

REVIEWS**Yet Another Acadian Literature Anthology**

Monika Boehringer, ed. *Anthologie de la Poésie Des Femmes en Acadie*. Préface de Nicole Brossard. Moncton: Perce-Neige, 2014, 266pp.

An anthology is never something essential. Whether Canadian literature, Quebec literature, or Acadian literature, none of these traditions require anthologies to prove their existence. Not in 2016. Yet, once in a while, someone—a professor or a poet or an editor—decides to publish a new anthology about a specific canon or a specific genre. Significantly, since 2009 no less than three anthologies about Acadian literature have been published. The latest, prepared by Monika Boehringer of Mount Allison University, deals with poetry written exclusively by Acadian women. It includes 27 authors, a substantive introduction by Boehringer, and a Foreword by well-known Quebec poet Nicole Brossard.

At first glance, the book certainly has its merits. For the first time, for instance, it is possible to read in one volume Acadian women writers from as early as the beginning of the 20th century up to the beginning of the 21st century; most of the important authors are also there, including Rose Després, Dyane Léger, and Hélène Harbec. Equally significant is Boehringer's inclusion of poems by Athela Cyr (1905-1990) and Anna Malenfant (1905-1988), two literary pioneers who have been glaringly excluded from previous Acadian anthologies.

The Foreword by Brossard reveals little; by comparison, the Introduction by Boehringer is fascinating. In introductions to previous Acadian anthologies, women's writing, especially poetry, was overshadowed by men's writing because works by the latter were easier to link with ideas of Acadian nationalism and modernity—as when Raoul Boudreau in his French Introduction to the anthology *Unfinished dreams* (1990) goes to great lengths to link poems by Raymond Guy LeBlanc, Guy Arsenault and Herménégilde Chiasson to the creation of a country, but offers only one short paragraph when he discusses women's poetry. But women poets who started to write in the 1970s and 1980s did not focus their energy on issues of language, identity, or country. They had a different way of expressing their own reality and aspirations, focusing on the mere fact of being a woman, or on unwanted maternity or on sad love. And so their contribution

was viewed as minor by previous Acadian critics because they didn't fit the mythical/nationalist Acadia paradigm. Boehringer attempts to rectify this oversight by offering readers a nuanced argument: instead of simply presenting the poets and the individual subjects or themes they explore, she describes the complex, multi-faceted historical context in which Acadian literature emerged and how women participated in the creation of Acadie's canonical works. She also explains how women poets wanted to free themselves from convention and how they participated in the postmodernism era with authors such as France Daigle and even Georgette LeBlanc.

Having said that, this anthology has at least one major flaw that, in some ways, undermines the whole project. At the end of her Introduction, Boehringer explains her two criteria for deciding which authors and which poems are included in the anthology. She states that after having read all the authors, she decided to keep (1) only poems in regards to their aesthetic qualities; and (2) the place the poems occupy in relation to an author's oeuvre. The first criterion is subjective and like with any anthology, a choice must be made at some point. This is not the problem. The second criteria would also be fine if Boehringer had actually followed it to make her choices. But she doesn't, not really.

Take Antonine Maillet, for example. She is perhaps the most famous Acadian author of either gender, and her list of literary accomplishments and accolades is long. Furthermore, she is the first and only Acadian writer to win the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize for fiction. But Maillet is celebrated for her novels and dramas; she is no poet. In fact, she has never published a collection of poetry, nor does poetry factor whatsoever in understanding her oeuvre. So when Boehringer writes in her acknowledgments that "Découvrir Antonine Maillet poète fut une surprise inattendue" (p. 262), the surprise is even greater for the reader. Including Maillet in this anthology therefore seems tenuous at best. The same may be said of Emma Haché. This young author won the Governor-General's Literary Award in 2004 for a wonderful play called *L'intimité*. In other words, her métier is theatre, not poetry. Granted, some of her plays are very poetic but, like Maillet, Haché has never published a collection of poetry. Why, then, does she appear in this anthology? At the same time, it is difficult to understand why Huguette Légaré has been excluded from the publication. Although born in Quebec, Légaré has lived her entire adult life in New Brunswick. More important, from 1973 to 1985 she published a novel and five collections of poetry in France, Quebec and Acadia. Despite the fact that she stopped publishing after 1985, Légaré is an important poetry figure from that decade. Granted, Légaré was not included in other anthol-

ogies in the 2000s, but still—in an anthology that deals with women, poetry and Acadia, this is strange unless perhaps it is an issue of copyright permission. In short, the only possible explanation for such discrepancies is that for Boehringer, gender trumps genre. But in doing so, Boehringer unwittingly downplays the achievement of the women in this anthology who have built their careers around poetry.

The second criterion was also discarded when Boehringer chose to include Marie-Eve Landry and Monica Bolduc as the last two poets. If it was the 1970s, when Acadian editors had no choice but to include even the up and comer in order to create a literature that was only in its infancy, Landry and Bolduc would have a place in this anthology. But we are in the 21st century; modern Acadian literature is now more than forty years old. Furthermore, neither Landry nor Bolduc have published a book of poetry: in fact, they have a grand total of 4 published poems between them in poetry magazines. So when your editorial criteria includes “the place the poems have in the whole work of an author,” you can see the inconsistencies. Having said that, Landry and Bolduc likely have a great future on the literary scene. They might even publish a book one day, at which point it would make sense to add them to an anthology. Again, this questionable choice doesn’t do any good to all the other women writers who crafted a significant body of work during the past 10 to 50 years.

In the end, it would be interesting to determine how many women writers were included in previous anthologies wherein gender was not one of the criteria. Of course, Boehringer’s anthology is showcasing every woman who is a poet (or not) and who published a collection (or not), but my sense is that the 2010 anthology from David Loneragan published at *Prise de Parole* did include all the major women writers. One might also wonder where this anthology ranks compared to the other eight that have appeared since 1977. In minority cultures like Acadia, the tendency is to publish what we can call an anthology-creation, in which the anthology creates literature by the mere fact of existing. Anthologies published in the 1970s and 1980s were like that and sadly, in 2014, Boehringer’s anthology falls in that category too. Sure, it is interesting to showcase women’s poetry, but David Loneragan’s *Paroles d’Acadie* is more selective since he chose writers who had published at least three books. But for the Introduction alone, this latest anthology is worth a read.

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