



trend

New Women Writers

by Monique Perrot-Lanaud

SURPRISE and emotion at the start of the 1995 literary season: all the major prizes, or almost all, went to women. Judge for yourself: the Prix Goncourt and the French First Novel prize to Chasseur zero, by Pascale Roze. Prix Femina: *Week-end de chasse à la mère* by Geneviève Brisac. Prix Médicis: *Orlanda* by Jacqueline Harpman. The French Academy's <<Grand prix du roman>> [the major prize for fiction]: *les Honneurs perdus* by Calixthe Beyala (although controversial because of a suspicion of plagiarism). Prix Goncourt des lycéens [for teenage fiction]: *Instruments des ténèbres* by Nancy Huston. Two prizes for detective fiction for *Mort des bois* by Brigitte Aubert. And the list does not end there... We can add the phenomenal success of *Pig Tales* by Marie Darrieussecq (see box), as well as that of *L'Horreur économique* (Fayard, over 300,000 copies sold and translated into 14 languages) by Viviane Forrester, a novelist who has ventured into monograph territory.

Over and above the surprise at this sudden convergence of awards, the phenomenon is something of a paradox since it is not phenomenon. What has it revealed, if not that women write and write well, which their readers already knew, especially their women readers, since novels are mostly read by women?

In 1997, through a curious and violent swing of the pendulum, no prize, or almost none, was awarded to a female novelist. Yet more than ever are being published and establishing their presence and their talent for tackling any subject, conclusively in all genres.

The 1997 season has been labelled one of violence and the sordid, which does not exclude either irony or humour, as shown by the <<little brat>> of French literature, Amélie Notomb — who first came to public attention as a prodigy in 1992, with *Hygiène de l'assassin* (Albin Michel) —, who has already sold 65,000 copies of *Attentat* (Albin Michel), her sixth novel — the story of a hideous modern Quasimodo. In the <<gory>> category, but not without charm, Pascale Gautier has published *les Amants de Boringe*, Albin Michel, about an incestuous affair between brother and sister.

Bedtime romps, perversions, solitary

With ever more of them each year, 1997 saw French women novelists dipping their pens into black ink, very black indeed. And, at a time when literature reflects violence, sex and war, they are in the front line with the most daring sexual fantasies and the most horrific stories. In France, the nineteen nineties saw women take the final step to appearing on equal terms with men in every bookshop category.



Lydie Salvayre: a defiant style

She <<can hardly believe it>>. Her book, *la Compagnie des spectres*, has sold more than 800,000 copies although the big prizes have disdained it. An independent jury, including the writer Philippe Sollers, awarded her the Prix November, an anti-Goncourt prize. Lydie Salvayre's story of what goes on in stifling intimacy links the period of the Occupation and our own through the <<madness>> of a mother whose adored brother was killed in 1943. Rose and her daughter live cut off from the world in a tower block in Creteil (a Paris housing estate). A bailiff comes to take an inventory. Is it so mad for Rose to take him for a militiaman? For the novelist, who is a psychiatrist, <<She is mad through knowing too much and what she knows is unacceptable. And what she sees on television, racism, Rwanda, Algeria, convinces her she is right. These days there is a virtual reality of ordinary monstrosities>>. <<What women say is much more violent than what men say, more combative. The grandeur, the beauty of a text, is also this ability to be a rebel.>>

pleasures... Sex seems to have become a compulsory ingredient of fiction, with the crude vocabulary that accompanies it. Arlea has published *Lubricus* by Marie Barthelemy and *l'Evangile d'Eros* by Florence Dugas. But it is not enough simply to talk about sex for a book to be erotic or subversive. On the other hand, Alina Reyes, from *The Butcher* in 1987 to *Il n'y a plus que la Patagonie* this year, (Julliard), has established herself as one of the best of the genre. Dominique Cozette, Françoise Rey and Tatiana de Rosnay insist upon the pleasure of describing pleasure, following the example of a pioneer in the field, Régine Deforges, who has returned to old habits with *l'Orage* (published by Blanche), of which 100,000 copies have already been sold.

