

In the Hands of the Living God. Lillian Bouzane.

William Barker

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In the Hands of the Living God. Lillian Bouzane. Winnipeg, MB, Turnstone Press, xii, 308 p. maps, glossary, 1999, softcover with French flaps, \$16.95, ISBN 0-88801-223-0.

WILLIAM BARKER

WE ARE PLEASED to present to you a 500-year-old document recently discovered by Dr. William Barker, Department of Ancient Computational Languages. While working in the archive of the Holy City of San Giovanni, Dr. Barker discovered an extremely ancient electronic disk labelled "Correspondence Regarding Unpublished Reviews," containing the following letters from one Guglielmo (called "Billye") to a man named Tomasso, known to be Tomasso or Thomas Nemec, the book review editor of the *Studii della Terra Nova* (at that time under the English name *Newfoundland Studies*). There are also, interspersed, sections from something called "diarii" which appears to be the plural form of our "diario" or diary. The letters, translated into our present-day electronic form from twentieth-century demotic, are here presented for the first time. We are indeed grateful to Dr. Barker for rescuing these letters from such an obscure form of the language known as DOS. The letters give us an accurate and valuable glimpse into the sociology of book reviewing in the long-ago San Giovanni. What is also extraordinary is the contact the reviewer seems to have had with world-historical figures, all of whom are known to have visited St. John's in the late twentieth century (though Dr. Barker reports that some of the historical references seem strangely out of sequence). The letters present a fascinating portrait of life at that time. The peculiar dating at the end of the letters seems to correspond to the saints' days used in earlier times, but are adjusted to late twentieth-century patterns — further confirmation that, as many

historians have long maintained, the religion of twentieth-century North America was shopping.

LETTER 1

Dear Tomasso

Thank you for sending me the book to review. It is a challenging work. I had not heard of the author before. The back of the book says that the author is an accomplished poet. But how can this be? I am a professor of English and I have never heard of her before.

Today I drove my children to the mall. In a shoe store I ran across John Christian, the doge of Canada, who is visiting our tiny shire. He made a number of witty comments, mostly about the trade in pepper, a subject with which he is obsessed. The strange way he speaks English has all of our country amused.

When will I ever find time to read this book? My days are filled with many tasks of teaching, my nights with writing of reports on pedagogical subjects.

We are still recovering from the recent visit of the Pope, a charming man with a delightful sense of humour.

Billye

Third day of Discount Week at Sears

DIARII

Have taken vow to read more poetry by local poets.

Have also spoken with friends. Apparently this writer Lillian Bouzane is indeed well known and is very active in the Local Writing Community. Despite her unusual last name, she is considered to be a Newfoundlander. She is the aunt of a friend of one of my students. Important not to insult her in any way.

May the Lord lend me the strength to complete the task of this review. I place myself in the hands of the living God.

Fourth Day of Discount Week at Sears

LETTER 2

Dear Tomasso

I am confused when I read this book. As you know, I am a scholar in the literature of the Renaissance. Yet there are many odd things that do not seem to fit the historical record as I understand it.

What kind of Latin is Savonarola speaking when he is claimed to have said “Vox dicentis clama” (or is that “decentis”? — we get two different versions on the same page [106])?

Did any Italian really date a letter by “the feast of Saint Caedmon, poet” (119)?

Would Venetian women really discuss property taxes while walking along a street (63)?

Would children attend a school that taught Greek to the level of a “faultless” performance of *Oedipus* (122)? True that there were pockets of knowledge of classical Greek, but was humanist education anywhere that organized?

What kind of English household would have presented a morality play at that time (239)?

And wouldn’t letter writers be using paper, not parchment, for personal correspondence (239)?

Many of these deviations — I give only a few of the scores that arose during my reading — are *possible*, so I did not reject any of the many facts out of hand, but they all “push” the historical record. This surely is a common problem within historical fiction.

Tomasso, how can I review this book? Clearly the history portrayed by Bouzane is extremely weird. I wish I had not done a PhD in this stuff. Perhaps I could be more generous.

Characters from actual history are mixed higgledy-piggledy with invented characters. Who can believe such nonsense?

I must pause to tell you of an amusing thing that happened the other day. I was invited to go to hunting with the President of the United States, Mr. George Bush. Mr. Bush fell into a bog hole. His bodyguards were extremely solicitous. Imagine, a former leader of the free world (as he liked to term himself), drowned in a bog. The mind boggles!

