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Helen Fogwill Porter. *Finishing School.*

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Lester and John Slade, who transported Irish passengers directly to and from the Bay throughout the 1770s and 1780s. Irish hunters and furriers were involved in the deaths of Beothuk, for example. Irish artisans and servants provided the labour that fueled the fishery, and many Irish became established as yeoman-planters, especially at Fogo and Tilting Harbour, though throughout the wider Bay as well. It seems strange that in a book which otherwise pays careful attention to the human diversity of the region, with its French, English and Beothuk people, the Irish are left out.

There are a couple of factual clangers in the book. John Slade did not have 150 brigs plying the Atlantic trade (29) ... this would have put his Poole-Fogo fleet on a par with the entire British navy. Similarly, Peyton's statement that in 1819, the "Bay of Notre Dame had not yet been surveyed" is incorrect (63). A high-quality survey of the region was conducted by Michael Lane in the late 1760s. These small faults do not condemn what is otherwise a fascinating and important book. Peyton's direct connection (through marriage) to the principle characters of the saga make it more authoritative and, somehow, special. It is a model of regional and family history and I hope that it serves as an inspiration for other writers.

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Helen Fogwill Porter. *Finishing School*, Lawrencetown Beach: Pottersfield Press, 2007, ISBN 978-1-895900-88-0

ONE OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCES between the journal and the story is that stories tend to tie things up, to dispose of matters. In the journal, the preoccupations are recurrent, the sense of finality or closure is impossible to attain, and the idea of returning life to an equilibrium is not done within the bonds of a plot, however loose, but within the limits of the waking time available each day. Life is an intermittent phenomenon that appears always in disarray; we cannot be past the middle of things, as Frank Kermode said (*The Sense of an Ending*, 1966). This is the kind of truth claimed by the journal, the genre Helen Fogwill Porter has chosen for *Finishing School*, a truth she has transferred to the format of another genre, the novel.

In *Finishing School* we listen to the commentaries of Eileen Novak, a spirited woman with a marriage behind, caught in the everyday reality of a low-paying job and a net of close relatives who need her urgent support. The authenticity of her speech, voice, and moods move us forward in a suspenseful manner produced by ordeals such as the violence of her son-in-law against one of her daughters, the aging of relatives that become increasingly dependent on her, or the attempt to come to terms with her affair with a young man. The reader's intimate engagement with her portrait of how she behaves as a reaction to other people's behaviour is also possible because she bears witness to specific social mores (working-class downtown

St. John's during the 1980s) and to specific generational changes, and because she responds to them in her mind most pragmatically. We find in this last position a degree of reality that is absent in many novels about women, in spite of the giant space allotted to female subjects in contemporary fiction. Porter shows us the reality of worrying when one is in charge of old and young age, and when one also seeks the well-being of those in-between, both relatives and friends.

The novel is a transcription of the everyday act of worrying, female worrying, worrying about understanding daughters and about neglected old people and their demands, and about cancer and about irritating friends, and about looks and about sex before and after turning 50. This worrying is persistent, personal, imminent, even embarrassing. It is not moulded into aesthetic patterns or fused into metaphor or held in grids of symbolism and analogy. Although feminist thinking has opened up the repertoire of respectable literary subject-matter to previously ignored female experiential patterns — what is felt to be narratable is now almost infinite — there is still too much academic affection mainly for works that offer playful narrative strategies and point at a metaphysics of a complex import (by that I mean works that reverberate with echoes of canonical philosophical and literary texts). There is a certain mystique about what is felt to be original (the formal strategies and ideological revisions of previous well-known texts that we have been trained to analyze) and many of us — teachers and critics whose environment has been postmodernism — are at a loss to assess literature that is not openly aware of literary criticism.

Eileen is not trying to write well, she is trying to make both ends meet, solve her daughter's problems, and go out with an attractive male. She does not indulge in attempts at transcendence, but when she starts remembering, she offers us a picture of a varied group of people, their habits and sayings, their ways to cope with disaster. Besides, Eileen is clearly not speaking to herself but conversing with "others," us, to whom she explains pieces of her past and family life. Although she supposedly *writes* all this, what she really does is *speak*, for her contribution is a performance, a prolonged utterance that has been organized in chapters and given novelistic value, and therefore elevated to the category of public, shared discourse. This transaction in which written literature is imaginatively given the complimentary companionship of the spoken word and also the impulse of performance makes us interpret knowledge as emitted by direct communication, as distinguished from the mere possession of knowledge produced by an exercise on paper. Additionally, by focusing on material that is the result of an attempt at learning writing skills, the author gives status to an unrefined voice, validates the tentative nature of any message in words, and explicitly obviates the definition of literature as a finished product. Eileen herself considers her writing to be a draft, and she is often ashamed to have to bring to light certain aspects of her experience.

