

Recent Maritime Fiction: Women and Words

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That many of this country's best creators of fiction today live, work, and write about the Maritimes is an incontestable and welcome fact. The era of Hugh MacLennan and Charles Bruce, when Maritime-born writers had to quit their native region, either imaginatively or physically, in order to practise their art successfully, has been followed by one in which some writers born outside the Maritimes actively seek out the region. In the recent "45 Below" listing of Canada's ten most important younger writers, a New Brunswick and a Nova Scotia writer made it—David Adams Richards and Susan Kerslake. But Maritimers did not need a publicity stunt like "45 Below" to inform them that writing was alive and kicking all around them; the number of Maritime presses and literary magazines, and the existence of publications such as the *Atlantic Provinces Book Review*, point to the fact that, for the last decade at least, this region has possessed a literary culture that puts that first golden age of Joseph Howe and Thomas Chandler Haliburton into perspective.

What this paper will discuss is a particular group of writers within the flourishing Maritime culture, a group of writers whose very existence, let alone their emergence into prominence, is startling—dazzling even—given the tradition of Maritime fiction. For it is a tradition which has, to a remarkable degree, both excluded and maligned, or at least misrepresented, women, in terms of their relation to the world of words—spoken and printed. This is not to say that there have not always been a few rare women who managed to struggle into print, from Julia Beckwith Hart, author of *St. Ursula's Convent* (1824), to May Agnes Fleming, author of *Estella's Husband: or Thrice Lost, Thrice Won* (1891). Fleming, in fact, managed to earn a handsome living by her pen. And it is not to belittle the achievement of Lucy Maud Montgomery, that contemporary of Virginia Woolf's who, alas, never possessed the privilege of a room of her own. However, women writers in the Maritimes have had to carry out two enormous tasks—not only invading the predominantly masculine world of letters, but also wrestling with and countering the portrayal of their own sex as one implacably hostile to literature and literary culture.

"Reading Stories is bad enough but writing them is worse"—so Marilla, in *Anne of Green Gables*.¹ It is a sentiment shared in Andrew Macphail's *The Master's Wife* by the formidable mother for whom "Reading was mere idle curiosity" and who had "no desire to seek entrance into the unreal world of the word maker."² The mother's virulent hatred for the books which take her husband and children away from the sea in Alistair MacLeod's story "The Boat" is modulated, but still powerfully present, in a novel such as Ernest Buckler's *The Cruellest Month*: "Half the trouble in the world came from printin' things. It wasn't natural."³ So claims a writer's housekeeper and eventual lover, that same Letty who is made to utter one of Buckler's pithiest put-downs of literature—that all the writing and reading in the world doesn't add up to a fart on the plains of Arabia. In fact, throughout his *oeuvre*, Buckler makes a cult of the silent woman—the farmwives who are eloquent in their scrubbing, baking, and sewing, and whose very sexuality is silent; one remembers the masculine world so convincingly realized in *The Mountain and the Valley* and *Oxbells and Fireflies*, a world largely sustained by sexual badinage. But the Besses and Effies, the Annas and Charlottes, are given no words at all to express or even joke about their equally powerful sexual being. We have to wait for Donna Smith's *Quilt* before we can hear rural women banter about what Buckler's women pass over in modest silence.

It is true, of course, that the majority of Maritime women would have had little time for talking, let alone writing. The fishermen's wives in Frank Parker Day's *Rockbound*, for example, lead lives of brutally exhausting labour, by the sides of men who are as illiterate as they. Yet it is interesting to remark that, when Day introduces into his cast of characters a literate person, the young and pretty schoolmarm, Mary Dauphiny, her role becomes that of romantic, rather than independent and articulate, heroine. True, she teaches her future husband to read, but quicker than you can say *abc*, Day marries her off and she becomes the typical Maritime bride of quietness. Not only Mary Dauphiny, but Buckler's Miss Merriam and Charles Bruce's Renie Fraser decidedly do not write anything in such leisure time as they possess—the creator of each of these schoolteacher heroines envisages her highest attainment as marriage to a properly sensitive or at least kind-hearted hero. And this in spite of the fact that Maritime literature offers a remarkable example of

¹ Lucy Maud Montgomery (1908; rpt. Toronto: Ryerson, 1962) 268.

² (1939; rpt. Toronto: McClelland, 1977) 79.

