

Patricia Smart. *Writing Herself into Being: Quebec Women's Autobiographical Writings from Marie de l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcan*. 2014. Translated by Patricia Smart, McGill-Queen's UP, 2017. Pp. 336. CAD\$34.95

Patricia Smart's award-winning, self-translated book, *Writing Herself into Being: Quebec Women's Autobiographical Writings from Marie de l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcan*, examines the development of Quebec women's sense of self through different modes of life narrative, including spiritual autobiography, private diary, epistolary correspondence, and autofiction. The book offers fascinating portraits of women who turned to personal writing to make sense of their individual struggles and the world around them. In so doing, each chapter poses the same question: How do women negotiate their autonomy and agency in a world that systematically constrains, if not outright denies, their subjectivity?

Writing Herself into Being is textured with detailed biographical and contextual information, well-researched critical readings of the selected texts, and a historicizing care that avoids oversimplifying these women's experiences and autobiographical practices. In Part One, "Living and Writing for God: A Mystical Era," Smart begins her conversation on Quebec women's life writing with Marie de l'Incarnation and her introspective writing, which provides a model of "feminist writing whose echoes [are] felt in the correspondences, diaries, and autobiographies of women who . . . follow" (65). Part Two, "Writing for the Other: Correspondences (1748–1862)," addresses Elizabeth Bégon's and Julie Papineau's respective epistolary relationships with their relatives. Their letters show how the line between diary entries and letters can sometimes blur and how their writings "give a sense of the narrowing of women's role brought about by the ideology of 'separate spheres'" (72). Part Three, "Writing for Oneself: The Private Diary (1843–1964)," is divided into three chapters, the first of which explores how the diaries of young girls create a space for self-expression and serve the function of "confidant" as the girls search for love (145). The second chapter discusses the lives of Henriette Dessaulles and Joséphine Marchand, and the third investigates cases of married women who use their personal writings to resist the silencing of women's voices. This section successfully reveals how "diary writing could be a literal 'life saver' for married women" (165), as well as how this form of life writing contributes to women's autonomy and self-affirmation. Part Four, "Writing Oneself into History: The Age of Autobiography (1965–2012)," contains four particularly fascinating chapters that address, respectively, the

pivotal autobiographical novel written by Claire Martin, personal writing in contexts of poverty, “women imprisoned in the maternal role and . . . the consequences of that imprisonment for the lives of their daughters” (255), and finally Nelly Arcan’s poignant autofiction. Each chapter addresses the “fictional dimension of . . . autobiography” (191) and reiterates the difficulty of women’s self-expression by examining the complicated dynamic between the “liberating effect” (191) of autobiographical fiction and “fatigue” (208) or the “need for self-destruction” (192)—both consequences of patriarchal oppression. These elegantly linked parts and chapters provide a historical portrait of women’s life writing in Quebec and uncover the writers’ individual and shared struggle to express themselves beyond religious, patriarchal, and class-based ideologies.

Smart’s ninth chapter focuses on women writers who come from poor backgrounds such as France Théorêt and Adèle Lauzon. Smart suggests that these women were some of the first in Quebec to be “paying particular attention to the complex interweaving of social class, language, culture, religious background, and gender identity in the often painful journeys of their protagonists towards self-expression” (190). However, this exclusively class-based analysis of autobiographical writings may leave readers wondering what such an analysis of life writing would look like through a more intersectional lens—that is, by also considering writings by Indigenous women, women of colour, and members of the LGBTQQIP2SAA community, who are more at risk for experiencing situations of precarity. As Myra Bloom rightfully observes,

Smart’s decision to highlight lesser-known figures while omitting famous writers like Marie-Claire Blais and Nicole Brossard (both pioneering contemporary lesbian writers), is admittedly a strength and a weakness of the book. Smart illuminates much esoteric and otherwise understudied material but thereby ends up painting an incomplete group portrait of Quebec’s female autobiographers. (25)

Indeed, while *Writing Herself into Being* is a timely contribution that confirms the importance of recognizing and valuing women’s self-presentation and testimony, it also points to the immense terrain left to explore in terms of life writing and autobiography in Quebec.

Readers might also question why such an important work on women’s life writing does not make more explicit use of established feminist theorists in the field such as Shari Benstock, Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, and Leigh Gilmore. While some chapters and the bibliography are rich with theoretical material by women (Luce Irigaray, Barbara Havercroft, Bella Brodzki,

Françoise Collin), Smart's discussion of autobiographical writing mostly relies on Philippe Lejeune's famous theorization of the "autobiographical pact," which he describes as a contract between author and reader that ensures authorial sincerity (19). In addition to Lejeune's important work, Smith and Watson's feminist scholarship on "autobiographical relationality" (141) would have contributed greatly to Smart's eloquent tribute to the literary and historical potency of Quebec women's life writing practices, especially since she notes that women's "sense of identity" is often configured as "more relational and less strongly individualized than that of men" (196). Such a configuration of relationality has a long genealogy in feminist life writing theory, and a more direct engagement with such theorizations would have clarified Smart's framing of a relationality "so important to women" that she briefly addresses in her introduction: "Theoreticians of women's autobiography have argued . . . that women's identity has been constructed in terms of her relationships rather than in isolation from them" (8). That being said, by engaging with a multitude of texts, Smart skillfully corroborates how the "negotiation among personal histories and the competing demands of individual and collective stories suggests a view of relationality as an ongoing process among modes of storytelling rather than a fixed form" (Watson 23). Indeed, in each chapter, Smart details how her selected autobiographical texts speak to "the receding point where the personal, the collective, and the universal come together" (279), showing the rich variety of life writing forms through which women trace and negotiate the relational tensions of self-affirmation and agency.

Smart's thorough archival research and rich analysis of Quebec women writers' struggle for autonomy, relationality, and self-expression is impressive. In line with some of her best-known critical work, such as the seminal *Writing in the Father's House: The Emergence of the Feminine in the Quebec Literary Tradition* (1991) and *Les Femmes du Refus global* (1998), Smart continues the necessary work of shedding light on women's fight for autonomy and recognition through cultural production.

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