Reviews of Porter's work have mainly commented on her ability to reflect regional dialect and to show certain class differences that are often unaccounted for.

These are an undeniable virtues of this novel, which effectively dramatizes economic and class inequities, class being a factor often overlooked in both Canadian literature and criticism. Quoting Danielle Fuller's insightful remark: class "is not only a product of material circumstances and the lived experience of economic structures, but an embodied and psychic inheritance" (*Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004: 246). That is why I have preferred to focus on other qualities of the novel that have made me take out my own ideas about literature and look at them.

The kind of fiction that has held most critical attention for the last decades is the fiction that has strayed from the reassuring implications of Story to create narrative forms that are subversive of Story itself. I take Story to be an explanatory structure which conveys meaning through connection, resolution, ethical hold, and faith in meaning. With this training, we may find novels such as *Finishing School* too reliable, since the narrative itself does not resist our grasp. In contrast, this novel offers us quotidian detail, apparently indifferent to the literary compromise. The character's awareness of herself is not articulated with reference to her existential condition, but only to the details, however petty, of her tribulations. Compared to some paradigmatic Canadian women's journals such as Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House,* or Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries* (1993), where the protagonists are more referred to than present and where the women's ordeals have a clear allegorical dimension, Eileen might strike us as too real. It has to be mentioned, of course, that the canonized heroine in Canadian literature, after so many decades of feminist struggle, is still white, middle-class, and educated, as Aritha van Herk has argued (see "Hanging Out the Laundry: Heroines in the Midst of Dirt and Cleanliness," in Eva Darias Beautell and Maria Jesus Hernáez Lerena (eds.), *Canon Disorders: Gendered Perspectives on Literature and Film in Canada and the United States*, La Laguna: Service Publications, University de La Laguna, 2007). Eileen is not metaphorically produced and she is not encumbered, and the plain, humorous prose that her author uses to create her can be defined, as Annie Dillard has put it, not "a pyrotechnic display but a lamp" (*Living by Fiction*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1988: 122).

The title of Porter's novel puns on two meanings, one is a noun, the institution that is supposed to lead students into a more cultured world, the other is a an action taking place now and expressed in the gerund, which seems to defer schooling forever. After reading the novel we realize that the title, in conjunction with the kind of experience displayed in it, shows that mid-life is a construct and that it makes fun of stereotyped developmental journeys. No matter how eager we are to close down on previous stages, life always assaults us with its demands (which tend to be always the same). We cannot find a point from where to look back on the past and be unmolested by time itself moving and blurring our resolutions. Thus, through Eileen, who appeared in Porter's previous novel *January, February, June or July* (St. John's:

Breakwater, 1988), we notice that the diary points at the warring beliefs mentioned at the beginning of this review. Society insists that our life should be a path signalled with clearly-defined goals. However, this notion goes against the intimate knowledge that each day is an autonomous space which baffles what we are supposed to be already.

In the Spanish literary tradition, the journal genre has been interpreted very differently than in Newfoundland or in Canada. Influential literary theorists in Spain have looked at it as a form destined for that which is insignificant and inessential in life. Defined as a ghostly form of *écriture* and a suitable medium for female submissive domesticity — also for situations of personal disconnection between private and public life — it is considered the ideal outlet for dissociated, unadjusted personalities. This context of understanding the journal has been different in Canada, where the woman's journal of the reluctant but resourceful immigrant has been foundational, one of the first canonized literary forms. Revised and reconstituted under many guises, it is one of the pillars of an institutionalized Canadian culture since Margaret Atwood imagined Susanna Moody. The journal acquires other purposes in Newfoundland when it helps to weave memories and collective situations that define and make cohesive a historically marginal community. Thus understood, the journal becomes a form that addresses a smaller audience, and that recognizes places, turns of language, social circumstances, objects, and situations. It is no longer an allegedly secret or private text but a shared possession; it establishes a common ground for recognition. It is a form of writing also in practice in other off-centre communities in Canada and is increasingly being published and gaining textual respectability, therefore allowing readers with other backgrounds to incorporate into our imagination peoples and places that have not been given much currency so far.

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Sarah Tilley, *Skin Room*, Toronto: Pedlar Press, 2008, ISBN 9781897141205.

SARAH TILLEY'S FIRST NOVEL is a double-vision narrative of interior and exterior landscapes in the face of a disrupted childhood. The story slips between Teresa Norman at age 12 and in her early twenties, elucidating the profound impact of cultural and physical landscapes on a youthful mind. As much as she tries to keep the stories of the past and the present compartmentalized, Teresa's interior life demonstrates the impossible task of rendering the two strands separate. Inevitably — healthily — the two stories do not run parallel to each other, but intersect. The novel's development is organized around this inescapable march towards colliding selves, spaces and stories.

Teresa's childhood is inflected by Tilley populating her protagonists' small world with beings, myths and literary figures. When her parents' marriage dis-