Queens of the Whodunnit

After an initially discreet, and not always well received, entrance into detective fiction and violent thrillers, women* are now completely at home in this field, to the point of breathing new life into a genre which had a tendency to get bogged down in male clichés. This breath of fresh, or rather ill wind, is one on which publishers are congratulating themselves, in particular the specialists, *Serie noire* (Gallimard), *Fleuve noir* and *Rivages/Noir*.

With <<*Chemins nocturnes*>>, the publisher Viviane Hamy maintains that she did not want to create a women's series <<But>>, she declares, <<I publish a lot of women because the best manuscripts I get are written by women>>. Among them, Fred Vargas, who sets her plots in a romantic Paris and sells 15,000 copies when the average print run for a thriller is 5,000. Or Maud Tabachnik, who, in an energetic and savage style, plunges her heroine, a lesbian journalist, into a world peopled with psychopaths and terrorists.

The same sure instinct at Seuil, where Brigitte Aubert with *Mort des bois*, her fourth novel, has been awarded the Grand prix de littérature policière [prize for the best detective

novel] and the Michel Lebrun prize, the crowning acknowledgement of her extraordinary invention of cruelties and horrors of all sorts. But the most sulphurous in the field is indisputably Virginie Despentes, now twenty-seven, who first surfaced in 1994 with her tales about young women: pregnancy, prostitution, lesbians, rape... <<The girls write about are deeply human. But not necessarily soft>>, declares the <<ex-droptout>>, who has since published *les Chiennes savantes*, a <<hardcore>> thriller.

Times of War

Young and not so young, writers continue to question a past that is not past, that of the last war: the occupation, the Vichy regime, collaboration, the deportations... Several women have a gift for writing about it. This is true of Catherine Lepront, who, after a dozen or so works, has published a splendid book, *Namokel* (Seuil). Five women friends very gradually discover, and the reader with them, the truth about the deportation through a Jewish family, the Namokels, while awakening to adolescence and politics in the France of the nineteen fifties and sixties. With an all pervasive sense of unconditional forgiveness and love, *Namokel* is a quest, both personal and universal, for the meaning of life. An accomplished first novel for Nicole Caligaris, whose *Scie patriotique* (Mercure de France) does not fit into any category. It is an absolute image of absolute war, of its monstrous horror made commonplace and of its absurdity.

Where is there to take refuge in a world so threatening? Anywhere but in the family, a theme eagerly tackled by women but which they describe as the place where life is most wounding. A great many first novels in particular settle accounts (Catherine Hervé-Bazin with her writer father — *la Fille indigne* —, Catherine Allégret with her mother Simone Signoret — *l'Entre-Deux mères*). A name to remember is that of Vir-

Darrieussecq : after Pig Tales



Described by *Nouvel Observateur* as a "charming little monster" (like Françoise Sagan, by François Mouriac when *Bonjour Tristesse* came out in 1954), at the age of twenty-seven Marie Darrieussecq has had a phenomenal success with *Pig Tales* in France (232,000 copies), Spain and Germany. The book has been translated into 33 languages, in every Scandinavian and European country as well as in Japan, and soon in Russia, Korea and China...

Pig Tales, a young woman changes into a sow while the world becomes a pigsty. "I wrote this book out of anger," she says. "I don't like the society in which I live. It all appalls me..." She is a female animal, thus alive, in a bestial world, obsessed by the healthy life but totally corrupt.

After submitting a brilliant doctoral thesis in French literature, in December 1997, Marie Darrieussecq continued to write. Published in February by POL, like *Pig Tales*, her second book, *Naissance des fantômes*, was announced as "very different from the first, much more inward looking." M.P.-L.

ginie Lou (who writes for young people) published by Actes Sud, her *Eloge de la lumière au temps des dinosaures* is a remarkable first novel, both powerful and subtle. Magnificently written, in a controlled and sensitive style, the book describes a rape in a present day housing estate, then how impossible it is for the narrator to communicate this trauma to her friends and family, who want to see her as a victim but not as a survivor, and especially not as filled with wonder at being alive; the miracle of speech (which is her salvation because it enables her to maintain human contact with her attacker), the powerlessness of speech — an impediment to even the best feelings.

Amongst established authors, Linda Lé, in *les Trois Parques* (pub. by Christian Bourgois), describes the impoverished life of two sisters and their cousin, who came from Vietnam many years earlier, and that of their father who stayed in the country. The viewpoint changes from one character to another like the figures on a round about revolving before our eyes, punctuated by her fireworks of sarcasm and cruelty of language, larded with unusual words.

