



## “Friendship is Better than Family”: Women’s Friendships in Quebec Fiction

“La amistad vale más que la familia”: amistades entre mujeres en la literatura quebequense

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### RESUMEN

Tradicionalmente, se ha dado por sentado que el objetivo primordial de toda mujer es el matrimonio y que las relaciones entre mujeres se encuentran dominadas por la rivalidad y la competencia. Este artículo rastrea la historia de la amistad femenina en la novela quebequense desde sus comienzos sugiriendo una historia algo distinta, una historia de amor, apoyo y solidaridad subyacentes a la intriga principal (la tramadada por el matrimonio). Si tenemos en cuenta que la amistad femenina sugiere valores típicamente femeninos así como una cierta resistencia a la opresión patriarcal, el asunto que se juega en la esfera privada adquiere un significado colectivo y público, que tiene que ver con cuestiones de poder, autonomía, normas sociales y justicia.

*Palabras clave:* mujeres; amistad; literatura; novela quebequense; género; heterosexualidad; libertad; creatividad

### ABSTRACT

It has traditionally been assumed that women’s main goal in life is matrimony and that relationships among women are dominated by competition and rivalry. This article traces a history of women’s friendships in the Quebec novel since its beginnings, suggesting that another story, the story of love, support and solidarity among women, runs beneath the surface intrigue (the marriage plot). Since women’s friendships suggest female-centred values and possible resistance to patriarchal oppression, the question, though played out in the private sphere, becomes a public and collective one, entwined with issues of power, autonomy, social norms and social justice.

*Keywords:* women; friendship; literature; Québec novel; gender; heterosexuality; liberty, creativity.

“The absence of female intimacy in literature is, partially, the result of the masculine point of view”, wrote Louise

Bernikow in 1980. Similarly, historical studies of friendship chart only relationships between men, and

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philosophers have also seen friendship as the privilege of males<sup>1</sup>. Until recently, in fiction, the “marriage plot”—a young woman’s search for a man who will choose her and thereby ensure her a future and a place in society (Miller)—governed most novels that featured a female protagonist. To tease out a different story hidden beneath or running parallel to the heterosexual economy of love and marriage, as I propose to do here, is to read against the traditional patriarchal grain. The goal of this article is to show that friendship between women, whether accepted or rejected, is a recurring motif in the Quebec novel from its beginnings in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until today, a motif that can shed new light on women’s writing in general by providing a new perspective from which to read their identity. It also illustrates ways in which the private—intimate friendships among women—is shaped by ideology—the idea that women exist principally as wives and mothers—and how art can challenge that vision, whether subtly or directly. In that women’s friendships suggest female-centred values and possible resistance to oppression, the question, though played out in the private sphere, becomes a public and collective one, entwined with issues of power, autonomy, social norms and social justice.

The novels studied here all revolve around a powerful tension between female friendship and the marriage plot, an articulation/opposition between heterosexual love (or at least partnership, not all marriages being love marriages) and an intimate relationship with another woman. It would be impossible to analyze female friendships in all their dimensions without studying lesbian novels, in which friendship often plays a central part. The work of Marie-Claire Blais, Nicole Brossard and Jovette Marchessault, among others, would be a starting place for such an exploration, but this article, for reasons of space and comparability, is limited to novels that depict a heterosexual world, with a hesitation between heterosexual love and female friendship that creates a particular narrative dynamic.

I will begin by reviewing feminist theorists’ and philosophers’ vision of women’s friendships and feminist literary critics’ readings of friendship in literature before analyzing selected works of Quebec fiction. In Laure Conan’s novel *Angéline de Montbrun* (1881), widely recognized as the first psychological novel published in Québec, friendships between women are both vital and doomed. In Germaine Guèvremont’s *Le Survenant* (*The Outlander*, 1945), female friendship outlasts love and helps to console the woman left behind by the man of her choice. By contrast, in *Bonheur d’occasion* (*The Tin Flute*), published the same year, Florentine, the heroine, has nothing but scorn for other women and disdains their friendship. Three novels by Anne Hébert, *Les chambres de bois* (1958), *Kamouraska* (1970) and *Les fous de Bassan* (*In the Shadow of the Wind*, 1982), describe the lure of friendship between women but depict characters whose main priority remains their relationships with men. Closer to us, Francine Noël has dedicated several novels to the topic. *Maryse* (1983) and *Myriam première* (1987) locate the eponymous heroine and her two close friends at the centre of a broader feminist solidarity which disappears in her third novel based on the same characters, *La conjuration des bâtards* (1999). In Noël’s *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* (1990), the female protagonist is torn between her various lovers and an exclusive friendship with another woman. Finally, *À ciel ouvert* (2007) by Nelly Arcan is the story of a passionate rivalry between two women competing for the love of the same man.

These examples among many reflect complex, shifting alliances and telling ambivalences. The figure of women’s friendships in fiction brings a new perspective to important feminist questions such as the so-called inevitable rivalry among women, possible solidarity and sisterhood, and alliances based both on pleasure and resistance.