³ (Toronto: McClelland, 1963) 181.

a schoolteacher who succeeded in writing her way into the international literary world—Lucy Maud Montgomery. Yet Montgomery's Anne, for all that she acquires a college education, marries the local hero and goes on to produce not books but babies—though she does toss off what she apologetically calls "trifles for children" in her rare spare time.

Perhaps one of the reasons Montgomery grew to detest Anne so heartily was that this character denied in herself that passion for language and writing which had always been Montgomery's own motive for being. And so, against Anne of Avonlea, Montgomery created Emily of New Moon, Emily to whom, from earliest childhood on, writing was "an outlet for the violence of emotion that racked her being."⁴ Though she does destroy her first novel on her fiancé's advice ("you can do more with those eyes—that smile—than you can ever do with your pen"), Emily eventually rejects both her fiancé and his advice. Poignantly and powerfully, Montgomery describes the lot of women writers in her time and place:

She knew that a hard struggle was before her; she knew that she must constantly offend . . . neighbours who would want her to write obituaries for them and who, if she used an unfamiliar word, would say contemptuously that she was 'talking big' . . . she knew there would be days when she would feel despairingly that she could not write and . . . when the editorial phrase, 'not necessarily a reflection on its merits,' would get on her nerves to such an extent that she would feel like imitating Marie Bashkirtseff and hurling the taunting, ticking, remorseless sitting-room clock out of the [window] . . .⁵

True, one might say that Ernest Buckler faced the same obstacles, living and writing in a community of people who did not read, never mind value, literature, and whose chosen language was physical and emotional rather than intellectual. Yet Buckler *chose* this problematic context out of which to write; Emily and Montgomery herself had these obstacles foisted upon them. Out of a sense of literary self-preservation, they delayed marriage; then, out of a rigid sense of duty, they refused writing careers in the city to help keep house for elderly and unsympathetic relations, writing whenever they could find time. Moreover, neither Montgomery nor her fictional alter ego ever possessed Buckler's ambivalence about the act of writing, his

⁴ *Emily of New Moon* (1925; rpt. Toronto: McClelland, 1981) 109.

⁵ *Emily's Quest* (Toronto: McClelland, 1927) 3-4.

mingled contempt for, and obsession with, a practice which alienated him from the farming people he loved and respected. Montgomery's Emily defines herself by her difference from the people who surround her; the loneliness and alienation from family and community which she suffers ground and strengthen her as a writer. Whereas David Canaan dies before he can write down a word of the vision he has on his Pisgah of the Annapolis Valley, Montgomery's Emily survives her own "abomination of desolation" to write and publish a novel which is described as an aesthetic, as well as a popular, success.

Snide critics will be heard smirking over that nefarious term, "popular success." Yet, given the literary double standard imposed on women writers of Montgomery's era—that they should be not women, but rather lady, writers, shunning the kind of bohemian hand-to-mouth and wandering life considered romantic in a Charles G.D. Roberts—popularity was a *sine qua non*, and of this Montgomery showed herself all too aware. To gain recognition and standing in the world of letters, she had not only to write but also to be published, and she could not be published if her work did not appear likely to gain hosts of readers. For Montgomery, both the act of writing and the fact of recognition were immensely important. Although Ernest Buckler might insist on being known as a farmer who wrote, Montgomery's life and literary output show that she considered marriage, motherhood, and the exhausting "career" of being a Presbyterian minister's wife as subsidiary to her prime source of identity and worth: being a successful writer.

Thus if a Maritime writer were to search out a topical *künstlerroman*, one which would honestly record the enormous difficulties of becoming, and continuing to be, a writer in an environment hostile to, or at best ignorant of, literature, a work which stresses unambivalently the primacy of both the act of writing and the necessary processes of publishing, finding an audience, and acquiring standing in the world of words, he or she would do well to choose Montgomery's *Emily* trilogy over Buckler's incontestably finer novel—particularly if that writer is a she. And though the three writers on whose work I wish to comment—Nancy Bauer, Susan Kerlake, and Antonine Maillet—may never have read a word of Montgomery's art or life-story, their own writing acquires a greater resonance and significance when regarded in that context of women and words which Montgomery, more than any other Maritime writer, created and spotlighted.

