CAROLE CORBEIL: A VOICE OF HER OWN

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Christine Hamelin

Carole Corbeil's successful first novel, Voice-Over *(Stoddard, 1992), uses both languages to give voice to Canada's bicultural reality. Moving from past to present, from Duplessis's Montreal to Toronto in 1984, it tells the story of Janine and Claudine Beaulieu, who were forced to "turn English" when their mother Odette was remarried to an anglophone. Claudine, a Toronto documentary filmmaker, focusses on the painful life stories of others to fuel her work and to avoid her feeling that she is a* vendue. *Gradually, she and the other women in* Voice-Over *confront the past and become open to the cultural and familial voices which have formed them.*

Corbeil, an arts writer for the Globe and Mail *in the eighties, grew up in Montreal and, like Claudine, had to switch abruptly to English during adolescence. Living in between the two languages has been difficult for Corbeil, who feels somewhat uneasy in both cultures. In* Voice-Over, *a semi-autobiographical novel of healing, Corbeil addresses the guilt she feels for having partly lost her Quebecois heritage. The novel has been greatly acclaimed by critics such as the* Globe and Mail's *George Galt, who says it is "destined to become a Canadian classic."*

Carole Corbeil is now working on a new novel about a Toronto actress cast as Gertrude in a production of Hamlet.

Christine Hamelin interviewed Corbeil in Toronto on June 25, 1992.

CH George Galt said that this novel is "destined to become a Canadian classic." How did that make you feel?

CC Wonderful!

CH Were you expecting that kind of reception?

CC Not at all. My husband went out and bought the *Globe,*

the late edition, and I read it and I cried. . . . It's a wonderful review. It wasn't just the accolades, but that he really understood what I was trying to do, and he understood it on many levels. To be understood is the greatest thing in the world.

CH Galt also compares *Voice-Over* to Hugh MacLennan and says it's one of the few novels that unites the two cultures. Why do you think there are so few bicultural novels?

CC I don't really have an explanation. I know that, in the process of how I went about writing it, I thought that it would be impossible to do. It was the experience that I had lived, so I wanted to write about that, from the point of view of someone who has lived it, but it felt as if I would lose readers when I switched to French, and yet I needed those touchstones myself, so I had to first of all give myself permission to do it—that was hard—and then I had to work at creating a very clear context for the dialogue, so that English people would understand.

CH There are a lot of anglophone readers who might need a dictionary to understand some of the dialogue here.

CC Well, I suppose so, but I had hoped that wouldn't be necessary. I think what we're dealing with is how anglophones feel about French, which is how some people feel about math, as something that they've had to do and that they're not good at, so they have a block. I'd always hoped that in the English promotion of the book it would not be put forward so much that there was a lot of French, because I think that some people are put off by that. But if they enter the book, I think they would be able to absorb it without too much difficulty.

CH Were you really conscious about using obscure or *joual* words in French, and about whether you should change them to words that were more accessible to anglophones?

CC No, because they were things that I really heard in my head. About six years ago, I was going to write a book of essays. I wrote a few of them, and then decided I was through with that kind of rhetorical writing, and I always had wanted to write fiction, and I had written fiction before.

CH Was your earlier fiction about bicultural issues?

CC No. I always knew I wanted to write this story, the story of having lived with those two cultures and those two languages. It started for me with writing down memories and doing a very experimental kind of writing. I hadn't written in French in a really long time, because I was mostly educated in English throughout adolescence and university. As I went back, as I wrote in French, a lot of memories started to come back, a lot of sensual and feeling memories started to come. . . .

CH Did you start writing the text of this novel in French?

CC Well, they were like little monologues in French. But I don't have the ability any more to write descriptively in French at the level that I have in English. So that was my challenge, how do I have that texture, but write it in English. It was very difficult, it was very tortured, but it came out.

CH Was your education in English or French?

CC I went to French Catholic school up to grade nine, then to Wales to do A-levels. Then I worked in Montreal, and I went to university when I was 23, at Glendon, honours English.

CH Why did you go to Wales?

CC Atlantic College, an international school which was started by Lord Mountbatten, was very promoted as an Outward Bound international school. There were a lot of people in the families that my parents knew that were interested in going there. I had always had this big fantasy about going to Europe, that was a really big thing for me when I was an adolescent.

CH For cultural reasons?