#### 1. Friendships between Women as a Form of Resistance against Patriarchy

From Aristotle and Foucault to Montaigne, Kant and Nietzsche, a vision of

<sup>1</sup> See Raymond, Faderman and Audet.

male friendship based on honour and moral virtue took shape, to the exclusion of women, who were deemed to lack those very qualities (Abel, 1983: 116). Any traces of deep and lasting female friendships have been erased from the historical record. Feminist theorists of female friendships all agree that this vision was harmful to women and attempt to rediscover intimate relationships between women over the course of history. Without a tradition of female friendship, women are unable to find their "woman-identified self" (Raymond, 1986: 4) and escape from what Raymond calls the logic of "heteroreality", according to which women can find existence and meaning only through a man. In other words, women's friendships have been erased from the historical and fictional record because those who produced that record saw them not as independent individuals who could both exist in their own right and create bonds with other women, but as appendages of the male sex: daughters, sisters and above all, wives and mothers.

Women's friendships, as these remarks make clear, have been sacrificed to the patriarchal order but potentially offer a powerful means of resistance to that very order. Offering an escape from rigid gender roles and a means of reconceptualizing female identity (Audet, 2000: 12), they help women to love themselves and each other so as to increase their independence, validate their perceptions and give them the strength and confidence they need to remain "perpendicular" (Bernikow, 1980: 144). "Gyn-affection", defined as "woman-to-woman attraction, influence, and movement" which allows women to "affect, move, stir, and arouse each other to full power", attempts to return friendship "to a primary place as a basis of feminist purpose, passion, and politics" (Raymond, 1986: 9). "Movement", in this sense, refers to energy, dynamism, empowerment and creativity, but also clearly references the women's movement and collective action.

Turning now to fiction, we note that traditional criticism, as well as popular opinion, has confirmed the myth of the inevitability of female rivalry. For Virginia Woolf, a novel containing the simple sentence "Chloe liked Olivia" would be the

sign of a powerful symbolic renewal. In literature, she continues, "So much has been left out, unattempted", and concludes that until the days of Jane Austen, women were portrayed not only by male authors, but "almost without exception" in their relation to men. It is the search for a husband that carries forward the action of much classic (and popular romantic) literature, at the expense of other possible topics such as work, creativity, travel or friendship between women (Abel, 1983: 414); only two endings are available to traditional heroines, marriage or death (Miller, 1980). However, Janet Todd (1980) has written about a number of 18<sup>th</sup>-century French and British novels in which female friendship is showcased; more recent novels, in the wake of modern feminism, tend to emphasize the search for one's own identity, usually in part through friendship with other women. Turning now to the Quebec novel, I will explore the tensions felt by heroines torn by the conflicting claims of female friend and male suitor within a social and narrative economy dominated by the marriage plot.

Since the works discussed in this article are not well-known outside of Québec, a few words about their institutional status and reception are in order. The novels of Conan, Guèvremont, Roy and Hébert are classics, widely studied in schools and by critics. *Maryse* was also well-received and is often taught and analyzed. Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* and Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan* won the Prix Fémina in France in 1947 and 1982 respectively; Hébert's second novel, *Kamouraska*, was awarded the Prix des libraires in 1971. Like Anne Hébert, Nelly Arcan published her novels with the prestigious French publisher, Éditions du Seuil. Before she killed herself at 36, she published four novels which are the subject of a great deal of literary criticism.

## 2. *Angéline de Montbrun*: The First Psychological Novel and the First Friendship

*Angéline de Montbrun* tells the story of the eponymous heroine's trajectory, between friendship and love. Angéline, an appropriatedly-named young girl who is

beautiful, pure, obedient and entirely devoted to her affectionate but authoritarian father (like most heroines of Quebec fiction before until the 1940s, she has lost her mother), becomes engaged to Maurice in the first section of the novel, an exchange of letters among Angéline, Maurice and above all, his sister, Mina, Angéline's intimate friend. But only a few pages after the young couple's future has been settled, to their mutual delight, the epistolary exchange is interrupted and violent events destroy their idyll: Monsieur de Montbrun is killed in a hunting accident and Angéline, disfigured in a fall, refuses to marry Maurice when it becomes clear to her that his love has not survived the loss of her beauty and that he remains loyal to her only out of pity.

In striking contrast with Angéline, her best friend Mina is an independent young woman; flirtatious, irreverent, and mocking, she encourages her multiple suitors and ironically comments on the courtships she sees around her. Surprisingly modern in the conservative and pious small-town society of her time, Mina brings a discordant note to a universe dominated by an austere father who is embodies the Catholic values of piety, renunciation and duty. But her dissident voice is gradually silenced: not only does Mina begin to devote most of her considerable energy to promoting the match between her brother and Angéline, i.e. the traditional marriage plot, but she also falls in love with Angéline's father and rejects her own values of pleasure and freedom in order to please him. After his sudden death, she enters a convent and takes her vows. A bereft Angéline mourns her losses and writes the long diary that forms the rest of the novel.

