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Loïc Bourdeau, ed., *Horrible Mothers: Representations across Francophone North America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019. x + 213 pp. Index. \$45.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780803293984; \$45.00 U.S. (pdf). ISBN 9781496218292; \$45.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781496218278.

Review by Juliette Rogers, Macalester College.

Editor Loïc Bourdeau explains in his introduction to this collection of essays that the title is ironic; that is, the term “horrible” refers to “all those instances in our lives when parents, especially women, are called ‘terrible,’ ‘horrible,’ or ‘unfit’ by external observers” (p. 6). One of the goals of the book is therefore to examine the restrictions that patriarchal definitions of motherhood have placed on women and to explore the ways in which recent representations of “horrible” mothers have offered alternatives to those repressive norms. The essays thus provide readers with a broad array of portraits, ranging from mothering characters who resist the status quo (and thus may be labeled “horrible”) to “childfree” women who purposefully refuse the role of mother altogether. The essays focus on fiction, autofiction, and feature-length films from the past twenty years in francophone North America.

The introduction by Bourdeau offers a strong contextualization for the volume, with references to several influential works on mothers and mothering, including Gill Rye’s *Narratives of Mothering: Women’s Writing in Contemporary France* (2009), Miléna Santoro’s *Mothers of Invention: Feminist Authors and Experimental Fiction in France and Quebec* (2003), Mary Jean Green’s *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (2001), and Lori Saint-Martin’s *Le nom de la mère: Mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin* (1999).^[1] While these earlier studies consider works from the twentieth century (including Anne Hébert, Madeleine Gagnon, and Nicole Brossard, among others), the texts and films analyzed in Bourdeau’s collection are more recent, focusing mainly on twenty-first century works. Bourdeau also addresses the centrality of the notion of failure for contemporary representations of mothering, referring to Jack Halberstam’s conceptual framework in his 2011 work *The Queer Art of Failure*.^[2]

Following the introduction, we find essays that cast a wide net: some focus on the daughters’ perspective of mothers and mothering, some examine texts that offer the mother’s perspective on motherhood, and still others explore the sons’ view of the mother figure. One article in the volume examines the choice to not become a mother, labeled as voluntary childlessness, or the decision to remain “childfree.”

In the category of the daughters' perspectives, the first article after the introduction examines matrophobia, and specifically the fear of becoming one's mother. Pauline Henry-Tierney discusses this concept in Nelly Arcan's *Putain* (2001) as well as the multiple responses of the novel's protagonist to her fears, which include sex, prostitution, physical transformations, and death. Susan Ireland and Patrice Proulx also examine the daughter's relationship to her mother in the seventh essay in the volume, centered on Nancy Huston's semi-autobiographical work *Bad Girl: Classes de littérature* (2014). They explain that Alison, the "horrible" mother of this text, based on Huston's own mother, not only left her children when the daughter-narrator was six years old, but also admits that she did not even want to give birth to this second child. Ireland and Proulx analyze with care the effects of the daughter-narrator's descriptions, in utero, of her mother's rejection and the ways this rejection will impact her future life. However, Ireland and Proulx also acknowledge that the daughter-narrator in *Bad Girl* suggests the oppressive social and cultural norms are also causes for her mother's thoughts and decisions, thus shifting some of the blame from the individual "bad" mother to society more generally.

Articles that address the mother's perspective include Chelsea Ray's cogent reading of Grégoire Chabot's plays *A Life Lost* (written and performed in 2006) and *Jeanne et Osithée: Parallèles Croisées* (co-written with Jean-Claude Redonnet in 2013, as yet unpublished). Both dramatic works center around the character Zithée, a Franco-American woman from the 1930s who fears that she may be pregnant with her seventeenth child. Ray indicates the multiple moments in each play where Zithée begins to find the words necessary to start to question and rebel against the Catholic church and its requirements of obedience and multiple maternities for women. As such, Zithée may not be a "horrible" mother, but she is definitely a rebellious one. Lucie Hotte and Ariane Brun del Re's lucid and well-researched essay on Marguerite Andersen's body of works, spanning from the early 1980s to her 2013 *La mauvaise mère*, also focuses on the maternal point of view. Yet the protagonists in Andersen's texts reflect on the ways in which they have been "bad" mothers, in contrast with their "perfect" mothers who constantly found ways to support and even rescue their daughter. For example, Hotte and Brun del Re provide several important examples of the narrator's feelings of guilt at not having gone to see her mother when she was alone in the hospital dying. In this manner, Hotte and Brun del Re include the bad daughter as well as the bad mother in their contribution to this collection.