Nancy Bauer's first novel has a deceptively offhand title—no *Lives of Short Duration* or *Painted Ladies*, but *Flora*, *Write this*

Down. It is as if someone had asked the novel's heroine to jot down certain events and impressions, in the way she might scribble down a shopping list or casual letter to an old school-friend. The novel tells the story of an unremarkable woman—a wife and mother—who returns with her young son to what has become the family home, in the town where she grew up. The son is to have a minor, if difficult, operation in a famous children's hospital nearby, but the bulk of the novel focusses on the sustenance which his mother, Flora, draws from going back to her human roots and tracing the patterns she is able to perceive in the ordinary, yet delicate, web which connects the different members of her extended family.

Bauer's writing is thoughtful and wryly sensitive, yet the concern of her fiction would be accessible to women readers in just those isolated, ordinary places and occupations in which Maritime writers have traditionally situated their female characters. It is only when Flora returns from her pilgrimage to her home town, back to the life she has made for herself in New Brunswick, that she actually begins to write things down—to become, by a kind of ritual initiation, a writer. She deliberately separates herself from her house, husband, and children, going out to the family cottage and living alone there. She overcomes fears about intruders and doubts about her own ability to write; she keeps a journal which establishes her individuality outside the octopus embrace of family life. In the end, she succeeds: not only has she stayed for the full term of her "initiation," but, out of the journal she keeps, emerges the "family chronicle" we have just read. It is the chicken-and-egg phenomenon familiar to readers of *The Mountain and the Valley*, a novel in which the protagonist spends her time getting ready to write the novel we are in fact reading; but, as with Montgomery's Emily, Bauer's fledgling writer does survive the first flight out of the nest. We are left with the sense of Flora's writing as a process which will continue beyond the covers of her journal or the book in our hands.

Wise-Ears, Bauer's next novel, is in many ways a revisioning and refashioning of *Flora*. The second paragraph of *Wise-Ears* presents the protagonist, fifty-eight year old Sophie Aspinwall, also a wife and mother, listening to a church choir sing "I Love to Tell the Story," and from that moment the project of this novel is clear: Sophie is going to experiment with different ways of telling stories, extraordinary stories, which incorporate those elements of her experience and consciousness that she cannot otherwise deal with or even articulate. The bulk of her experience is common or garden variety. Her children have grown up and left home; she keeps a diminished house; she

worries over the success of her children's marriages; she grows increasingly anxious at the thought that she may never have grandchildren. It is this anxiety which, more than anything else, propels Sophie's writing. Her sole purpose in life has been to marry and raise children who will, in turn, marry and raise more children, so that the human chain can be sustained from one generation to the next. Yet none of her children shows any signs of wishing to secure the chain. One of her sons has a vasectomy; another, she suspects, is homosexual; her only daughter, unmarried at twenty-six, shows no interest in settling down. Yet Sophie's experience of mothering and even her stint as a volunteer at a local shelter for battered wives and their children confirm her belief that family life *can* be our greatest good, one of our most poignant and fulfilling reasons for being. This knowledge she attempts to communicate to her refractory children.

At first she chooses a non-verbal means of expression: she redecorates the guest room in extravagant fashion, putting huge mirrors on the ceiling over a new bed with "magic" massaging "fingers" and built-in trays to hold the elaborate breakfasts-in-bed which she loves to prepare for her homecoming children. This combination of the erotic and the domestic, Sophie's wish to shower affection and understanding on her children and also to entice them to procreate, sets the tone and direction of Bauer's novel. When, after a weekend in the newly-refurbished guest room, her son and his wife announce an irreversible intention never to have children, Sophie looks for less threatening and more persuasive means of getting her message across. She decorates the crawl space under the house, originally intending it as an exotic playroom for her future grandchildren, replete with a hidden tape-recorder which will tell fairy stories of her own devising. But, gradually, the room becomes her own, a private place in which she can realize her mature self as she scribbles her thoughts down on the meaning and the shape of her life, and on her relation to God and the world He has created. Over and over again, the refrain sounds: "I love to tell the story/ Because I know it's true,/ It satisfies my longings/ As nothing else could do."