Ultimately, the friendship between Angéline and Mina is at once essential—it appears very early in the novel and survives her father's death and her suitor's loss of interest—and secondary, subordinated to the marriage plot. The novel clearly values female friendships (a third young woman Angeline and Mina are close to also enters a convent) but cannot imagine their existence outside of women's traditional destinies in the world it describes, where the only possibilities were to become a wife and

mother or a nun<sup>2</sup>. In the incestuous climate of the novel—some critics have read it as the story of passionate, symbolically-consummated love between a daughter and a father—, one might wonder if Angéline's romantic interest in Mina's brother and Mina's in Angéline's father act as a mask for attraction and passion between the two women, as a quest for a woman-centred world. If so, it is a passion entirely forbidden by the society of their time. Still, it is significant that from the very outset—from the very first time it delves deeply into the human psyche—, the Québec novel tells the story of love and affection between women.

### 3. *Le Survenant* and *Bonheur d'occasion*: Friendship Accepted, Friendship Denied

Published the same year, 1945, *Le Survenant* and *Bonheur d'occasion* have often been seen as polar opposites. The first, with its sequel, *Marie-Didace* (1947), is an affectionate but lucid portrait of a quickly-disappearing world, the old rural life of a seigneurial Quebec undergoing rapid urbanization and modernization. Didace, the powerful but ageing patriarch, recently widowed, has only one son, Amable, sickly and uninterested in the hard work of farming the family land. Despite Didace's longing for male grandchildren to continue his tradition, Amable and his wife Alphonsine are still childless after four years of marriage. The arrival of an outsider, the mysterious "survenant" of the title, brings rapid change to a tiny settlement where there are no strangers and no surprises. The newcomer develops a relationship with Angéline Desmarais, a woman of thirty who has refused various suitors she was convinced were interested only in her father's land. By refusing to marry in a society where a single woman has no value and no power, and later by selecting a man who can offer her neither material goods nor a position in society, but who awakens her passion and desire, Angéline shows great strength and independence. But as he announced from the beginning he would, the Survenant

<sup>2</sup> See Smart for an in-depth reading of the novel.

resumes his wanderings, leaving Angéline heartbroken. It is at this point that the old friendship between Angéline and Marie-Amanda, Didace's only daughter and a married woman with a large family, is revived. Marie-Amanda finds the words that help Angéline to come to terms with her loss<sup>3</sup>. Marie-Amanda is described as a kind of beacon for her friend, "haute, lumineuse et fidèle"<sup>4</sup> (Guèvremont, 1992a [1945]: 203). Acting as a guide and a confidant, she listens to Angéline and weeps with her, then gently urges her to accept the Survenant's decision :

... pendant un an il t'a donné son cœur. Il t'a pas appauvrie ? T'as rien à regretter? Et tu regrettes tout ! Sois plus raisonnable que ça [...] Abandonne-le, Angéline. Sans quoi, tu connaîtras jamais une minute de tranquillité<sup>5</sup> (Guèvremont, 1992a [1945]: 205).

This scene is striking because, as rarely in the Québec novel of the time, deep emotions are expressed and analyzed. The trust between the two women is also remarkable: without reservations or shame, they speak their minds and hearts. In addition to her nuanced understanding of human relationships, Marie-Amanda knows and loves her friend while recognizing her weaknesses and foibles. She teaches Angéline not to remain "penchée sur [s]on mal, comme une plante morte"<sup>6</sup> (Guèvremont, 1992a [1945]: 206), reminds her that a woman's life has value even without the love of a man, and urges her to return to her former joys, her beautiful garden and their close friendship.

Friendship between women is thus a source of strength. However, Guèvremont does not idealize women's relationships: Marie-Amanda, a young mother who listens to other's sorrows and consoles them, has nobody to listen to her in the same way.

Additionally, rivalry among women is rampant in this traditional universe, as shown by Angéline's fears of other women as rivals for the Survenant and by the deep hatred between Phonsine, Didace's daughter-in-law, and his second wife. Angéline is keenly aware of the limits of women's friendships in a society where their value is derived from their relationships with men: "Et puis, on change. L'une mariée à l'Île de Grâce, l'autre, fille au Chenal du Moine, certes elles se retrouveraient toujours avec plaisir, mais elles n'avaient plus la même vie"<sup>7</sup> (Guèvremont 1992b: 226).

Despite these reservations, female friendships are passed on and transformed. Angéline consoles Phonsine when her husband leaves to accept work elsewhere, using language she learned from Marie-Amanda. Though she hates to part with any of her belongings, Angéline gives Phonsine her most beautiful potted geranium, a gesture portrayed as full of love and caring. When Phonsine and her husband die, Angéline adopts their only child, Marie-Didace, and becomes a symbolic mother. A powerful, almost cosmic image shows the two women as deeply connected, through their friendship, with the world around them, with nature itself:

Marie-Amanda la rejoignit sur la route. Silencieuses, elles allaient du pas calme des femmes qui ont à soi du temps et de l'espace. La neige tombait toujours et brouillait à mesure l'empreinte de leurs pieds, sur le sol blanchi<sup>8</sup> (Guèvremont, 1992a [1945]: 77-78).

Within the limits of the traditional rural society portrayed in the novel, *Le Survenant* describes the kind of feminist ideal of friendship described by Janice Raymond, a union of "thinking hearts" (1986: 223), linking emotion and reason.