I hope you will excuse this sad pun, but I am at my wit’s end with how to go about reviewing this book.

Billye

Sale day at Zeller’s

LETTER 3

Dear Tomasso

I have a beginning to my review. I believe it is sufficiently neutral and inoffensive.

In the Hands of the Living God is a historical novel set at the end of the fifteenth century. It is made up of a series of letters back and forth between one Mathye Caboto and her husband Giovanni, along with many other characters, with inserted entries throughout from the diary of Mathye. It is a portrait of an independent-minded woman of the Renaissance and, indirectly, an account of Cabot’s voyage to North America and the New Found Land.

I believe this will not insult anyone.

As I read, I am confused that everyone in Bouzane’s late fifteenth-century Italy writes in such short sentences. Surely they studied epistolary rhetoric and would be capable of the occasional Ciceronian flourish, and did not all write as though they were journalists writing for the *Evening Telegram*.

But I suspect I am not permitted to say this in my review. Please advise.

Billye

Second day into the 20% sale at Eddie Bauer's

DIARII

Today heard another strange tale regarding the family of Bouzane. I can use none of this material in the review, yet in a small town such as St. John's, local gossip is the spice of everyone's life.

What will Bouzane hear about me after she reads my review? I have many enemies.

Tire Sale at Goodyear

LETTER 4

Dear Tomasso

I am struggling with the review.

I cannot figure out why the character is named "Mathye" in the novel when all the other characters are given their Italian names. I looked up material about Giovanni Caboto (e.g., R. A. Skelton's fine article, "Cabot, John", in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, volume 1). His wife was indeed named Mattea. There seems to be a point to this "Mathye," but what it is I do not know. It's true that one of Caboto's boats was called the "Mathye" or "Matthew" but that should not affect the way she signs her name, should it? But I suppose I am missing something obvious.

Despite my difficulties with the details, I am reading ahead with some interest. I confess, the letters and diaries have a hypnotic quality. This book is not history and I would even say it isn't much of a novel — there's no plot! — yet one reads ahead, sensing that something is about to happen. So there is something good about this book. It is an increasingly rich portrait of an unfolding sensibility.

The main character is a strange construction, perhaps an impossibility. Yet there is shape to her way of writing and presenting the world.

She is said to be wealthy (why not, it's more fun to read about rich people than poor!), talented (she knows Latin and Greek, she is a composer), has easy access to famous people (kings and artists), and she is a thoughtful mother to her children.

Though the novel presents her as a fifteenth-century woman, I suspect she is really a highly liberated twentieth-century professional woman in disguise. She is lacking only the equivalent of a cell phone (though maybe pen and "parchment" are enough!).

Nonetheless, despite my satirical comments, I find that the character is sympathetic and her plights entertaining. I am drawn on by the rhythms of her prose.

I cannot tell you how delightful the famous singer Van Morrison is. Though he is known around the world, he is also an ordinary person. We went to see him in our local stadium and afterwards we were invited out to dinner with him. He

amused us all with his witty conversation. In a Celtic gesture of courtesy, he invited my wife back to his hotel room. Unfortunately she had to decline because of problems with the babysitter.

Billye

Discount Day at Swiss Chalet

DIARII

I am close to finishing the book.

Strangely, this has not been hard to read, once I accepted the unreality of the history and allowed myself to enjoy the rhythms of the prose. I have been drawn on by the portrait of the woman, a kind of amalgam figure, a figure that can exist only in fiction.

Yet there are problems. How to write truthfully about the book when I am unsure what that "truth" might be?

I hear that my colleague Stella Algoo-Baksh has written a flattering review in *Newfoundland Quarterly*.

Increasingly I feel alone.

Soon I must continue with the writing.

But for now, I shall read through to the end.

Thanks be to the Lord for His assistance in this act of reading!

Greco's Pizza Bonanza Discount

LETTER 5

Dear Tomasso

I am delighted to announce that I have finished the book!

But what a strange conclusion. The whole book has been about Mathye — her vision and her sensibility. Yet at the end this main character suddenly is shelved, in grief for the loss of her husband, while we read about a strange conspiracy theory in which Amerigo Vespucci, the Portuguese, and the Venetians were responsible for the death of Giovanni Caboto.

Oddly, bad history overtakes what had turned for many pages into an engaging portrait.

