transports her back and forth to Holy Angels school in Sydney. James tutors her in Latin, provides her with classic books, educates her with Italian operas as well as special schools and teachers chosen to develop and enhance her voice. Her mother functions as a maid, enduring her daughter's hysterics and remonstrations—along with her husband's daily abuses. Only when James finds himself sexually aroused by Kathleen and strikes her, loosening a tooth, does he reach back to Materia: in quick succession, Mercedes and Frances are born. Materia "takes pleasure in her little ones—Mercedes is such a good girl and Frances is a clown." As in most fairy tales, a period of grace only delays the awful events that are to come.

For a brief period of time, for the Pipers, there is a sense of family with the younger girls following their mother into the kitchen, learning songs and dances from her, Materia imparting her own Lebanese traditions without censure. There are scenes where tumbling, laughing girls climb on and over their adoring daddy who shines in their light skins, quick intelligences, and charming good humour. Although Materia and Kathleen do not communicate with one another, Kathleen adores and loves her little sisters who return her affec-

tions as they learn of the worlds of Fifth Avenue, *Bazaar*, Liszt, *Anne of Green Gables*, and Ibsen from her. Kathleen is enamoured of herself and the resounding circle of her sisters' praises attests to her perfection heralded and directed by her father's education of his "buddy." Prevented from developing friends outside her home, viewed as a snob by her classmates, and kept physically and emotionally distant from everyone but her family, Kathleen's ability to make friends and become involved in healthy relationships is vastly hindered by her upbringing: she has no friends. A photograph snapped at this time catches the family frankly: the fond high jinks between father and daughter; the mother encased and sequestered behind a window in the kitchen, gesticulating but ignored. Materia, here, of course, is the outsider, the shadow receding behind her girls, but observing, like the reader, the possible joys of a parental-child relationship—without the presence of a man.

The intrusion of war is a blessing for Materia. James enlists in the 94th Victorian Regiment and so, she is freed from his presence and his harsh judgements of her lack of English, of her loose clothes, of her foreign mannerisms: "With James gone, she comes to life." Materia even prays that he'll be killed quickly and painlessly in Flanders. Unfortunately, James escapes all of his harrowing exploits in the war, unscathed. His postcards home are regular, repetitive, shorn of any sentiment towards his wife,

Dear Missus, All is well. Do not worry. Love to the girls.

James.

When almost strangled by a Frenchman near Vimy for his boots, James has an epiphany: "We will win because we have more and better boots, boots determine history." This idea like a precious amulet is the *idée-fixe* that envelops James. He understands that warm, dry feet are the key to making money that will allow Kathleen to study at the conserva-

tory. His obsession with footwear draws the notice of his commanders who interpret his fetish of boot polishing as a sign of "shell shock." He is honourably discharged and sent home from Passchendaele.

James's readmittance to the family again disrupts the natural order of the little girls and their mother in their all-female world, and trouble again brews. Hardened and deadened by his war experiences, James brutally re-establishes his control of his family and his business life, growing rich in his production of boots.

James persists in promoting Kathleen's career, even sending her off to New York in the care of an aged relative, Giles, whom James believes will see to Kathleen's proper deportment. She ventures into a new world, *resolving never to be sensible again*. She gains the respect of her irascible music maestro and makes friends with her moody accompanist. "First she fell in love with New York. Then she fell in love with a New Yorker." Away from her family and her father, Kathleen exults in the promise of a life of her own.

However, after a mysterious letter arrives from New York, hinting at Kathleen's debauchery, James snatches her back home where she wastes away in her room. More births and deaths, as terrified sisters observe uncomprehending the sudden starts and stops in their family. Materia vanishes: all that remains of her is the cedar chest, symbolic of a happier time and life, furtively visited, but never sustained.

As the story continues, Frances' adventures reveal a very troubled, almost demonic girl headed for disaster. Her colourful, frightening lies, her wild nocturnal activities and self-abuse are all intended to strike back at her father as well as punish herself. Gentle, intelligent Mercedes, who once believed she could go away to school, marry, and begin a life of promise, decays into a spinster school teacher, unsmiling, unloved, cold, and resolute. The plan she concocts against Frances is so hurtful that one is surprised that such wickedness could

fester so long behind a martyred countenance. Lily, much younger, is a humanized lame Kathleen who attempts to untangle the threads of her family's tale with the aid of Kathleen's diary. Lily discerns that she must journey far from the Pipers to dislodge the truth and understand the reason for the cloying, dark environment that has engulfed and destroyed her sisters.

Like *Alice in Wonderland*, Lily discovers an upside down world of oversized leering, dismantled, confusing occupants as the story becomes stranger and stranger. And like *Alice*, Lily emerges from her dark and frightening rabbit hole with an answer to her questing. The moral of Ann-Marie MacDonald's twisted tale of a family's perversion seems clear: James Piper, a man, the father, is the cause of the evil. Through nearly 600 pages, the stories of the Pipers have unfolded, surprised, shocked, intrigued, and startled the reader. What begins as a fairy tale transforms into a message where the villain is no longer the aged crone, bent on wicked revenge and curses for the family's redemption, but her deadly counterpart—the male.

## VIRGINIA WOOLF

Hermione Lee. London: Chatto and Windus, 1996.

*by Deborah Heller*

"She would never say of anyone in the world now that they were this or were that," muses Virginia Woolf's fictional heroine, Mrs. Dalloway. In her "biography" of Orlando, Woolf writes of her subject's "great variety of selves." And when Woolf undertook to write an account of her own life, she began by reflecting on the various reasons for the failure of most memoir writers, "it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is