<sup>3</sup> For Patricia Smart, the friendship between the two women heralds a new feminine vision in the novel of the land, based on sharing and generosity (171-172).

<sup>4</sup> "Tall, luminous and true".

<sup>5</sup> "He gave you his heart for a year. He didn't leave you poorer than before, did he? You have nothing to regret? And yet you regret everything! Come on, be reasonable . . . Let him go, Angéline. If you don't, you'll never know a moment's peace."

<sup>6</sup> "Bent over her sorrow like a dried-up plant."

<sup>7</sup> "And people change. One married and living in l'île de Grâce, the other a spinster in Chenal du Moine, they were always glad to meet again, but their lives were different now."

<sup>8</sup> "Marie-Amanda caught up with her along the road. Without speaking, they walked along at the calm pace of women who have both time and space. The snow kept falling, filling in their footprints on the white ground as they walked along."

A very different vision of relationships among women is described in Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, the story of a working-class Montreal family during World War II. One of the novel's subplots revolves around a classic love triangle. Florentine Lacasse, a 19-year-old waitress at a lunch counter, falls in love with Jean Lévesque, an ambitious young man who flirts with her but has no intention of settling down. Pregnant after one encounter with him at a time when virginity was prized and an illegitimate pregnancy was both a scandal and a sin, Florentine settles for Emmanuel, a friend of Jean's who sincerely loves her, and, without telling him about the baby, convinces him to marry her before going overseas to fight the war.

The heart of the novel is thus a traditional heterosexual romance featuring a frivolous but manipulative young woman, whose narrow range of opportunities partially justifies her dubious actions. And yet a key scene of the novel raises the possibility of a strong and effective relationship between women. Marguerite, a coworker from the lunch counter, guesses that Florentine is pregnant and offers to help her, refusing to condemn her for immorality as the prevailing social values command:

Et elle fut étonnée de n'éprouver aucun sentiment de mépris. Elle avait pourtant jusque-là porté sur l'amour hors du mariage un jugement plein de sévérité et de dédain [...] Et voici que, n'apercevant que des ruines sur le chemin que parcourait Florentine, elle éprouvait surtout le désir de la couvrir, de la protéger<sup>9</sup> (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 279).

The plight of her co-worker calls up the best Marguerite has to offer, her material help, her loyal support, her active friendship: "Nous serons ensemble, Florentine. Je te le promets. Et je te défendrai, va<sup>10</sup>" (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 280).

<sup>9</sup> "To her surprise, she felt no scorn. And yet until then, love out of wedlock had inspired her with severity and disdain . . . But now, seeing only ruins on Florentine's path, she felt the desire to spare her, to protect her."

<sup>10</sup> "We'll be together, Florentine, I promise. And I'll defend you, don't worry."

But far from being touched by Marguerite's courage, Florentine is horrified that her secret is out and shocked by Marguerite's honesty. She has never had any female friends, imagining that all the other girls "étaient envieuses d'elle, prêtes à lui jouer un mauvais tour<sup>11</sup>" (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 275). She denies everything and rejects Marguerite in her heart:

Elle pouvait bien faire la généreuse, celle-là! Personne ne l'avait aimée [...] C'était par curiosité sans doute qu'elle se montrait si bien disposée. Et pour mieux la calomnier ensuite. Les femmes! pensait-elle avec mépris. Et d'ailleurs, est-ce qu'une femme peut aider une autre femme? (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 282)<sup>12</sup>.

Florentine is as willing to discredit all other women as she is to attribute magic powers to men; she sees contact with women as useless at best, dangerous at worst. And since she esteems women to the extent that they appeal to men, Marguerite is easily disqualified ("nobody had ever loved her") and labelled "folle et sotté"<sup>13</sup> (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 280). Florentine is convinced, rightly so in the conservative Catholic society in which she lives, that only a man can save her from dishonour by marrying her; women therefore have little value in her eyes. When she discovers she is pregnant and Jean has disappeared, she is filled with "un indicible mépris pour sa condition de femme, une inimitié envers elle-même qui la déroutait"<sup>14</sup> (Roy, 1993 [1945]: 263). A key word here is "contempt": though Marguerite does not condemn Florentine, Florentine does feel contempt for Marguerite, for all women and for herself. This hostility towards herself and other women she sees as equally powerless and contemptible cuts Florentine off from Marguerite and enslaves her to the male gaze. As Patricia Smart suggests (1988:

<sup>11</sup> "envied her and were anxious to play tricks on her".

<sup>12</sup> "It was easy for her to play generous ! Nobody had ever loved her . . . Probably she was being nice out of curiosity, so she could gossip about her later. Women ! she thought scornfully. Can a woman ever really help another woman ?"

<sup>13</sup> "crazy and foolish".

<sup>14</sup> "unspeakable contempt for her female status, an unsettling feeling of hostility toward herself".

245), the time had not yet come, in the Québec novel, for such a daring friendship between women. But while it is nearly impossible to imagine two women, or a woman alone, raising an illegitimate and therefore "fatherless" child in the context of the time, defying religious and social taboos, *Bonheur d'occasion* suggests that that time will one day come as well as lucidly pointing out the dangers, for women, of allowing themselves to be defined only through men's eyes.