Several articles also examine the rapport between sons and their mothers. Susan Pinette's essay on gay Franco-American writers concerns both mothers and grandmothers, Anglo and Franco, and their interactions with their gay sons or grandsons. Pinette elucidates the complicated relationships between the main characters of Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man* (1992) and David Plante's *American Ghosts* (2005), and their nonethnic mothers. Further, Pinette offers the only analysis of a poem in the volume, a fascinating study of "In My Grandmother's Kitchen" (1990) by Franco-American poet Steven Riel. Although Nancy Huston's work *Lignes de faille* (2006) contains four different stories, all narrated by individual six-year-olds from different generations of a single family, Alison Rice focuses her essay in this volume on the first of those stories, exploring the relationship between a son and his mother. In her study of the precocious and violent six-year-old Sol and his overly protective stay-at-home mom Tess, Rice persuasively illuminates the problems that Huston has with this American brand of parenting, as the mother figure Tess succeeds in raising a horrific monster at the same time that she denies herself any possibility of individual freedom. Bourdeau's final essay in the collection, on Xavier Dolan's two films *J'ai tué ma mère* (2009) and *Mommy* (2014), contrasts the figure of the son and their two single mothers: the self-centered Chantal (in *J'ai tué ma mère*) and the devoted but powerless

Diane (in *Mommy*). While many critics have focused on the negative qualities of Chantal and the selfless qualities of Diane, Bourdeau provides convincing evidence that in fact Dolan's portraits of both mothers are complex, reflecting social and political changes in the Quebec culture of the time.

Amy Ransom's essay features the relationships of both sons and daughters with their mothers and their fathers, as she takes us through a large number of recent films about Quebec family structures in the 1960s. We find here strong analyses in particular of Léa Pool's representations of absent or suffering mothers in *Emporte-moi* (1999), *Maman est chez le coiffeur* (2008), and in Philippe Falardeau's *C'est pas moi, je le jure!* (2008), although other films that might not automatically come to mind in a collection on "horrible mothers" receive equally fine treatment in this essay.

Finally, Nathalie Edwards examines Lucie Joubert's *L'envers du landau: Regard extérieur sur la maternité et ses débordements* (2010). Edwards describes Joubert's text as a "work of autocritography or personal criticism" (pp. 95-96), combining academic prose, first-person narrative, irony, humor, and poetic elements. Even though the reasons for a decision to remain childless are similar to those of mothers who leave their children, that is, the desire to pursue one's own goals, whether personal or professional, and not be bound by societal definitions of motherhood, there remain, of course, major differences between the two categories. As Edwards explains, women who choose to remain childless are often accused by mainstream media of selfishness, and Joubert's text serves as a rebuttal to those accusations.

The essays are for the most part quite readable and well edited, and some choices for ordering the essays were obvious. For example, the two essays on Franco-American authors were placed next to each other and both film essays were grouped together at the end of the volume. However, other choices were less apparent: why were the two essays on Nancy Huston not placed one after the other? Why was the work on childlessness placed in the middle of the collection, in between essays on Nancy Huston's *Lignes de faille* and Marguerite Andersen's works? But these are minor distractions. Overall, as this brief overview of *Horrible Mothers* shows us, the first two decades of the twenty-first century witnessed an explosion of depictions of mothers, mothering, and non-mothering that have helped to expand on traditional and outdated definitions. The essays included in this volume each focus on unique aspects of this recent wave, using a variety of theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks to explain and understand the contributions of this very diverse selection of authors and filmmakers. Yet, as Bourdeau himself mentions, the collection is not a completely inclusive survey. For example, there are no First Nation writers or other writers of color included in the volume, nor are there writers from certain francophone regions of North America, such as Louisiana. As such, we look forward to a future volume of essays that continues the proposition that Bourdeau has begun here, with his ambitious collection of essays on "horrible" mothers.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Pauline Henry-Tierney, "The Whore and Her Mother: Exploring Matrophobia in Nelly Arcan's *Putain*"

Susan Pinette, “Horrible Mothers in *Mémère’s* Kitchen: Queer Identity in New England Franco-America”

Chelsea Ray, “‘I’m Not the Virgin Mary’: Rebellious Motherhood in Grégoire Chabot’s ‘A Life Lost’”

Alison Rice, “Permissive Parenting: The Awful American Mother in Nancy Huston’s *Lignes de faille*”

Natalie Edwards, “Lucie Joubert’s Ironic Rejection of Motherhood in *L’envers du landau*”

Lucie Hotte and Ariane Brun del Re, “Voicing Shame: From Fiction to Confession in the Work of Marguerite Andersen”

Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx, “The Transgressive Mother in Nancy Huston’s *Bad Girl: Classes de littérature*”

Amy J. Ransom, “Forgiving the Horrible Mother: Children’s Needs and Women’s Desires in Twenty-First-Century Québecois Film”

Loïc Bourdeau, “Politics and Motherhood in Xavier Dolan’s *J’ai tué ma mère* and *Mommy*”

NOTES

[1] Gill Rye, *Narratives of Mothering: Women’s Writing in Contemporary France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009); Miléna Santoro, *Mothers of Invention: Feminist Authors and Experimental Fiction in France and Quebec* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003); Mary-Jean Green, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2001); Lori Saint-Martin, *Le nom de la mère: Mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin* (Montréal: Éditions Nota Bene, 1999).

[2] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

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