

## Joan Clark. *An Audience of Chairs.*

Valerie Legge

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Patrick O'Flaherty's *Lost Country* is an invigorating contribution to the historiography of Newfoundland and Labrador. His is a fresh and engaging account that complements foundational studies of Newfoundland's economic and political history by S.J.R. Noel, James K. Hiller, Shannon Ryan, and David Alexander. *Lost Country* is an admirable sequel to *Old Newfoundland*, and O'Flaherty demonstrates that good history can be written with passion, conviction, and optimism.

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Joan Clark. *An Audience of Chairs*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2005, ISBN 0-676-97656-5

... if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone.  
Anne Sexton, "Courage"

IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* Edith Wharton suggests that among an individual's greatest sins are conformity, cowardice, and a general failure of imagination. Based on Wharton's account of what constitutes a life well-lived, Joan Clark's Moranna MacKenzie succeeded despite an often debilitating mental illness, the devastating loss of her two daughters, and the hostility of an unimaginative and terribly intolerant Maritime community.

The trajectory that Moranna's life would take was determined early when her mother, Margaret McWeeny MacKenzie, plagued by bouts of depression, drowned herself during a visit to Scotland, leaving a bewildered husband to raise two young children on his own. For Moranna, this dark family legacy was twofold: in her youth she was haunted by the spectre of the drowned mother who had abandoned her; and as she grew into womanhood, an inherited condition, characterized by extreme mood swings and frequent periods of delusion, would worsen. Yet following the failure of her marriage and the loss of her children, Moranna learned to cope with the chaos of her illness and, in the process, she achieved some small measure of control and contentment. According to Clark, one of the books that "most inspired and informed" the writing of *An Audience of Chairs* was Clifford W. Beers's *A Mind that Found Itself*, an autobiographical account of Beers's own mental breakdown and the inhumane treatment he witnessed and received after his affluent family committed him to a private insane asylum in Connecticut at the turn of the century. Upon his release, Beers became an advocate to change public perceptions of mental illness; he campaigned for more compassionate models of treatment; and he worked tirelessly for the promotion of good mental health.

A more recent biography, whose subject is madness, is *A Beautiful Life* by Sylvia Nasar, based on the life of the brilliant young mathematician, John Nash, and popularized in the 2001 Hollywood film of the same title starring Russell Crowe. Interviewed about his condition following the release of the film, Nash suggested that there was a fine line between his early eccentric behavior and his later rather dramatic descent into madness. Nash described his mental illness as a form of non-conformity and as an escape from an unsatisfactory situation.

Nash's somewhat provocative thesis regarding madness was explored by psychologist Phyllis Chesler in *Women and Madness*, a feminist text which argues that a sexist society literally makes women mad. Madness, Chesler wrote, is a woman's natural response to society's rigid codes and conventions.

A less obvious influence on Clark's latest novel is Jack Hodgins's *The Barclay Family Theatre*, a sequence of eight linked stories situated largely on Vancouver Island. In the opening story titled "The Concert Stages of Europe," Clay Barclay discovers how complicated family relations can be when his ambitious mother, inspired by a paper piano keyboard, decides that her son is destined for something greater than working for some miserable little logging company. For Lenora Barclay, the keyboard symbolizes high culture, something not easily found in her west coast island community.

Raised in a similar rural environment in the east, Moranna MacKenzie would have felt a sense of kinship with Lenora and her "Fabulous Barclay Sisters." As Clay's father understood it, "marrying into the Barclay family was like getting a lifetime's pass to the movies." Unfortunately, the high drama of Moranna's life was, like her silent keyboard, played out before an unresponsive "audience of chairs" rather than within the supportive circle of seven extravagant, eccentric sisters who created chaos and craziness wherever they went.

In *An Audience of Chairs*, Moranna's madness, which is real rather than merely theatrical, is complicated by two factors: the demands of motherhood and her lonely search for creative expression. In recent years, writers like Tillie Olsen, Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich have written extensively about the conflicting demands of motherhood and creativity. In *Silences*, Olsen observed that until recently most distinguished literary achievement had come from childless women: Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Katherine Mansfield, Isak Dinesen, Katherine Anne Porter, Dorothy Richardson, and others.

Indeed, in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker advised women wishing to be writers to forfeit motherhood completely or, at the very least, to restrict the size of their families to one child. Like Moranna, women artists from Kate Chopin to Christiana Pflug have struggled to remain sane while trying to balance the demands of their craft with those of their family and with the conventions of society. But as Edna Pontellier realized at the end of Kate Chopin's feminist classic, *The Awakening*, for a woman, talent and creativity are never enough: "The artist

must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies." When Edna's courage faltered, she became despondent and eventually swam far out to sea committing suicide. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf, mused about women, writing, motherhood, and melancholy.

It is to Moranna's credit that she never completely surrendered to the symptoms of a illness that eventually defeated artists such as Woolf, Anne Sexton and Christiana Pflug. After her daughters were taken from her, Moranna spent a brief stint in the psychiatric wing of a Halifax hospital before returning to Baddeck, where she was saved not by the community but by a strange vision: one of her crazy ancestors, appearing in a tree on the family property, instructed Moranna to become a carver and a keeper of her family's chaotic history. Lacking the legitimacy of sculptor, painter or writer, Moranna became a folk artist, an appropriate vocation given her rural location. And like women artists before her, Moranna discovered that art could be her salvation. Encouraged to write about her experiences by her physician, Anne Sexton in "All My Pretty Ones," expressed her deep anguish when for years mental illness kept her from her daughter: "Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit / and a postcard ... / as if it were normal / to be a mother and be gone." Though Moranna was never forcibly confined to a mental institution, she was estranged from her two daughters for thirty years; as a "gone" mother, she knew the grief of writing letters which her daughters never acknowledged. And as Mad Mory, she knew only too well the rough road leading "to bedlam and part way back."

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf wrote, "Books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately." Clark, it seems, since her earliest publications has been writing around and toward the related motifs of madness, motherhood and creativity. If *Swimming Toward the Light* is a young writer's guardedly optimistic take on what it means to be a daughter struggling to find her own way in the world, then *An Audience of Chairs* returns to consider more fully and more compassionately a daughter's much darker and more disturbing relationship with her mother and her other female relations. As Woolf so succinctly observed, "a woman writing thinks back through her mothers."

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James West Davidson and John Ruge. *Great Heart: The History of a Labrador Adventure*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006, ISBN 10 0-7735-3075-4 and ISBN 13 978-0-7735-3075-1

JAMES WEST DAVIDSON and John Ruge's *Great Heart*, the story of the two Hubbard/Wallace expeditions through the Labrador interior and the human drama involved, has been published in a new edition by McGill-Queen's University Press.