Sophie tells her stories by concocting a fairy tale about an orphan named Snowflower, by writing idiosyncratic letters to her children, and, most interestingly of all, by penning a series of letters to her sister, in which she deliberately creates a fantasy life, re-inventing herself first as a missionary midwife in China and then as Anna, the housekeeper and mistress of a mysterious Chinese man. Sophie's fiction is no milk-and-cookies affair: the Chinese man Anna is made to keep house for is portrayed as a pederast who abuses a succession of young boys; she is per-

sueded by a Buddhist higher-up to bear the pederast's child; and, to seduce him, she performs actions which, it is safe to say, Sophie Aspinwall, née Taylor, would never have practised with her devoted and genial husband, Harold. She herself is shocked by the tenor her "China" fantasy has assumed, until she realizes that her suspicions about her son's homosexuality and the knowledge of child abuse she has gained through watching documentaries and working at the transition house have assumed this particular configuration in her unconscious and have demanded expression in her writing. Thus the various forms of storytelling in which Sophie engages continue side by side: she keeps writing letters to her children (and learns to live with her children's decisions), brings the stories of Snowflower and of Anna to fitting conclusions, and persists with her efforts to describe God and understand death. In the process, she gains the two things she has needed most: freedom, and the ability to invent something, to bring something into being. We leave Sophie engaged in a new form of invention, experimenting with something as frivolous and fascinating as breeding tomatoes in order to discover all the possible variants on the colour red. Yet she is still writing—not for future grandchildren, now, but for God, the peculiarly desultory and approachable "Wise-Ear" with whom she has open conversations. The novel ends with Sophie in the act of writing.

Sophie describes writing as a "soothing" activity,⁶ and indeed there is something low-key, laid-back, resolutely un-high-literary about *Wise-Ears* and Bauer's style in general. It is as though she has given a voice to generations of Maritime women who have been handmaidens of silence, who simply did not have the leisure or the authority to speak and write. Of course, there were women for whom the act of writing would have seemed an absurd and unnecessary exercise; no one would doubt that the Renies and Margarets, the Lettys and Marthas, whom Charles Bruce and Ernest Buckler portray are convincing mimetic types. The point is, however, that they do not exhaust the possibilities, and that, more and more, Maritime women writers in particular have tried to free the other voices, those of women for whom verbal expression and communication have become essential. The Floras and Sophies created by Nancy Bauer come into literary language and being in a fashion which is consistent with their possibilities. I have used the term "common or garden variety" in reference to the experiences and characters about which Nancy Bauer writes, and it should be clear that I use the term in no derogatory sense. For it is one of the hardest things in the

⁶ Nancy Bauer, *Wise-Ears* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1984) 81.

world to portray the everyday and ordinary in such a way as to make it worth reading about, and Nancy Bauer achieves just this.

Yet there are, again, other possibilities, and Susan Kerslake is a writer whose female characters are portrayed not as handmaidens to, but as prisoners of, silence. Her women, moreover, learn to come out of this silence into speech and into the invention of themselves through language.

Susan Kerslake's first novel, *Middlewatch*, is the story of a young girl, Sibbi, who is psychologically and physically abused by her much older brother. At the novel's opening, the girl lies spread-eagled, naked on a bed, her wrists and ankles roped to the posts so that "raw snakes burn[ed] below the bleached skin, down to where there [was] still blood."⁷ In a series of narratological manoeuvres which are artful, subtle, and complex enough to deserve a better name than "flashbacks," we learn that the brother, Jason, having sustained a head injury while out cutting wood, has finally lost his tenuous balance between inchoate inner darkness and outer strength, between practicality and sheer volition. He abandons the sheep farm he has struggled to create, after first destroying everything he can lay hands on—including his sister. But the physical damage he inflicts upon Sibbi is only a new form of violence; for the previous ten or so years of their life together, he has punished her by total silence, refusing, or unable, to speak to her, so that she is forced upon her inner life and an internal language of perception to keep herself alive at all.

It is only on the rare days which she is able to spend at the school run by the young teacher who unties her from her bed and painstakingly coaxes her back from the darkness in which she has lost herself that Sibbi learns the uses of language. Her attempts to read and write are described as "feverish" (15), and, though she does master both arts, she cannot practise them except by translating them into the terms of her peculiar environment. She learns to read the natural world around her—the ocean, stars, forests, and meadows surrounding the rude cabin in which she lives. Perhaps her most intense experience of happiness comes from hearing the school teacher, Morgan, read a poem to her; fittingly, it is Hopkins' "Pied Beauty." And when she finally meets someone with whom she can speak (the gypsy boy who has helped her brother after his accident), her sexual awakening is described as a welcome invasion of the silence at her core.