CC Yes. I was very romantic. The Seine was as present in my mind as the St. Lawrence. When I was seventeen, I really wanted to go, my parents were prepared to send me there. It was very hard.

CH A lot of Canadian writers have gone to Europe to observe the culture there, as if what we have here is somehow not valid.

CC Yes. It was more common then. It was the time of backpacks, and people wore Canadian flags on their knapsacks. But also it speaks of the colonial part of our education. When I was going to French school, we mostly read writers from France.

CH But you read Nelligan . . . did you find him on your own?

CC Yes, I did. That was in my adolescence.

CH Would you still like to write a book about him?

CC I don't think so. I think there's a particular point in your life when you really identify with that kind of romantic madness. If I were to write it now I'd write it from a very different point of view, to try to understand what happened in his early life to create this man, rather than [talking about] how wonderful the burning light that burns out so soon.

CH When you worked for the *Globe and Mail*, were you writing a lot about French-Canadian culture?

CC I did, I would end up going there a lot and writing about it. I started out as a general entertainment writer, and I also did theatre and visual art and dance and writers and books.

CH How did it feel to write in English for the *Globe* about Quebec culture? Did you feel you were bridging the two cultures?

CC Yes, in a way. I felt that I understood it so well. . . .

CH Did you wish you were writing in French about Quebec culture?

CC Yes, I did. I would berate myself about not being able to do both. I had this ideal in my mind that I should be able to do both.

CH I think that's one of the aspects of bicultural guilt; we would like to be able to excel in both cultures, which is rare.

CC I think so. I think people can be bilingual and kind of bicultural, but I don't think they can do both with the same level. We have a big joke in my house that I can't two-track. I was never a kid who could do my homework with the radio on. Just one thing at a time! It's the same with language for me. After a while when I'm immersed in the French environment, it all comes back to me. But the switching is almost like different parts of the brain.

CH That's related to the fact that in your family you didn't have the two languages flying around.

CC No, not in the immediate household. In my mother's family, there was a bilingual bantering and eventually that became part of me. By the time I went to high school, my mother had remarried an English person, so we were an English household.

CH This sounds very much like *Voice-Over.* Would you say it is autobiographical?

CC It's autobiographical in terms of the events of my life, like where the switch happened to English, but in terms of particular scenes, it's very, very fictional, and some of it is completely imaginary.

CH You stuck to the exact same cultural mixes as in your life. Odette is half French-Canadian, half Irish, like your mother.

CC Yes. To me it was important that it was Irish, because of the Catholicism and the strange hybrid that that is, Irish and French.

CH I wanted to ask about the title. In the powerful first scene, Claudine decides to do a voice-over for Cindy, whose language isn't appropriate. Are you doing the voice-over for Claudine?

CC I think that's what the idea of the title is. I had a lot of difficulty with the title. It was originally going to be called *Speaking in Tongues*, then it was going to be called *Mother Tongue*, and there were a few other titles floating around. When it came time to publish, it was of real importance to find one, there was a lot of

pressure and I woke up one morning thinking *"Voice-Over."* When I wrote it, that was very much on my mind, how after that first scene, when Claudine says, "we'll do it in voice-over," because they didn't really get what they wanted, the book opens up into all the voices of Claudine's life, basically.

CH Does Claudine have a voice? Does she have two conflicting ones, or one fragmented one, or is that the same thing?

CC Yes, it is kind of the same. I would say that she is struggling to find what is her voice. It had a lot of punning possibilities in that the English voice was over the French voice and all of the parental voices and the cultural voices.

CH Claudine says that frogs don't turn into princesses, but they lose their tongues. And there are a lot of comments about losing your voice and having a twisted tongue. But she does seem to have a voice of her own, especially towards the end. Is that the voice-over of the author, or Claudine's own voice?

CC The way I see it, all of the women in the book are struggling to become conscious, and by the end they are beginning to be conscious of what shaped them. I think consciousness is really related to voice, that once you become fully conscious you find your voice.

CH Odette seems much more conscious near the end of the novel, when she goes swimming and finds some coral. What brings about this consciousness? Does she make a choice for life?

CC Yes, I think so. I think that she does something on her own, and to me, although I wasn't conscious of this, there is a lot of water imagery which to me does represent the unconscious. She dives down and is really afraid, and then finds out that it's not something to be really afraid of, what she finds. And she actually retrieves a piece of coral. It is to me a metaphor for diving down to the unconscious in that there are all these riches there, but you have to go down and then resurface.

