

## Book Reviews

Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard, and Eleanor Wachtel, eds. *Language in Her Eye: Views on Writing and Gender by Canadian Women Writing in English*. Toronto: Coach House P, 1990. pp. 308. \$18.95.

*Language in Her Eye*, a collection of forty-four contributions by contemporary Canadian women, brings together a range of topics, voices, and styles. Because of the sheer number of offerings, it is impossible to do justice to all of the essays, creative works, and other forms of writing included in this book. The numerous contributions address questions as varied as male/female relationships, lesbian identity, race and ethnicity, class, language, sexuality in literature, and cultural appropriation. Feminism is also discussed as a concept synonymous with support, solidarity, liberation, contradiction, anxiety, and alienation.

Some of the key issues addressed in this anthology—gender, race, class, language, and writing—are considered by Himani Bannerji in her story/essay, “The Sound Barrier: Translating Ourselves in Language and Experience.” Bannerji eloquently describes the difficulty faced by a Bengali writer writing in English, an alien language. Her observations provide Western readers with valuable insight into the phenomena of race, “otherization,” class, gender, and motherhood. She also focusses on the postcolonial experience of language, which in her case is represented by the struggle between Bengali and English. Her acute sense of dislocation is further reflected in her decision to combine a creative fragment or story with critical commentary.

Like Bannerji’s piece, Dionne Brand’s “Bread Out of Stone” also deals with race and gender, but her contribution focuses on the multiple conflicts entailed in being a black, feminist, lesbian writer: “Even in a Black dream, where I, too, am a dreamer, a lesbian is suspect; a woman is suspect even to other women, especially if she dreams of women” (48). In her text, she describes her collection of oral histories by older Black women in Ontario and the process of making a film about women. This subject matter is presented in the present tense, which allows the author to create a sense of immediacy that blurs the distinctions between Brand’s black foremothers and her own “dangerous smile” (52), memory and life, oral history and writing.

Other issues covered in *Language in Her Eye* include the influence

offeminist thinking on the writing of individual authors, the question of gender discrimination or lack thereof, the backlash against feminism, (for example, the Montreal massacre), the exclusion of women from the "Great Tradition" or literary canon, as well as the fusion of the personal and the political in theorizing feminist reading and writing. A number of writers like Margaret Atwood, Janette Turner Hospital, and Paulette Jiles discuss their disenchantment with feminism and the alienating ideas presented by some academic circles; Kristjana Gunnars and Phyllis Webb, for example, also fear the encroachment of dogma on their art. Carol Shields seeks to dismantle the divisiveness inherent in the opposition of distinct male and female worlds, and argues on behalf of the human. Gail Scott engages in narrative play to undermine the linearity of male writing, reinventing the concept of the tragic character for her heroine figure. Libby Scheier, editor and contributor, envisions a kind of writing that will maintain the twin concerns of the political and the mystifying. Contributions by Cameron, Godard, and Hutcheon will undoubtedly be of particular interest to women in academe. In her essay on biography, for example, Elspeth Cameron argues that a feminist biography does not require a female subject. Godard's two-column work on the personal and the political deals with positionality in writing and reading, and advances the discourse of poststructuralism. Linda Hutcheon also presents herself as a feminist postructuralist critic, but applies this theoretical approach to the practice of teaching and to the realization that meaning and truth, like gender, are not fixed. According to Hutcheon, "gender is less biological than socially produced" (150). This question of essentialism is further examined by Janice Kulyk Keefer, whose position is more anti-essentialist in her push for androgynous language which can embrace both difference and similarities.

Perhaps one of the most controversial issues debated by many of the women in *Language in Her Eye* is the question of cultural appropriation in literature or speaking in the voice of the other. This debate is summarized by Marlene Nourbese Philip who states that it was "sparked by the rejection of three short stories by the Women's Press for an anthology of short fiction, *Imagining Women*, on the grounds that the writers in question, all white, had used the voice of and characters from cultures and races other than their own" (209). Some writers like Margaret Hollingsworth ("Nobody owns a myth, a culture, a story," 143) and Anne Cameron appear to support the freedom of the imagination and dismiss any suggestion that they should avoid certain topics. Cameron does not believe that "any particular 'form' of story structure belongs to any particular bunch of people regardless of colour" (70) and questions the very definition of the term "indigenous." It is worth noting, however, that Cameron's rejection of limitations imposed on a writer's choice of subject and form does not appear to extend to her conception of class. The opening pages of her essay reveal her resentment towards middle-class women who talk about poverty.

Native women writers, Lee Maracle and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, vehemently oppose the appropriation of another culture, particularly the presentation or use of native culture by non-native writers. Their goal is to reclaim the place of the native in literature. Aritha van Herk supports the latter viewpoint and calls for an awareness of when "to back off"; she in turn refuses to "appropriate difference to aggrandize either [her] own fiction or [her] own feminism" (275). While certain writers either condemn or dismiss the appropriation issue, others like Daphne Marlatt argue more diplomatically for a recognition of difference and a recognition of shared ground (192). Claire Harris's response in the form of a creative dialogue interspersed with Caribbean dialect provides an atypical humourous edge to the issues of multiculturalism, assimilation, and racial relations. Clearly, the difficult choices many writers make between gender solidarity, literary creativity, and cultural specificity continue to affect feminist and ethnic studies.

Although feminist readers will respond in a variety of ways to many of the points expressed in *Language in Her Eye*, feminists will undoubtedly agree that some of Edith Iglauer's statements do a disservice to feminism and to women's writing in general. For example, Iglauer's view that the male world is synonymous with "a sharper way of thinking—a more direct approach" (155) undermines the gains women have made in overcoming feelings of inferior intellectual ability. In her opening remarks, she suggests that she may not be a feminist because she enjoys being with men and likes working with them. This rather simplistic link between feminism and a hatred of men merely reinforces a stereotypical image of feminism. Another regrettable feature of the anthology is the alphabetical arrangement of contributions from Atwood to Wein-zweig. While some individual pieces do cover a variety of topics and could theoretically fit into a number of categories, an editorial decision to organize the content by topic would have enhanced the pedagogical value of the text. Complementary or conflicting views between individual contributions could then have been identified more easily by instructors and students. Scholars interested in a more engaged debate with feminist theory will have to look elsewhere. Aside from Barbara Godard's and Janice Kulyk Keefer's pieces, the majority of the works have a decidedly confessional tone.

Despite the obvious shortage of theoretical discourse or applied critical analysis in *Language in Her Eye*, the editors have included multiple feminine and feminist voices, thereby reinforcing the prominence of diversity in Canadian writing by women. Although many of the views in this anthology may not intersect, they do provide a keen sense of some important issues facing Canadian writers, critics, and readers today.