

## *Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada.* Jeanette Lynes, editor.

Renee Hulan

Volume 17, numéro 1, spring 2001

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17\\_1rv02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17_1rv02)

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Hulan, R. (2001). Compte rendu de [*Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada.* Jeanette Lynes, editor.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 17(1), 94–97.

*Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada.* Edited by Jeanette Lynes. Foreword by Gwendolyn Davies. Lockeport, Nova Scotia: Roseway, 1999. 232 pp., softcover, illus., ISBN 1-896496-09-1.

## RENÉE HULAN

"THERE ARE WORDS out there / that will light up the tomb" from Carol Langille's "What Poems Cost" is the epigraph to Jeanette Lynes' introduction and the inspiration for the anthology's title. The poem, which begins with the line "I go where poems are," explores the poet's daily encounter with language, experience, and imagination and moves towards a moment when "hope leaps / off the printed page" (15-16). The poem sets a tone for a collection among whose many motifs is women living the writing life. In many of the interviews that accompany the poems, the women discuss "voice," both finding it and understanding its unique qualities. By deciding to publish poems and interviews together, Lynes explores voice by creating a conversation between the poetic speakers, the poetry, and the poets that presents women actively engaged with individual and collective expression.

In the "Foreword," Gwendolyn Davies anticipates the introduction by noting "an astonishing thread of commonality in the collection" and connects that thread to a tradition of women's writing that "finds fruition in the poems and interviews of the twenty-three Atlantic women poets published in this collection" (7). While it is impossible to do justice to such a substantial and varied anthology in the space of a short review, the thread that Davies describes draws together some common elements for consideration. One of these is the formation of different kinds of communities. For instance, there are groups of poets encouraging each other's work. Sue Goyette names members of the Halifax Poetry Group, and other poets

mention the Wolf Tree Writer's Group. Mary Dalton speaks of Agnes Walsh and Carmelita McGrath; Sheree Fitch acknowledges McGrath, Goyette, MacLeod, and Lane. Others mention the literary milieu of Fredericton and a number of male poets, including among others Brian Bartlett, Fred Cogswell, and Richard Lemm. Within this community, there is an awareness of people drawn together by a strong sense of region or place. Lynes asks most of the poets how important it is to them, and although the answers vary, all recognize its impact to some degree. While for some, place is understood through family and memory, the collection smashes the stereotype of Atlantic Canadian rootedness and resistance to change in the significant number of the poets who have "come from away": Anne Simpson, Heather Pycz, Sue Goyette, Lesley-Anne Bourne, Liliane Welch, M. Travis Lane, Carole Langille.

It is the "sense of the community of *all* poets" experienced through books that M. Travis Lane identifies when she lists the poets who have been important to her. As poets speak to each other through their work, each woman discusses writers as diverse as Baudelaire, Pound, Seamus Heaney, John Ashberry, Margaret Atwood and many others, testifying to the depth and range of influences. In part, the perception of common experience emerges from the interviews in which Lynes approaches a set of themes relating to the poet's work besides influence, place, and experience. By asking all the poets questions relating to the same subjects, Lynes creates a comparative structure that highlights similarities and differences between the poets and ultimately brings cohesion to the collection. Yet, informed by Lynes' knowledge of each poet's work, each interview is devised to suit the subject and to open the poet's work to the reader.

If the term "voice" indicates a collective project of women speaking for themselves, then the repeated use of the word "craft" in the interviews signals a shared sense of the poem as a made thing. The poets craft their verses using a range of techniques: the bold use of space in Sue MacLeod's "Brick Lane" and Margaret MacLeod's "Ghost Child," the long lines in Agnes Walsh's "Homecoming to the End" and Anne Simpson's "Now What?"; the figurative language in Deirdre Dwyer's "The Last Swim":

The water holds you temporarily  
like a teacup we hold to the light,  
imagining where it will break  
when it's dropped. (77)

Each poet's distinctive style is represented by one or two selections, a tantalizing taste of the words out there. While differing in form and technique, they have themes in common. For example, the presence of monsters and the threat of violence shape certain poems, including Margaret MacLeod's "No Wolves, I tell you" and "Ghost Child," Lynn Davies's "Tonight the Violent Wind," and Carmelita

McGrath's "Booman." The latter makes the imaginary "booman" a metaphor for a girl's growth from innocence, when the "booman" is "a spectre from the years the grass grew high / as houses," to experience, when he "found me late / at night on a city street / where trees were thick and crowds thin":

but I got away with loud curses,  
the pump of my grand girl's legs. I still expect him  
some nights on some streets  
where the dark lies heavy and sweet and deep  
as the grass where I first found him.  
The best protection is to never discount him. (39)

What I admire in this poem is the rhythm of "some nights on some streets" or "where the dark lies heavy and sweet and deep;" the subtlety of street and deep and found and discount. Just as I admire J. Maureen Hull's "Heading North" for its candid perspective on the outsider's encounter with the north. As the speaker sees "us," technicians, scientists, "ignorant tourists and feckless poets" reflected in the landscape: "The mirror ripples, shatters, / lets us go reluctantly / as if it knows we won't be back." (71)

Most important of all the communities are those made up of women. "Well," remarks Maxine Tynes, "we're a community. That's a given. As we move through our lives, we connect with women in our community. Then there are those other women who enter your life obliquely, who instruct you and who have no clue that for you, they are the light on the horizon, edifying your life. There are those women who give voice to what you have not yet learned; there might be women you would like to emulate or are emulating subconsciously" (122). As this brief passage indicates, the words spoken in the interviews sometimes rival the poetry in their power and clarity. Tynes's interview is particularly beautiful, approaching oratory at times, and sends me back to the cadences of her poetry, the musical sounds of "Let There Be Sex":

when the hand that rocked  
the status quo  
straightened a tie  
felt a thigh  
smoothed a skirt...

The collection offers the reader an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the connections and relationships Tynes describes as she and Rita Joe do when they acknowledge mutual admiration and inspiration. Their poetic voices share the strength and resistance expressed in Rita Joe's "Kuntewe'wey Wikwom (Stone Wigwam)":

I will never be gone  
The shade behind the toil  
Always like the wikwom ... (32)

Asked "What women poets ... do you admire most?" Rita Joe replies first that "Maxine Tynes moves my heart" (133). In one of her poems, Tynes has the speaker make a bold reply to intolerance and prejudice, saying "Don't Give Me Looks":

that flap on the line like clothes in the wind  
that ring and ring like a telephone in an empty room  
that flicker white and snowy, like the telly at midnight  
that are snowblind in August  
that are full of all the rest of the world  
and not me. (31)

One can appreciate the skill and talent in poetry, but one is *moved* by the emotions poems like these convey.

For those who, like me, find themselves on the hunt for collections of contemporary poetry, new anthologies are always anxiously anticipated. As demonstrated by at least one recent anthology with its scant and token attention to poets from Atlantic Canada, anthologies are often constructed along national historical rather than thematic lines, so a good deal of space is usually devoted to the well-known Canlit crowd rather than to new and emerging, in my view, the *truly* contemporary poets. This is why anthologies like *Words Out There* are needed. Jeanette Lynes is to be commended for the remarkable energy and sheer amount of work it must have taken to produce as well as her intelligent and sensitive treatment of the material. With its balance of critical discussion and poetic expression, *Words Out There: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada*, like the poets collected in it, deserves further attention.