

Book Reviews

Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond, eds. *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990. pp. x, 374. \$12.95.

We are never so Canadian that we have never been "other." The "other Canadian" syndrome, recalling John Sutherland's historic anthology *Other Canadians*, continues to be a productive principle in compiling new anthologies, such as Miriam Waddington's very fine collection of *Canadian Jewish Short Stories* (1990) and Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond's *Other Solitudes*, published in the same year. Hutcheon and Richmond's venture seeks to represent not one or diverse "ethnocultural enclaves" but rather the multicultural and multiracial composition of Canadian society (and literature) at the present time. The book comprises short stories and excerpts from longer works (eighteen in all) by "other" Canadians, interviews with their writers, interviews with the first and founding nations, the controversial Multicultural Act, and an introductory essay by Linda Hutcheon. The editors' intention is to present both the lived experience and the literary expression of our multicultural identity. Ethnic and immigrant fiction have been with us for a long time, but this collection brings race and colour narrowly into focus as the site of cultural confrontation, where the awareness of difference so painfully occurs. *Other Solitudes* is therefore a book with a thesis.

The Multicultural Act is politically indeterminate. It is possible to read it as a conservative document that with typical Canadian caution pre-empts revolution and radical social change by incorporating the potentially problematic in its vision of a just society, disguising a "myth of concern" as a "myth of freedom" (Frye 45). In fact, Bharati Mukherjee has argued that Canadian multiculturalism remains offensively racist, rewarding by way of accommodation and expiation a resistant and unassimilable difference (199), and many writers interviewed here object to its cultivation of disempowered and archaic communities. On the other hand, the Act also rewrites the Canadian mosaic in terms of official ideology, giving sanction to voices of dissent. Hutcheon suggests that in valuing the marginal and the different Canadian multiculturalism participates in the genuinely liberating postcolonial and post-

modern enterprise. As one might expect, criticism of official policy enacts this central ambiguity.

One consequence for the fiction of this setting up of alternate subjectivities is an extraordinarily rich sense of character, "as believable and complex and intricate as possible," to quote Michael Ondaatje (198). The conception of character that emerges is necessarily limited for the purposes of this collection to memories of personal, ancestral, or racial persecution in the Old World and experiences of prejudice in the New (with variations on the theme). Then there is the perennial theme of survivors, often women, who wrest a sort of victory from defeat. The stories I have liked best in this context have been Matt Cohen's "Racial Memories" and Paul Yee's "Prairie Widow." Hutcheon, however, would like to emphasize that the narratives represented not only raise issues but also point to "the images we create and the stories we tell in our sense of identity and self-worth" (1). Excepting a few (predictable) experiments with structure, language, and myth, the "stories we tell" seem to me to be surprisingly conventional in form, however gorgeous the texture of the collection as a whole, reflecting a variety of cultures, histories, and traditions. Must we suppose it is mainstream writers who occupy the cutting edge?

This partiality for closed forms could indicate dogmatic content, and there is evidence of the programmatic in some of the interviews with people of colour (as we are called), who on the level of opinion at least are the more interesting and original voices, bringing Third World perspectives to bear upon the discussion, as well as the immediate experience of racial discrimination. In his concluding interview, Robertson Davies remarks that the point at issue for us is not assimilation so much as integration or feeling at home, and the stories by these writers describe both a sense of ineradicable difference and displacement and the attempt to carve out one's own particular niche, courageously, angrily, ironically, despairingly, or hopefully.

Whether or not they can find an audience for their work is the more pressing question, and the range of views is wide. Dionne Brand, Himani Bannerji, and Paul Yee resolve the tension between margin and mainstream for themselves by writing out of the centre of their community for persons like themselves, and they hope to subvert the dominant ideology by silently ignoring the white majority (in a politics of non-recognition), but Neil Bissoondath believes it incumbent on minority groups to fit in with the larger society, while Marilú Mallet (from Chile), writing out of Montreal but not as a visible minority, reflects that the new multicultural literature tests whether the introverted Canadian and Québécois psyches are capable of accepting a more cosmopolitan world-view.

As a text that provides documentary materials along with primary readings, *Other Solitudes* is ideally suited to classroom use, but perhaps the excerpts from longer works could have been more usefully replaced by complete short fiction, even if it means sacrificing selections by Skvorecky, Kogawa, and Ondaatje. I am inclined to question the choice

of Frank Paci's "The Stone Garden," a story that does not seem to mirror the concerns he mentions in his interview as being central to his work. Finally, the omission of Native fiction is an error. Although Native writing is given pride of place in an interview with First Nation playwright Tomson Highway, the literature still remains conspicuous by its absence.

But on a subject so sensitive it is easy to slip, and one is startled by Rudy Wiebe's remark that he is probably more Canadian than most (are we seeing the rise of a new fundamentalism?), or Himani Bannerji's rhetoric; while the headnote states that she arrived in Canada to continue her education, she herself ascribes her departure from India to more remote causes: "The question is the degradation of a large part of the world on which brutality was done, and that if we are here, we came here as a result of our colonisation . . ." (147). *Other Solitudes* certainly generates discussion at every turn; the anthology will be required reading on my next course.

WORKS CITED

- Blaise, Clark, and Bharati Mukherjee. *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987.
 Frye, Northrop. *The Critical Path*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1973.

MAIA BHOJWANI

Marian Arkin and Barbara Shollar, eds. *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women, 1875-1975*. New York and London: Longman, 1989. pp. 1274. \$27.20 pb.

Let me state at the outset that I have no substantial negative criticisms to make about this monumental editing project, which to my knowledge is the first of its kind and hence deserving of unstinting appreciation. Besides, for reviewers who feel their reputations are at stake unless they do say something negative, the anthology of literary works is too easy a target. The canon can always be appealed to as the "objective" standard and the anthology held up to one or another of W. W. Norton's tomes and found wanting. This strategy can and has been used to mask the ideology, personal taste, and limited knowledge of reviewers. But the beauty of any anthology of women's literature is that it thumbs its nose at the traditional, male-dominated canon, and the advantage of an anthology of *world* literature by women is that at this point in history there is no established canon, no comparable volume of Norton—in short, no prior authority to appeal to. Indeed, to adapt Elaine Showalter's famous metaphor, Arkin and Shollar's anthology represents the tip of a submerged continent of women's writing rising like Atlantis from the sea of world literature.

Not only does this anthology implicitly participate in the new concept of canon as a *process* rather than a *structure*, it also defies traditional notions of periodicity by staking out its territory as 1875 to 1975, defining