CH Why is Odette now able to dive? Her life in Jamaica is

difficult, and she has lost touch with the girls. Is it because time has gone by that she can go back and retrieve things?

CC That may be a way of putting it. I think that in us all there's a little part that stays alive, that goes towards the light. It's hard to say exactly what propels her at that point.

CH Back to the first scene, with Cindy. There's the whole theme of telling someone else's story. Is there much difference between Colin's stories and Claudine's documentaries? They both seem to tell someone else's story, maybe in a way to avoid telling their own story, sort of by putting a veil in front of them.

CC That's very perceptive. I think that's what I was trying to get at. For me, Claudine's drive as a documentary filmmaker, the subjects she's attracted to, have to do with having to tell her mother's story. What was unconscious in that household wants to come out. Claudine doesn't know why she's so attracted to those particular stories, but she's using them. I think they're telling her story, too, but they're also her mother's story.

CH So are Colin and Claudine doing the same thing?

CC Well, I think what's different is that I also had in mind that in the mother's era, the mother's means of working, she worked in front of the camera, she was the object of the gaze. The daughter now has the camera, a unit of control. For a woman, this is an evolutionary step. But it's not enough. It's not enough to just point the camera. And there's a whole dilemma for Claudine that is shared by a lot of women in their late twenties and early thirties, that you can have power, you can be like a man, you can pass. She has a whole thing about equal being the same, and wanting to be equal, meaning the same, but in fact that's not enough, there's another step, you can have equal rights but be true to our difference, and that's what I hope they're all striving towards.

CH When Colin writes the poetry book *She*, about Claudine's life, he whittles down her story so that it doesn't resemble reality. Can writing, or documentaries, encapsulate reality very well?

CC Well, at one point, when Claudine is in Quebec City and

she imagines Colin and Sally together back at the apartment, there's a whole thing about how that's how she's coped, by being kind of a voyeur of her own experience, of imagining. It ends by her saying, after she calls and there's no answer, that she got it all wrong. Often I wanted the novel to open into that kind of thing, that there is no reality, there is her point of view on it, there's her imagination. What Colin makes of things, what she makes of things, are all versions.

CH And *Voice-Over* is another version of things? A coping strategy.

CC Yes, maybe. There's a great healing thing about creating a world out of something that pained you.

CH There are many images of falseness in the novel. Is that related to feeling like a *vendu,* to feeling wrong in a culture?

CC That's interesting. There's the whole thing about how the girls didn't have a leg to stand on in either place. It's true—there's something about the bilingual/bicultural, actually living it, that makes an actress or a performer out of you, or makes you conscious of how different you are in different contexts, as we were talking about earlier.

CH Did you have a different personality in English and in French?

CC Yes, yes. I wasn't completely [different], but definitely there's a difference.

CH The act of speaking one language or the other can affect one's personality and worldview.

CC Yes. There's something in the language itself that propels a certain kind of rhythm. And for me, French being the language of my childhood, it's closer to childlike feeling, whereas, learning English mostly in adolescence, it became a more controlled language, and also because it's a second language, there's more fear of making mistakes, and sò there's more reserve, something happening on a smaller space.

CH Ironically, you're more comfortable now writing in English.

CC Yes.

CH But the theme of fakeness isn't just related to language. Beribée, for example, moves to California to become a stuntman and hurts himself on a fake cactus. Is that a real story?

CC Parts of the character are based on real stories, but a lot is invented. I had a real thing about something which I felt had never really been explored, which is the fascination of the Quebecois with Hollywood and American things. When I was growing up, that was so huge in the French culture. That was the fantasy life, and it had nothing to do with reality. That's another colonial aspect, and I found that really interesting. So there is a lot of that in the book. Odette, for instance, kind of models herself on various American actresses. I'm fascinated with how a lack of identity and a damaged sense of self lead to a real attachment to fantasy.

CH The images of falseness seem related not only to bicultural problems, but also to the demands placed on women to adopt certain predefined roles.

CC Yes, I actually believe that all women are bilingual and bicultural in the sense that they've absorbed a way of thinking and talking that is not their own. There's a whole patriarchal overlay in us that we're often dealing with.

CH So that would make you trilingual.