Yet not all women's voices are gloomy. That of Geneviève Brisac, also a publisher, is light, almost ready, yet strong. 'How to be a parent? Her fifth novel published in 1996, *Week-end de chasse à la mère*, shows a mother's vulnerability and the strength of her bond with her son. Honoured by the Prix Femina, *Week-end* has been published in South America, Germany, the United States, Japan and Korea. "A prize helps a book to cross frontiers. In Chile, I was very pleased to discover that I had been able to move young women. In general, I have more female than male readers, because I write about women, about mothers."

But she refuses to talk about "women's" writing, a hackneyed theme in the nineteen seventies, which saw an explosion in the number of books written by women and often published in series reserved for them by publishers, as if this really was a separate type of fiction. "I object to it as long as there is no attention paid to men's writing. This year, when no prizes were awarded to women," she adds mischievously, "I was waiting for announcements about 'the return of men's writing'. We are still waiting...."

poems

* Bhajan

by Kazi Nazrul Islam

Give us strength, give us patience
O thou Lofty Lord
Give us rejuvenescence.

Give ambrosia to the dead
Give infinite courage to the timid
O thou Omnipotent.

Give us health, give us a long life
The luminous light, the soothing breeze
Give us heart unimpeded
Give us knowledge unblemished
O thou Omnipotent.

Give the shine of beauty in our body
Give our home peace that last
Give us love and piety, welfare and prosperity.

Make us firm and strong over fear and restrictions
To live with our head aloft
What we cherish we ought to triumph in gaining
Let's not accept any alms-giving
O thou Omnipotent.

* a bhajan is a song in praise of the Deity

Translated by Tito Choudhury

Mangoes and Green Coconuts

by Afroza

Your lips taste of the nectar dripping from mangos
caught in the sieve of my fingers
licked off like a child eating a creamy Kulfi ice-cream
who enjoys not only the crushed bits of pistachios
but the game of catching the dew before it drops.

Your kisses taste like green coconuts
your mouth made fragrant
by the sweetened water of its pulp
cascading gently onto our tongues
water falling into a reservoir of kisses.

Give me some more mangoes and
green coconuts.
Not to devour,
or to greedily consume.
To savor,
Nourish,
and to be sustained.



Antique Inheritances*

A small dark woman
with thick black-rimmed glasses
leans against the side of her bed made of wood,
the kind that you can see in a Museum on 19th Century
Furniture.

She looks to her side
where her small dark granddaughter
leans against the side of her leg,
the kind that has held up many generations,
but one you'll will never find in any Museum on the 20th century.

* Dedicated to my Dadi.

Green Chillies and Dhal

Give me green chillies and dhal.
Fill my hungry belly,
Inflame my spiceless soul.

Give my people green chillies and dhal.