⁷ Susan Kerslake, *Middlewatch* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1976) 7.

Unable to break through her brother's terrifying silence, Sibbi had told herself stories in order to survive. Yet as Jason's physical brutality plunges her into a perpetual winter darkness, Sibbi herself succumbs to silence. Morgan's attempts to help her are met by a "dumb stare" (11) and "animal sounds" (42) instead of language. When he provides her with pen and paper, she leaves the sheets utterly blank. It becomes apparent that she must complete her descent into darkness before she can find any way out again. And in evoking that darkness, and the effects it has on Morgan's own perception of himself and the world, Kerslake is breath-taking. *Middlewatch* becomes a narrative of perception, a sensuous interrelation of the physical reality of a remote coastal village and the mental landscapes of certain of its inhabitants. As in Bauer's novels, there is no tightly structured plot, no driving narrative thrust, but rather a free play of associations, perceptions, ideas. In Sibbi, we are made to live through what might be called "the going of winter," as, slowly, almost inconsequentially, she is drawn out of darkness.

Typically, her emergence is signalled by speech—an expression of concern for Morgan, who is wrestling with his own inner darkness. "What. What is it. What's the matter?" Sibbi finally asks. And Morgan, instead of rejoicing in her words, almost resents them. For with this speech, Sibbi shows herself to be subject to no one and nothing; she is active, asking questions, persisting, demanding an answer. We are told that Morgan "wanted her secrets, her private being opened to him, but she had found his first" (94). Thus Morgan, whose obsession with drawing Sibbi back into life is portrayed through predominantly sexual imagery—he continually presses Sibbi to "admit him, let him inside" (75-77)—is himself invaded and overpowered. Sibbi's last act is to offer him her hand: he thinks it fragile, vulnerable, but, as he grasps it, he realizes it is "quite steady, offered as a solid thing, a story" (133). The novel ends on an indeterminate note. Sibbi has indeed broken free from winter, but Morgan is not altogether sure that she will accept him as a reward for coming back to life. Rather, as in Gide's *Symphonie Pastorale*, the helpless silence and blindness of the abandoned girl-child and the knowledge, power, and authority of the teacher come to be both reversed and intermingled. Helping these women into the world of light and language, the rescuers discover abysses within themselves; confident that they have won the love of these victims, they discover themselves powerless before their own love of women who have grown independent of, and, indeed, beyond, them.

The female protagonists of Kerslake's next novel, *Penumbra*, reveal three different approaches to, or ways of being with,

language. The novel is set, like *Middlewatch*, in the past—in this case, in the heyday of the whaling ships. And while a great deal of the novel explores the horrific mindscape of the sailor, Hebel, and the compassionate consciousness of the asylum-keeper, John, an equally powerful section of the novel details the lives of the women who are stranded with Hebel and John on the island of Lune, which houses lunatics from the coastal settlements. One of these women, Mercy, is, like Hebel, an inmate on the island. Like Sibbi at the opening of *Middlewatch*, Mercy is immersed in darkness; for her, however, it is the darkness of total madness and possession. In a remarkable chapter of the novel, Kerslake is able to slip under the skin of this character; weaving together heightened and abnormal perceptions of the real world, superstition, magic, and the supernatural, she allows Mercy to turn her silence into a form of speech. For this woman, who was born with her eyes staring open and who, for three nights after her birth, speaks out to her mother saying that she was sad to have been born, never speaks again. "The earth was not for her," we are told. "She held her hands at odd angles in the sky exploring the qualities of light."⁸ Yet she does listen to the gossip and cures of the "herb-craft lady" and midwife who had pulled her to birth and in whose speech Mercy strains to hear the words that will make her night terrors stop or allow her to be finally possessed by the spirits she perceives in everything around her. The way in which Kerslake communicates the unsayable, the purely phenomenal, is brilliant. Here, for example, is Mercy's perception of night terrors:

they would ignite the marrow in her bones until the steam seeped out from beneath her nails and eyelids. They transformed her silent tears into beads of glass that broke. The walls sunk into deep alleys that were raw and humid as if the passageways of animal bodies, of her own body had been sucked out and embedded there. She watched the flames swirl in there and felt the burn in her body. Then the sweat glistened all over her skin and put out the fire before it froze. She knew it froze and flaked off her because in the morning light when she looked out into the hall her footsteps were in the frost on the floor. As she breathed over them they melted. She felt the walls lightly in case they gave in, but the morning light was mortar and the walls were solid. The sun and the moon were in the sky together.(57)

⁸ Susan Kerslake, *Penumbra* (Toronto: Aya, 1984) 54.

