

Waiting for Time. Bernice Morgan.

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VALERIE LEGGE

"IN THE MARGINALIA ... we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly — boldly — originally — with *abandonnement* — without conceit." (Edgar Allan Poe, *Marginalia* 1844)

ON 27 NOVEMBER 1976 in a piece for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, Alistair MacLeod wrote, "From time to time there are writers who come riding out of the hinterlands of this country called Canada. And they are writing about a life that they really know down to its smallest detail. And it is a life that is fierce and hard and beautiful and close to the bone." Such hinterland writers — and Bernice Morgan is one of them — "go about their task with the single-mindedness of the Ancient Mariner." You are held fast, gripped by the power of a good story, and changed "in such a way that your life will never again be the same."

In *Waiting for Time* (1994), the sequel to the Canadian best seller *Random Passage* (1992), Bernice Morgan picks up the narrative threads of her earlier novel with its "black stories" about a people who refuse to vanish, a people who refuse to be vanquished by time, circumstance, or history. Many male theorists would have us believe that historically women have always been the secondary bearers of culture; women remember the important stories about their culture and pass them on to their children, but men are most often credited with their authorship. Like the strong, determined women in her stories who "dedicate [their lives] to disruption," Morgan works with and against this myth of woman as marginal or secondary, and of women's stories as marginalia. As critic Linda Hutcheon assures us in *The*

Canadian Postmodern, the margin or the periphery may serve not only as a site of transgression and resistance, but also as “the place of possibility.” And in Morgan’s stories, perhaps because they are situated in a Newfoundland community, what one character describes as “a place of mythic horror” clinging to the “outermost edge of the continent,” we discover that anything, indeed everything is possible.

Random Passage was organized around the brief entries of a nineteenth-century journal recorded by errant woman Lavinia Andrews, shortly after she was washed up on the “grey, forsaken” shores of Cape Random, having been “uprooted from her own country, a soft, settled place.” Reading the log books and journals of the early male explorers — Christopher Columbus, Jacques Cartier, Samuel de Champlain, George Cartwright — we sense that something significant is missing. Despite often magnificently obsessive descriptions of landscape and a deluge of details about weather and climate, we often feel bereft and yearn for what is unwritten. As Helen Fogwell Porter indicated in her response to *Random Passage*, there are many unwritten stories that women, Newfoundland women, have waited for these many years. Like John Steffler’s Mrs. Selby in *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*, we have noticed the many “strange omissions” in male exploration narratives. We too have felt compelled to read between the lines, to “write in” the unauthorized stories about the people who lived here before the Europeans arrived, stories about the women and the laborers who either accompanied the early explorers or made their own separate voyages. These, then, are the unsanctioned stories that Morgan retrieves from the gaps in official histories and conventional male narratives. As she describes them in *Random Passage*, here are “the quiet conversations women have — talk of a child’s fever, what their mothers had said about this or that, how to prevent miscarrying, what they pray for, the pain in their backs, the timing of their periods, how the berries are coming, ruminations about the question of sin, what is cooking over their fires ... glimpses of lives as varied as the grains of sand.”

As in her first novel, the main characters in *Waiting for Time* are women: fierce witch-women, journal women and journey women, mad women and sane women, wise women and foolish women, “moon mazed” and “star crazed” women, determined and defiant women. Women with evocative ancient names like Mary, Cassandra, Una, Sarah, and Rachel. And their stories, like their lives, are interwoven in Lavinia Andrews’ journal “with spider-like scribbles [that] weave in and out, between and around lines ... a third story ... a text existing beside the official text ... such jottings [that] are called marginalia.” In *Waiting for Time*, another Lavinia Andrews retrieves these once lost stories that have been “passed along from woman to woman, each writ[ing] her own version of events in the white space” of the original journal. In *Margins and Marginality*, Evelyn B. Tribble suggests that in texts which include marginal and interlinear commentary, “the margins and the texts proper [exist] in shifting relationships of authority; the margin [may] affirm, summarize, underwrite the main text, and so stabilize meaning; or it may assume

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a contestatory or parodic relationship to the text." In Morgan's works, the margins and marginalia are of primary importance for they affirm the significance of women's experiences, they allow other voices to be heard, and they enable other stories to emerge.

In *Waiting for Time*, many secrets long concealed from the present generation of characters are finally revealed. One of the most powerfully written passages is Tessa's story, remembered and recorded by her sister many years later. Haunted by the pain of the past and her own youthful inability to act, old Mary Bundle shares Tessa's story with Rachel, her great granddaughter. With anguish and perhaps a lingering sense of shame, Mary describes the brutal whipping and rape of Tessa many years ago. This dark, disturbing tale is based on a historical event that Morgan uncovered in Paul O'Neill's *The Oldest City*.

To the question which hounds Lavinia Andrews (ancestor of her nineteenth-century namesake and fore-mother), "Is it better to have no history or an imagined one?" Morgan's narrative suggests a possible answer: any history that writes people out, that dismisses their spirit, their tenacity, their contributions, that history becomes itself simply another "foolish embroidering of the truth," a story not to be trusted. In *Waiting for Time* the discovered journal becomes the place where Lavinia Andrews can discover and recover her own family's past, or at least glean several versions of it. It is not the accuracy or the validity of the stories that matters; what counts is knowing her relations, finding and connecting with her own people. The importance of blood ties is a common motif in Atlantic literature and, for writers like Bernice Morgan and Alistair MacLeod, the ritual of sharing stories is one way to celebrate the power of blood relations.

All my favorite books — *Don Quixote*, *War and Peace*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* — are big, heavy in the hand, and woven with intricate brooding story lines that demand and reward a reader's careful attention. Initially *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time* were conceived as one book under the working title *Random Passage*, but following the advice of her editor, Morgan agreed to split the original manuscript into two separate but interlinking works. Hence *Waiting for Time* became a sequel. These interwoven, interwritten stories with their web of connected characters belong between the covers of a single book. A book that requires patience and "all the time in the world," a book that weighs heavy in the mind long after the last line has been read.

Waiting for Time belongs to an emerging sub-genre of women's writing, what American writer Adrienne Rich calls "re-visionism" or "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988), Joan Clark's *Eirisdottir* (1994), Michele Roberts' *The Wild Girl* (1984) and *The Book of Mrs. Noah* (1987) all belong to this newly emerging genre in which women tell their own stories in their own particular ways, where women tell the truth but "tell it slant."

Several years ago, referring to the important matriarchal role of women in Newfoundland culture, playwright Michael Cook wrote, "it's the women who are the survivors in this country. They don't fight the landscape as the men do but accept it in a deeply-felt feminine way; men fight an heroic confrontation that can only end one way. The women just go on...." In *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time*, Bernice Morgan describes a world that is harsh, a world where women are both feminine and fierce.

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