As these two very different novels of 1945 suggest, while female friendship is subordinated to the marriage plot and therefore fragile, if not impossible, it holds great promise. Friendship accepted, in Guèvremont's work, allows for comfort and consolation, support in loss and in rebuilding one's life. Friendship rejected, as in Roy's novel, nevertheless suggests hope, an alternative that Florentine does not pursue but which Marguerite bravely and generously offers. Later novels will build on that promise to create new forms of female friendship and give it centre stage.

#### 4. Anne Hébert: Love, Manipulation, Rivalry

Anne Hébert's novels are often centred on strong, passionate, desiring heroines who reject traditional values. But their question for freedom generally fails or leads them to a new form of marital confinement. Catherine, the heroine of *Les chambres de bois* (1958) escapes a deadly first marriage through complex and ambiguous alliances with her husband's sister and with the maid who takes care of her when she falls ill, but as soon as she recovers, she chooses to marry another man whom she has just met, gentler and more understanding but no less patriarchal than the first. Her female friendships play a role in her departure from her husband's house, then disappear from the text as soon as the new man appears. In *Kamouraska* (1970), the action takes place in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: Élisabeth, a young girl from an upper-class family, marries a man from another old family, but when he reveals himself as violent and unfaithful, she quickly begins an affair with a friend of his. Together, the lovers decide to kill Antoine

Tassy. At this point, the enigmatic figure of Aurélie Caron reappears in the text. Aurélie is a lower-class orphan who, during their mutual childhood, fascinated the strictly-raised and closely-guarded Élisabeth because of her freedom, her overt sexuality (she lives with an older man she says with a wink is her "uncle") and her knowledge of the mysteries of life and death (Aurélie claims to be a witch). Élisabeth, as a young woman, longed to wander the streets with Aurélie and ask her about boys, but fearing her mother and aunts would punish her, she avoided Aurélie and fantasized about festivities appropriate for her social class instead:

... il faut que je rentre, ou je serai privée du bal chez le Gouverneur [...] Adieu Aurélie. Si jamais je te rencontre, je ne te reconnaitrai pas, mauvaise compagne, mauvaise rencontre. Ma mère m'a promis un collier de perles, pour aller au bal du Gouverneur. Mon âme pour un collier de perles. Et les garçons, Aurélie? Et les...<sup>15</sup> (Hébert, 1970: 63-64).

The friendship between Élisabeth and Aurélie is based not on affinities but on a perverse fascination. Out of greed and worldly ambition, Élisabeth gives up her connection with Aurélie. But as a young bride, she hires Aurélie as a maid and, working with her lover, convinces her to poison Antoine Tassy. As if under a spell, Aurélie agrees, but the murder attempt fails. Élisabeth's lover, George Nelson, kills Antoine and then flees the country; to save the honour of her influential family, Élisabeth, though she does undergo trial, is acquitted and Aurélie sent to prison in her place. The novel shows how relationships between women can be based on obsession—as a young girl, Élisabeth longed to be Aurélie and much later, fascinated by the spectacle of herself in the mirror wearing Élisabeth's rich finery, Aurélie will do anything to please her mistress—and lead to manipulation and betrayal. The difference in social class tilts the scales

<sup>15</sup>"I must go home, or I won't be allowed to attend the Governor's ball . . . Farewell, Aurélie. If our paths ever cross again, I won't recognize you, bad company, bad example, My mother promised me a pearl necklace for the Governor's ball. But what about boys, Aurélie? What about..."

strongly in favour of Élisabeth, who uses Aurélie in an attempt to fulfil her own needs, whatever the consequences to the other woman, her “mirror image”.

*Les fous de Bassan* (1982) offers a contrasting picture of female friendship. At its heart is a heterosexual romance, the passion two teen-aged cousins, Nora and Olivia Atkins, feel for Stevens Brown. Both girls are murdered one night, presumably by Stevens, and their bodies thrown into the St. Lawrence River. But long before that, the cousins, who grew up side by side without a shadow between them, are lost to each other. Nora relates the end of the closeness between herself and Olivia, describing the pair as “Siamese sisters from our earliest childhood” (Hébert, 1982: 121): Il a suffi d’un seul regard posé sur nous deux ensemble, comme sur une seule personne, du fond de l’église, par un garçon insolent, pour que rien en soit plus jamais comme avant entre nous. [...] “C’est moi qu’il regarde! Non, non, c’est moi!” Mieux qu’aucune parole de rupture ces petits mots ordinaires nous opposent et nous séparent à jamais<sup>16</sup> (Hébert, 1982: 121-122).

Once again, the heterosexual romance destroys female friendship and deprives the girls of support; the moment their puberty, symbolized by Steven’s gaze, begins, they become rivals. Elsewhere in the novel, twin sisters who act and speak as one have covered the walls of the pastor’s house—he was the girl’s uncle and sexually molested Nora—with a huge mural illustrating the events that led up to the double murder, making visible the violence the villagers attempt to bury. As the example of the twins shows, women can enjoy intimate bonds and even behave subversively, but the consequences are ambiguous: the mural sheds light on the past without making the present any more liveable. In addition, female friendships, in Hébert’s novels, either end when childhood does (*Kamouraska*, *Les fous de Bassan*) or

are short-lived (*Les chambres de bois*). Could this be the reason behind Hébert’s heroines’ failure to break free?