This is the language of pure perception—not just heightened or intensified speech, but a different kind of articulation that is at times terrifying in its power and very fluency. How do you learn such a language? the reader asks; how is it possible for anyone to give words to sensations which are both invisible and all-consuming? In this extraordinary way, Kerslake frees the voice of madness and makes it intelligible—which is perhaps the most frightening thing of all. Yet, in *Penumbra's* other female characters, she is able to portray alternatives to Mercy's kind of speech (for example, in Sarah, the wife of the asylum keeper). Sarah wakes in the middle of the night, fearful, stifling cries, and expressing herself to her husband in eloquently broken speech: "Oh God, John, of my children, myself . . ." (13). Like Sibbi in *Middlewatch*, she is stricken by the silence which walls-in her existence.

The burden of her complaint is that she has no one to talk to. Her daughter, the unnamed heroine of *Penumbra*, who is, for a large part of the novel, a first-person narrator, reflects that, while her mother has known another world than that of Lune, she, having grown up with her brother on the island, and knowing no other world than that of the lunatics and the little fortress of ordinary living her mother has erected against them, finds Lune a world which is "quite possible" (13). When she does make a trip to the mainland, she acquires a lover, another sailor, who comes to her on the island. The narrator's world is communicated to us as an amalgam of the ferocious strangeness of Mercy's and the inescapable reality of Sarah's; yet, what the narrator is able to bring out is the fierce beauty and freedom of the life she lives, until it is ended by her father's performing a mercy killing, itself an act of communication between the insane Hebel, who can no longer endure the torment of his memories, and the "keeper," John, who has promised Hebel his friendship.

When news of the killing reaches the mainland, John and Sarah are taken off the island with their children—John, we may assume, to be convicted of murder, and the pregnant Sarah to survive somehow with her children. *Penumbra* ends with the narrator's lying in bed, listening to her mother telling her young brother a story, and then hearing her talk in her sleep, trying to piece together the reasons for what has happened, the justification for her husband's having helped Hebel to death at the price of abandoning his own family. We are left with words spoken disjointedly in darkness, with ordinary speech used to state and understand that which is incomprehensible, unforgiveable. In this way, the experience of Kerslake's female characters underscores the antithesis *Penumbra* creates between the organized and socially sanctioned lunacy of whaling, with all the

terrors it involves, and the profound human decency and sanity of John's treatment of the certified lunatics on his island, a decency which ends in death and desertion.

Penumbra is an extraordinarily complex and difficult novel; the reader is, in turn, exhilarated by the power and beauty of Kerslake's metaphors and unnerved by her uncanny re-creations of disordered or deranged consciousness. No two writers could be more dissimilar than Nancy Bauer and Susan Kerslake, yet both are compelled by the same need to give voice to those who have traditionally kept silent or been silenced, the majority of them women. And the qualities of these women's writing—the spiralling movement of their narratives, the refusal of linearity, their sense of language as something with which one may joke and play, or which one may scrape like matches against rough dark walls—are clearly new qualities in Maritime fiction. This freeing of the text from the yoke of linear narrative and also from the magisterial, perfected structure one gets in *The Mountain and the Valley*, for example, is, of course, part and parcel of postmodernism in fiction. Yet it is interesting to note how many of the best postmodernists are women and to speculate on how much of their energies derive from this sudden sense of being freed from silence into speech, as well as from their perceived need to speak for those who were previously excluded from either the expression, or the recording, of their identities.