CC Yes! I think some men have problems with the patriarchal system too, but I think that, for women, it's a struggle.

CH Can you compare the oppression of women and the oppression of culture and language? Is cultural oppression less blatant, more intangible?

CC Yes it is, but it is all about power. The results aren't necessarily the same. I don't know, there are so many levels. For instance, the experiences that I describe of feeling ashamed of yourself for not knowing another language, feeling that kind of

shame, or feeling that they were being *vendus*, whatever, it happens also to people in other cultures, like for instance Jamaicans, who would speak a patois at home, be taught "English" English at school, and come to another country. Being taught that there is a right way and what you are is not right, it happens to a lot of people.

CH Is there any difference between the bicultural situation we have here and that in other cultures? Say, because the country is facing division? This brings some issues to a head.

CC It's at a stage now where it's evolved into a face-off. But when I look at the history of both sides, there's the huge Catholic influence in Quebec, which I think really kept people down. There was a colonialism there about France, and not being as good, and the whole French-French thing and Québécois thing, it was worked out to an identity, somehow, and going from feeling oppressed by the English to feeling superior, actually. This is similar to the English side, they felt very dominated by England culturally for a very long time, and by the United States, and then finally got a very fragile identity, and went on. But these are processes that are recognizable; and they happen to people, too, in that their authentic self is robbed or moulded, and they come to some kind of understanding and go back to that.

CH We were saying earlier that bicultural guilt must be linked to Jansenist Catholicism. Any other thoughts about it?

CC There must also be something very strong historically. Even as children, we absorbed that that was the greatest betrayal of all, to lose your language, that it was some sin.

CH My parents were married at the dawning of bilingualism, in the Trudeau years. There is probably unspoken pressure on a child to be a symbol of what the country can be.

CC The whole golden-era Trudeau thing, I felt that too. Again, it becomes another myth that is imposed on what is actually a very difficult personal situation. Since the whole drive has been towards the purification of language in Quebec, I've always thought there was a lot of fun to be had in mixing, in *franglais*, and people have forgotten that there are jollies to be had.

CH Colin is described as a robber. Are all writers?

CC That's an interesting question. One of the reasons I invented Colin as a writer was that I had inside me a male writer voice that was telling me, This is not a story, this is not the way you go about it, you've got to have one single point of view, the narrative has got to go like this. And so I kind of incarnated that, and also that I always had great personal difficulty with the bad-boy artist myth, where it's okay to abandon children, to do anything you want, because you have the magic thing, so I wanted to explode that a little bit, and to use some of the anger that I'd had about that kind of devil-may-care attitude, because mostly it's women and children who have suffered because of it. Also, male writers have often written about women's experience. When I was in high school, we read very few women writers, so we read a lot of stuff about women by men, and I was not at that time taught how to read this critically, or to ask what is the difference between my experience and what is being portrayed. So again, it's another overlay. And that in turn becomes another way of judging yourself, of saying, I shouldn't be all of these things, but this is the way I should be.

CH Colin seems to be a failed artist.

CC I don't know. The poor thing, he's had such mean things said about him by reviewers.

CH What is there that's any good about him?

CC Actually, he gets to say some things that are, to me, true things. He tells Claudine, I didn't create this cold thing in you; that's true. And he says other things that are true.

CH I take it you see past and memory as very important to healing and to creation. The caves and the mention of *A Passage to India* suggests that you see the confrontation of certain events in the past as a really important key to making art.

CC For me it was. For me the whole structure of the novel works as a narrative of echoes, where what's going on in the present has its seeds in the past. For me what we forget and why we for-

get is very interesting, and remembering is for me becoming more whole.

CH Art and healing seem very close here. If Colin is not a great writer, is this related to his being unpreoccupied with his past?

CC Yes, I would say definitely. This is linked to the idea of fakeness. There's writing as exhibiting a *persona*. . . . For me, really good writing is very connected, and his writing is a bit of a pose.

CH Connected?

CC Emotionally. When I was younger I was very attracted to writing that had a lot of artifice in it. As I get older I'm much more attracted to very simple but true writing, where there is not much of that artificial interference.

CH Who were the women writers who influenced you?

CC We were introduced to Jane Austen, and I think *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë was really a high, high favourite of mine, I still think it's an incredible novel. It's so full of pain to me. I read it very differently now than I did before. I recently read a Charlotte Brontë biography, and to find out what was going on in that household is just amazing.