##### 5. Francine Noël: The Ups and Downs of Female Friendship

Francine Noël’s four novels offer an example of an ethos based on female friendships<sup>17</sup>. She has published a trilogy made up of *Maryse* (1983), *Myriam première* (1987) and *La conjuration des bâtards* (2000), whose central figure is a young academic and playwright. Noël charts her life, with her lovers and friendships, from the time she turns twenty, in 1970, until her violent death at the end of the century. Another novel, called *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* (1990), tells the story of Fatima Gagné, who has a number of non-resident lovers but only one close friend, Amélia. Noël’s work offers a vision of female friendship that is realistic and sometimes utopian, but also undermined by tragedy.

At the beginning of *Maryse*, the title character is a young literature major. From a low-income background, she identifies strongly with Roy’s heroine Florentine Lacasse, and her developing affair with a fellow student, the ironically-named Michel Paradis, is marked by the dependency and vulnerability Florentine showed<sup>18</sup>. But unlike Roy’s heroine, *Maryse* will be saved by her close relationships with other women. Though the novel begins the day *Maryse* meets Michel and ends to when they separate for good, its main action is the intellectual apprenticeship of a young woman and her close connection to other women<sup>19</sup>. Though the heterosexual romance is still important and *Maryse* initially longs to marry Michel, it no longer occupies centre stage.

<sup>17</sup>Alexandra Jarque (1991) has described the contemporary Québec novel as a “girlfriend novel” in which social relationships are based on friendship instead of families or couples; she sees Noël’s work as exemplifying the trend.

<sup>18</sup> See Nutting for a study of parallels between the two novels.

<sup>19</sup> *Maryse* is also friends with François Ladouceur, even calling him “her best girlfriend” (Noël, 1983: 177).

<sup>16</sup> “One glance shot at the two of us from the back of the church by a brash boy, as if we were a single being, and everything changed between us forever (...) I’m the one he’s looking at!’ ‘No, I am!’ More than any words of separation, those ordinary little words pit us against each other and thrust us apart forever.”



The novel focuses instead on Maryse's relationship with her two closest friends, Marie-Lyre Flouée, known as MLF<sup>20</sup>, and Marie-Thérèse, nicknamed Marité. The similar names suggest deep affinities based on trust and mutual respect. MLF, an actress and feminist activist, thrills Maryse when, in class, she declares that Freud is "dubious" (Noël, 1983: 51) because of his concept of penis envy, and the already-formed duo of Maryse and Marité quickly befriends her. The novel relates long conversations between two or three of the friends, a source of pleasure, strength, support and knowledge<sup>21</sup>. With their support, Maryse is able to give up her dream of becoming "Mrs. Maryse Paradis" (Noël, 1983: 46) and ultimately separate from the man who waxes indignant about the "scandalous plight" (Noël, 1983: 336) of Third-World women while dominating and beating Maryse. Though she struggles with self-loathing and doubts her worth and abilities, Maryse is finally able to recover her self-esteem, with her friends' help. Friendship offers women the means to define themselves (Abel, 1983: 416) in a safe space that is solidly rooted in the broader world (Raymond, 1986: 153).

Additionally, women's friendships go beyond the private sphere and generate collective action. As a lawyer, Marité represents women who have undergone domestic violence and MLF writes letters to the editor and calls corporations to protest against racism, sexism and other injustices. Confused by the abstract and pretentious political discussions among Michel and his socialist friends, Maryse learns about social issues from Marité. Though there are a few women—as dogmatic and aggressive as the men—among the armchair revolutionaries who pontificate all night in bars with Michel, true political action, according to Maryse and her women friends, is small-scale, local and down-to-earth. Toward the end of the novel, a telling scene brings together Maryse, her friends and other women:

<sup>20</sup> Not coincidentally, her initials, MLF, are those of the "mouvement de libération des femmes", or women's liberation movement in France.

<sup>21</sup> See Dansereau on chat as a form of female resistance.

Elles marchaient depuis longtemps déjà [...] Maryse voyait toutes ces femmes réunies pour la même raison, des femmes de tous les âges : il y avait là Marie-Lyre, Louise et Marité qui avaient aidé à l'organisation de la marche, il y avait Gervaise, Ginette, Nicole, Norma, Rose, Lisette, Mélissa, Odette, Louise, Lise, Monique Laviolette [...] Il y avait toutes les autres que Maryse connaissait de vue seulement ou pasx du tout, et parmi lesquelles elle marchait, portée par leur mouvement. Toutes ces femmes réclamaient l'avortement libre et gratuit (Noël, 1983: 384)<sup>22</sup>.