In this context, one must mention a third Maritime woman writer, Antonine Maillet, whose fiction boils over with the emergence of suppressed voices, those of the Acadian people, and, in a less abstract sense, of Acadian women—la Sagouine, Mariaàgélas, Pélagie—the repressed wives and daughters of the politically and economically oppressed. Like Kerslake and Bauer, Maillet has chosen to work with unorthodox fictive forms, preferring loose epic and romance structures to the constraints of the realist novel, exploiting fairy tales and visions rather than treading the well-worn path of sober life histories and *Bildungsromans*. Her female protagonists are characters who spring into life—and words—in the gaps left them by the men in their lives. La Sagouine goes out to scrub floors to help keep a roof over her family's head. As she stirs the filthy water in her bucket, she speaks out, both to herself and for her entire community. Her speech is “uneducated,” illiterate, and yet incredibly vital, full of subversive malapropisms and a naïveté devastating to the powers that be. To Pélagie, Maillet allows greater independence and articulateness; because her husband perishes during the deportation of the Acadians, she is left to take up the reins and lead her own family, as well as her neighbours' families, back to

Acadie-in-the-north. And, finally, Maillet has her heroine, Mariaàgèlas, begin a flourishing career as a rumrunner because her father and brothers have not the wit or spunk to climb out of the poverty which imprisons them.

It is with a few comments on *Mariaàgèlas* that I should like to end this article on women and words in contemporary Maritime fiction; this novel shows how intimately a consciousness of the inarticulate and hidden lives of ordinary women is connected with the issue of language and literary form as a means of breaking out of silence and invisibility. In this novel of a poor, but amazingly resourceful, Acadian girl who refuses a life of exile and subsistence in the shops or factories of the Boston States, the role of author-narrator is a prominent element. In fact, Maillet would seem to be identifying herself, an Acadian-born writer now resident in Montreal, with Mariaàgèlas, the Acadian Mafiosa who, for all the brilliance of her smuggling operations and her astonishing success in defeating her rivals and ill-wishers, defeats her own purpose. Once she has secured her financial independence so that she can remain on her own terms in the settlement she calls "La Baie," she realizes that La Baie is too small and constricting a world for her. The novel would end on a quasi-tragic note (a neighbour killed, due to Mariaàgèlas's influence, and Maria herself drowned off the Iles de la Madeleine) were it not for the final merging of heroine, creator, author, and narrator.

The epilogue to *Mariaàgèlas* is quietly self-reflexive, with one of the characters of the novel proper, a fortune teller named la Bidoche, telling the narrator that she will ultimately realize her heart's desire—"to write one day the marvellous adventures of one Mariaàgèlas who so joyously battled against the sea, customs officers, fishermen, priests, the village gossips and life itself during the most glorious and most tragic epoch in the history of my country."⁹ That last "my" is significant, for it brings about the merging of the fictional "she" with the authorial "I," giving us the sense that Maillet is effecting her own freedom through expression, exploiting the very vivacity and earthiness of spoken Acadian which she, better than any other writer, has managed to recapture in enduring words.

These three writers—Bauer, Kerslake, Maillet—I have chosen as representative figures; it goes without saying that there are many other gifted and accomplished women writers in this region—Donna Smyth, Ann Copeland, and Beth Harvor among

⁹ Antonine Maillet, *Mariaàgèlas* (Leméac, 1973) 236. My translation.

them. And it is also self-evident that contemporary writers of the other sex are as worthy of notice as those I have just named. Yet because there has been such a long and strong tradition in Maritime fiction of portraying women as incapable of, or hostile to, literary language, and because, until very recently, few women in this region have been able to take up the pen and correct or create alternatives to this portrayal, I hope I will be forgiven for what will otherwise seem as arbitrary and useless a gender distinction as that which decrees which shall be girls' and which boys' books in the children's section of the public library. As early as the 1820s, Joseph Howe addressed his women readers with the following plaint:

And now, my fair countrywomen, at the risk of some score of frowns . . . I cannot refrain from asking whether you think that nature intended . . . that your lives should be passed in combing children's hair and making pies and pastry. . . . Were your minds formed for nothing better than this? . . . is there no pleasing study, no literary or scientific pursuit, that without interfering or weaning you from your domestic duties, might elevate and enlarge your understandings? . . . [T]he bright galaxy of peerless females who shed such radiance over the British Isles . . . enrich[es] their literature and adorn[s] their age; and why should not women on this side of the water 'go and do likewise'?¹⁰

We have done, Joe; we are doing.[†]

Annapolis Royal

¹⁰ Joseph Howe, *Western and Eastern Rambles: Travel Sketches of Nova Scotia*, ed. M.G. Parks (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1973) 69-70.

[†] At our suggestion, Janice Kulyk Keefer substituted the first person pronoun for the third in her concluding sentence. We want to draw attention to the author's own contribution to Maritime literature. Janice Kulyk Keefer recently won first place, for the second year in a row, in the CBC's national short story contest. -Ed.