For two hours I became obsessed with the problem of history in fiction. I went to reread the relevant parts of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he differentiates history from poetry. I then read two essays by Paul Ricoeur in his *Time and Narrative*. I went to Paul Veyne, Michel de Certeau, Gadamer, and turned their pages rapidly.

There was too little time, and besides this was more research than I have undertaken in three months. I had a migraine from the effort, and declined to go to the library to look at J. A. Williamson's 1962 Hakluyt Society collection entitled *The Cabot Voyages and Bristol Discovery under Henry VII*.

Yet perhaps I had enough.

As I read and thought, it dawned on me.

History had destroyed this historical novel!

Let me explain....

So long as this novel is grounded in the particularity of a self, and the narrative is built around that character and her events, the novel works. It is, to speak simply, a story. But when this novel attempts to become history, not story, it fails. That's because while the story is well imagined, the history is poorly imagined. The end of the novel — the paranoid conspiracy theory of the death of Giovanni Caboto — is clearly a rewriting of a historical narrative, a playful "imaginative" tampering with the historical record. But it is a dangerous move — because it makes the reader (this reader) begin to think — and imagine — historically.

Historical imagination is very different from literary imagination. Historical imagination is a thinking through of a logic of events, a reconstruction of what was, not what might be. Of course, story and history may be brought together — in Stendhal, Proust, Tolstoy, or, on a slightly less elevated plane, Patrick O'Brien. These writers engage us in the story, and they encourage us to think historically. The story and the history are brought together in creative tension, not set in opposition.

Paradoxically, this revision of history is required by the plot of the novel, because right from the start, it's implied that the Venetians have it in for Giovanni. Yet when the mimetic truth of the history is destroyed by this playful rewriting, the mimetic force of the story goes with it.

Please, Tomasso, you will help me to make my points clearer in my review, if I can ever write one. But any reader of the book will understand my comments.

I read the review by my old friend Stuart Pierson of Wayne Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in *Newfoundland Studies* (14, 2 [1998] 282-300). Stuart did the unthinkable. He attacked Johnston, a Local Writer! This showed great bravery! I am not so strong.

Though Stuart's article is hugely entertaining and thought-provoking, its argument is not entirely satisfactory because it overemphasizes the history of the novel and neglects the story. The two must be seen in their relationship and tension. Stuart was obsessed with details. Historical imagination may need attention to details, but as Stuart well knew, it is something more. It is a thinking through of historical questions. One may write great history and yet be ignorant of details or even commit inaccuracies. It may be that Johnston lacks historical imagination. He can be a great story teller, but to explain history through story is a great challenge.

Or so it seems to me.

Bouzane's novel was closer to history when it was not presenting itself self-consciously as history.

Forgive my paradoxical remarks. How will I be able to state such things inoffensively? You are the only one to whom I may speak my doubts.

I cannot leave off, Tomasso, without telling you about a concert we attended last weekend. This was Rod Stewart, like Van, another famous artist of the song.

His concert was called "Rod on the Rock." This was very exciting to me personally, as it gave me an opportunity to introduce him to my old friend Ben Heppner, also in town for a quick visit. They hit it off well and planned to meet in New York in a couple of months, perhaps to sing in a concert together! How gratifying it is to know that St. John's is the scene of such historic encounters!

Billye

Free Swim Day at the Aquarena

LETTER 6

Dear Tomasso

Word has been circulating that I may write a negative review of Bouzane's book. To whom have you been speaking? Has someone been reading my letters to you?

I sense hostility in Auntie Crae's on Saturday morning. I sit there with my family, sipping coffee and eating the delightful cherry danish, and old friends nod to me but hurry past. This is most notable with various Local Writers.

I engage a passerby with whom I often play tennis, and ask him what is happening.

All he says, mysteriously, is that "certain people are upset." I press him. Who are these "certain people?" He will not answer and smiles cryptically as is his wont.

I explain that my review is not negative, just mixed. "Indeed, there are things in the novel that are delightful."

"But there were things you did not enjoy?"

"Yes...So what should I do?" I ask him.

"Do not publish."

I fear for my life and that of my family. As you know I am not From Here, and have few allies. I sense that powerful forces are gathering and that I should withdraw.

I regret, therefore, to tell you that I cannot complete the review as you requested.

Billye

Surprise Sale at Fred's Records