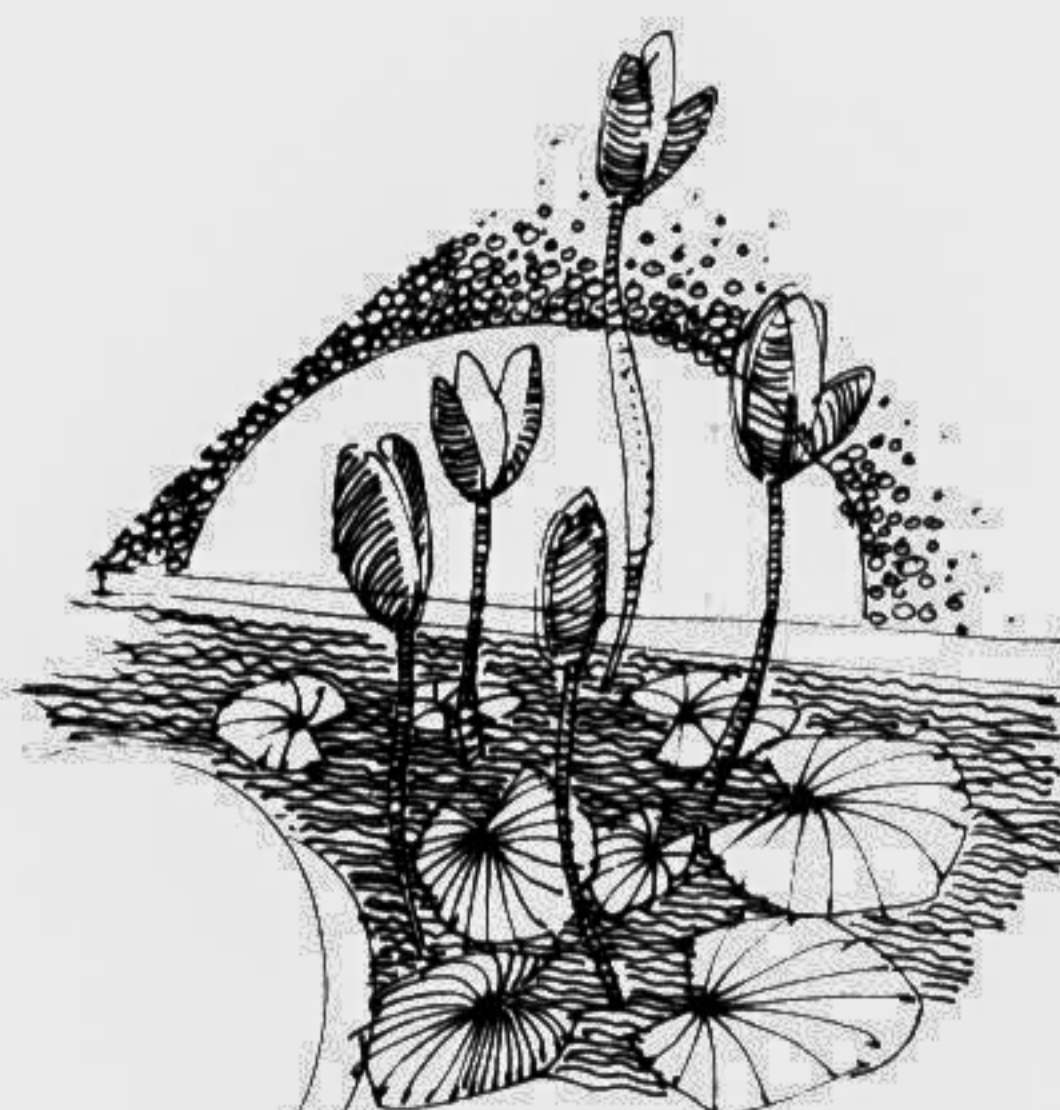
Dancing to the Revolution

Long after the music has died,
the red-velvet curtains has dropped,
and the audience no longer claps
for encores,
she dances.

Her leg,
bent at a slight angle,
fracturing the straight-lined
silhouette of the Right,
Subconsciously,
placed,
outstretched to her left side,
as her hips circle on it,
guiding her waist
held by resistant hands,
creating friction.

Her whole Body
supported only by her arched feet,
as her toes dig dip into the Earth,
of Balance.

She hums the tune,
to that Aretha Franklin song she likes.



"People get ready,
there's a train a coming,
don't need no ticket just get on board."
Probably messed up the Words,
no Matter,
All she need is Soul anyway.

Besides, she never danced to the Words.
Most times,
she just plain ignored them,
cuz they always tried to throw her
off
beat.

Made them laugh,
watching a jungle girl,
moved by music they tried not the understand.
Where did you learn to belly dance,
or whine like so,
boogie down
masala girl.

Made no sense,
Why ya dance to that Porta-reecan music,
can't understand that patois they them sing in reggae music,
why ya listen to qawaali,
if you can't speak no muslim.

She never danced For the Words.
She soul trained to the steady-drum beats.
The percussion pulsed from the heart of the congo land,
skinny-dipping in the Nile,
to find Self in the Ganges,
eating mangoes.
The tracks,
climbed the troughs of the andes,
only to,
find It,
washed upon the shores of the americas,
deserted
after a storm.

She never danced by the Words.
She salsa and merengued
circling around the edges,
whirling like a dervish
Into the Center,
its core,
its essence,
u-niting,
with
un---consciousness.

Awakened by
someone playing Her on the juke-box,
humming Her like a tune,
circling Her on their hips.
Merged.

No longer dancing to the Words,
but now Dancing the Revolution.