

**Le nom de la mère:  
Mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature  
québécoise au féminin**

Lori Saint-Martin  
Montréal: Éditions Nota Bene, 1999

**Reviewed by Christl Verduyn**

Mothers' names have been lost to daughters. They have been lost to sons as well, but more particularly to daughters, one of three key ingredients in this study by Montreal writer and professor Lori Saint-Martin. Saint-Martin explores relations between mothers and daughters as presented in Quebec women's writing. Her explorations confirm the centrality and vitality of the mother-daughter relationship in this body of literature. To better understand it, and ourselves, Saint-Martin's book suggests, we need to know more about "le nom de la mère" and the maternal legacy. Saint-Martin does an excellent job in providing this knowledge.

The subject of motherhood is vast and Saint-Martin skilfully guides readers through the complexities of recent feminist and psychoanalytic theoretical contributions. For Freud and his followers, the maternal was located outside culture and in silence. This was viewed as a normal destiny for women and how society operated best. Feminists relocated mothers and daughters to the centre of the social and psychological story, as many women writers have done as well.

The first two chapters of Saint-Martin's book detail contemporary theoretical perspectives on motherhood and mother-daughter relations. The range of work reviewed is impressive. Saint-Martin considers the contributions of Americans such as Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone, Tillie Olsen, Karen Horney, and Marianne Hirsch, with the same insight that she brings to the writings of Europeans such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Françoise Couchard, among others. In chapter three, Saint-Martin tackles the tricky and troubling topic of matricide and infanticide, drawing on both psychoanalytic and literary sources, including Suzanne Jacob's powerful novel *L'Obéissance*. Chapter four makes the link between the maternal and the literary through a close reading of Gabrielle Roy's oeuvre. The mother-daughter relationship is much more than just a theme in literature, Saint-Martin asserts. It is a determining factor in narrative structure and style. It is a key ingredient in identity formation and in human ethical behaviour. The mother-daughter relationship introduces values such as respect for difference and co-existence, continuity and cooperation, openness and understanding.

These may be found in the writing of Quebec authors Nicole Houde (chapter five), Anne Hébert (chapter six), France Théoret (chapter seven), Madeleine Gagnon, Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault (chapter eight), Jovette Bernier, Monique LaRue, Julie Stanton, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, (chapter nine), Elise Turcotte (chapter 10) and finally, (in)concluding, Ying Chen. Together, these writers represent a substantial selection of Quebec literature, and Saint-Martin's study of their work provides readers with important insights into this literary corpus.

*Le Nom de la Mère* is a valuable study. Saint-Martin writes clearly about complex issues and draws due attention to significant writing by women. Most of all, she creates critical awareness of a topic too often reduced to simplistic readings or no reading at all. The mother-daughter relationship is at the heart of women's identity formation and literary expression.

## **In Silence the Strands Unravel**

Sybil Seaforth

Hamilton: Capricornus Enterprises, 1999

### **Reviewed by Dannabang Kuwabong**

Sybil Seaforth once wrote that "a writer of fiction does not ... write to convert, to disturb, to instruct, to reassure, or to challenge readers" (134), but to have her muted experiences heard. She states that her priorities as a writer are to develop a "lucid, simple, euphonic, vivid, sensitive, and harmonious" style in order to achieve a balance between emotion and logic (138) and to validate Caribbean women's experiences that have been "expressly denied" (139) in Caribbean literature. In her recent and fourth novel, *In Silence the Strands Unravel*, published by an up-and-coming Capricornus Enterprises, Seaforth seeks to achieve these priorities. The novel ironically also disturbs, instructs, and challenges the reader (especially the male reader) in the opening scenes with vivid representations of betrayals in husband /wife relationships by husbands among middle-class, middle-aged couples.

The main thrust of the novel centres around the latent consequences of middle-class, well-educated, Caribbean women's choices of marriage over careers. The novel explores the experiences of four friends, Jessica, Norma, Ruth, and Dora, and hence dramatises what Leota S. Lawrence in "Women in Caribbean Literature: The African Presence" theorized as the deliberate stifling of women's "pretensions to a career, lest in doing so she outshines her