The female protesters in this scene have what the characters in the novels discussed above lacked: the feeling of being connected to other women and of both enjoying themselves and engaging in political struggle together. Friendship, here, becomes feminist solidarity. While Angéline and Marie-Amanda strolled along together and Florentine was embarrassed to be seen at the movies with her girlfriends and not a date on a Friday night, these women do not walk privately, sharing secrets, but march in public, side by side, claiming rights for all women, the kind of dynamic, creative "movement" Raymond sees as challenging the social order. Whether the cause be heartfelt for them or not (Maryse is desperately afraid she is sterile, but protests with the others), the force of numbers gives them a strength that "sets free and enhances movement of all kinds" (Raymond, 1986: 41). Though this novel and the second volume of the trilogy, *Myriam première* (which sees MLF come to blows with a fellow actress because of her snide remarks), recognize the existence of conflicts between and among women, personal and political alliances remain in the foreground.

<sup>22</sup>"The women had been marching for a long time (...) Maryse looked at all the women united with one purpose, women of all ages: Marie-Lyre, Louise and Marité, who had helped organize the march, and also Gervaise, Ginette, Nicole, Norma, Rose, Lisette, Mélissa, Odette, Louise, Lise, Monique Laviolette [...] Plus all the others whom Maryse knew only by sight or not at all, and she was marching among them, carried along by their movement. And all these women were demanding free legal abortion on demand" (384).

Finally, friendship is the force that allows Maryse to find her own form of political commitment as a playwright. She moves from writing tiny fragments which she tears up immediately, stricken with shame, to discovering her voice with the help of Marie-Lyre. Together, they spend a month by the sea, with Marie-Lyre acting out the script Maryse is writing. Maryse sees MLF not as a muse, as her friend laughingly suggests, but as an equal and a co-creator. Her first play is about a cleaning woman and other subordinate female figures she rescues “from oblivion and silence” (Noël, 1983: 414)<sup>23</sup>. When *Myriam première* begins, Maryse has become a recognized playwright. Her feminist consciousness broadens to include both women’s history in working-class Montreal neighbourhoods to global issues, with a special focus on Central and Latin America. The novel she brings as *Myriam première* draws to a close is about two prostitutes, one in Montreal, the other in Managua: “Le texte sera fait de la correspondance des prostituées et ces lettres étranges formeront un pont au-dessus de l’Amérique de Reagan<sup>24</sup>” (Noël, 1987: 500). More complex and international than Maryse, the novel remains focused on bonds between women from different places, eras and countries.

The third volume of the trilogy, *La conjuration des bâtards*, comes as a surprise, ringing the death knell of female friendship. Most of the action takes place during an anti-globalization summit that Maryse and her new companion, Laurent, helped organize. While a vast network of resistance to neo-liberalism emerges, inspiring new hope, the ideal of friendship between women has faded. At the beginning of the novel, we learn that MLF has died of breast cancer, and she is not mentioned again. Marité, now a member of provincial parliament, is also absent from the text. And Maryse herself, still vital and creative, dies in a bomb attack that brings the Summit to an abrupt end. With her death, a thirty-year friendship also perishes.

<sup>23</sup> For an exploration of the linkages between freedom and women’s creative writing, see Barrett (2000).

<sup>24</sup> “The novel will be composed of the correspondence between the prostitutes and their strange letters will create a bridge over Reagan’s America.”

Another novel by Noël, *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique*, also offers a pessimistic vision of friendship between women, once again emphasizing the heterosexual romance. The main narrator is Fatima Gagné, who has a number of lovers and rejects monogamy. She has only one female friend, however. Amélia Malaise is a translator who continually crosses linguistic and political borders, working to promote the writing of Latin American women. Fatima transcribes long excerpts of their conversations, underscoring their mutual trust, their ability to understand each other easily, their generosity and their mutual admiration.

But their friendship is put to the test when Fatima becomes more serious about Louis, the married man Amélia had loved and left because she cared too much for him (he gives Fatima a false name and she doesn’t realize at first that he is the man Amélia was involved with). From that time on, though the two women remain close, their trust has been shattered. Because they loved the same man, they are both perversely intimate<sup>25</sup> and permanently estranged. While travelling in Europe, Amélia sends Fatima a letter in which she confesses how hurt she is by the relationship between Fatima and Louis, but accepts the situation: “Sans doute étions-nous destinées à partager beaucoup de choses, toi et moi, les mêmes expériences, les mêmes émotions<sup>26</sup>” (Noël, 1992: 216). Theoretically, the letter announces a return to their old bonds. But the plane in which Amélia is flying back to Québec crashes over the ocean, wiping out friendship between women and erasing Amélia’s work-in-progress, a translation of Délia Febrero. The ever-broadening circle of women depicted in *Maryse et Myriam première* has now narrowed to include only a heterosexual couple. Enacting the literal burial of love and friendship between

<sup>25</sup> Fatima’s commentary: “je porte déjà ses vêtements, et voilà qui j’hérite de ses anciens amants” (126) (“I already wear her clothes, and now I’ve inherited her old lovers”). The word “inherit”, used while Fatima is still alive, is troubling, as if the fact of involuntarily shared a lover condemns Fatima to death.

<sup>26</sup> “It seems you and I were meant to share so many things, the same experiences, the same feelings.”

women and leaving intact only a lasting if non-exclusive bond to a man, the novel tells the story of a tragic loss. The elimination of Amélia Malaise creates a literal *malaise*, an unease, in the reader (1993).