CH And Quebec women writers?

CC I read Anne Hébert. I have to say that when I read someone like Anne Hébert, the early work, there was a very closed-in feeling, a very claustrophobic feeling, a very lyrical way of writing, which ultimately felt stifling to me. So there's something there. I have all that. But in the English literature I'm also very attracted to the outward, to the surfaces of life, to the creation of a very concrete realistic world, to sort of put those two together. But it's sort of like when we were talking about Nelligan. At a certain point, you just want to break out of the self a little bit.

CH A lot of these people, like Brontë and Nelligan, are very romantic. There aren't very many romantic passages in your novel. It also has a quite tragic vision, even though at the end

there are several images of reconciliation, like housecleaning, the writing of a poem. How much of a reconciliation did you intend?

CC I would say it is a dark book. I don't like novels with neat resolutions, and I think that it's possible to suggest that there is a forward movement without real closure; the book ends up with a question mark, "Can you hear me now?" I think it was necessary for me to explore the darkness, to throw light on the darkness, because it had marked these women, and it's very important to give that its weight. But I always conceived of the novel as a summer, the summer of 1984, when everything comes to the surface, all of the ghosts kind of rear up their heads. So it's an artificial environment in a way. It's a creation. In real life it doesn't happen that way. In real life there are mediating factors that bring light. And yet it was important to me to show what the effects of early wounds are, that they stay, that they're not prettied up.

CH When Odette is in the caves, she has a private realization about her abuse. The small realizations in this novel seem restrained and individual as opposed to communal. There is little reconciliation between people working through something.

CC That's very interesting, because the novel has a lot of isolation, and the women are isolated from each other and very fragmented because of that isolation, and there are certain pressures that have created that. But I also think that within families, especially mothers and daughters and sisters, there are such psychic connections that when one person becomes aware of something, whether it's spoken or not, some psychic change happens in all of them. That's always fascinated me about those bonds. I don't think I completely explore that but it was sort of the feeling that I wanted to create in the novel. For instance, Claudine remembers her fevered state in the Marilyn Monroe scene, and Janine's daughter is in a fever and she gets to take care of that daughter. As the mother remembers this, the daughter remembers that. It may not be spoken directly but it's moving.

CH The women characters all seem very connected, unlike the men.

CC I wasn't very concerned about the men. I would like to write something that had more developed male characters but that wasn't my task. I think women share a lot. Even the imagery, quite a few women have read the book and have said that they have the same images, like the underwater stuff. I guess where there have been experiences of violence to the body, there are in women a lot of out-of-body kind of feelings, watching yourself, behind yourself.

CH Or being in front of a camera, being put on the spot.

CC Yes. Trapped within that gaze. To varying degrees we all share that.

CH Would you like to be considered an English-Canadian writer?

CC Oh God!

CH The novel stands in its own category and gives people permission to write in these languages together. Other post-colonial writers use non-English languages, like Hindi, in their texts. People are getting more comfortable with this mixing.

CC But when you try and get an American publisher, it's a real problem! We were trying to sell it in the United States, I think, and a lot of people thought it was so rooted and steeped in the Canadian milieu . . . as if we haven't had to read all this steeped stuff from there!

CH You won't necessarily keep writing about bicultural issues?

CC I don't think I will.

CH Are you comfortable seeing yourself as an English-Canadian writer, in the tradition of Munro and Atwood?

CC It's very difficult. I think I have a very different sensibility. Alice Munro has a very Ontario sensibility, and Margaret Atwood a very Toronto sensibility. . . .

CH Do you have a Montreal sensibility?

CC I don't know. I'm not sure what I have!

CH It makes you uncomfortable to have to put yourself into a category like that.

CC Yes. There's something in me that would like to write something really romantic.

CH Are you writing anything now?

CC Yes, I'm writing a novel. It's about an actress who's 38, who's been cast as Gertrude in an Ontario production of *Hamlet.* It's fun. It happens in Toronto.

CH Do you set fixed hours when you write?

CC No. I'm very undisciplined. Once I get going, I go through big, big spurts, I work it all out and then pull back. But this novel took a really long time for all sorts of reasons. I was also trying to make a living, and I have a child, and I wrote a tremendous amount of stuff that didn't end up in there.