Throughout Francine Noël's work, female friendship is a core value. Her characters seek out equalitarian relationships with men, but above all, they value their friendships, deeming them "better than families" (Noël, 1987: 127) because they are freely chosen, based on affinities and not obligation, and can be dissolved at any time. Without denying conflicts and trauma, Francine Noël sees female friendships as a liberating feminist force. But the end of the trilogy that focuses on Maryse as well as the conclusion of *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* show that the ideal is unravelling, collapsing. Because the friends are ageing, because organized feminism is less fervent than it once was, because at the end of the millennium, individualism and neo-liberalism reign triumphant? In any case, an image lingers after reading Noël, a "lignée de femmes primordiales, originelles, essentielles les unes pour les autres<sup>27</sup>" (Audet, 2000: 119), a source of power, beauty and vitality.

## 6. *À ciel ouvert*: A Return to Female Rivalry

Published in 2007, *À ciel ouvert* pays testimony to the staying power of an age-old vision of female rivalry. Nelly Arcan tells the story of two women in their early thirties, Julie and Rose, the first a documentary filmmaker, the second a fashion stylist, connected by their competition to win the same man, Charles, a fashion photographer obsessed with pornography. Julie wins Charles away from Rose, only to be abandoned by him, and Rose's plan to seek vengeance leads to Charles's death rather than Julie's, as she may have planned.

Though it is in no sense of the word a friendship or a love affair, the relationship between Rose and Julie is intense, passionate and intimate. At first glance, they recognize how similar they are and begin to compete; each can plainly see the

tinest scars left by the plastic surgery the other has undergone. While they are both obsessed with their beauty and spend most of their time shopping, at the gym or in the plastic surgeon's office, they are less narcissistic than deeply convinced that only the male gaze can give them any value. As long as their relationship lasted, Charles rescued each of them from her inner void: "il était devenu le Regard qui englobait tous les autres, il était l'Œil dans lequel elle se tenait<sup>28</sup>" (Arcan, 2007: 142).

In a situation where they compete for men, women are linked only by rivalry and hatred for one another. Rose develops a theory that there are too many women in Québec society, causing a war among them; Julie feels that "chaque femme était finalement la salope d'une autre femme<sup>29</sup>" (Arcan, 2007: 29). Both court their own destruction to hold on to Charles: Julie has her vagina rebuilt to seem like that of a teenager, while Julie covers her body with lacerations when she discovers they excite Charles.

Paradoxically, though these women feel they exist only in the admiring gaze of men, they show little interest for their partners; women fascinate them, because they strive to measure up against them. Bernikow points to the story of Cinderella as the archetype of female relationships under patriarchy, stressing the passage when the stepsisters cut off their toes or heel in a vain attempt to fit the glass slipper. In Nelly Arcan's work, the characters' plastic surgeries play the same role, as each mutilates herself to become the fairest of them all and win the heart of the prince, the aptly-named Charles. And when late one night in a bar, they flirt and Julie kisses Rose on the mouth, it is only a "comédie lesbienne"<sup>30</sup> (Arcan, 2007: 102) meant to excite male spectators, Charles above all.

Toward the end of the novel, Rose, planning to win Charles back and "crush" (Arcan, 2007: 241) Julie, suggests organizing a photo shoot on the roof of the

<sup>27</sup> "A lineage of primordial women, alive since the origins of time, essential for each other."

<sup>28</sup> "He had become the Gaze which included all the others, the Eye that held her."

<sup>29</sup> "Every woman was a bitch for some other woman."

<sup>30</sup> "Lesbian act".

luxury tower where all three live. After being exposed to Rose's redone vulva, Charles falls off the roof to his death, as if the female sex were literally fatal. But why does Charles die and not, as one was given to expect, one of the female rivals? Whatever the reason, his death destroys both women, who depend on his gaze for their very existence. It may be that Rose and Julie do not exist strongly enough as independent beings to live, or even to die.

The isolation and dependency of Arcan's female characters recall Florentine's situation in *Bonheur d'occasion*, without Marguerite's generous offer of help. For Arcan, though other novelists such as Brigitte Caron highlight friendships among women, nothing would appear to have changed since 1945: like Florentine, her characters hate themselves and undervalue other women while overestimating men and feeling they cannot exist without them. Arcan's pessimistic novel reminds us of the powerful and sometimes alienating attraction of the heterosexual romance. Is it even possible to speak here of a post-feminist world, when Arcan's characters behave as if feminism and even bonds between women had never existed? There is no trace, in any case, of the dynamic "movement" that Raymond (1986: 41) associates with alliances between women; Rose and Julie are caught together in a deadly stasis. Ironically, it is the women who are least able to form friendships with other women who need those friendships most; what they have in common, their quest for a powerful man, turns them into enemies obsessed by appearances, victims and creators of mirror games that turn out to be deadly both for them and for the men around them.

## 7. Conclusion

As Raymond says, a critical rethinking of the patriarchal economy of relationships between women creates a "counter-memory" (1986: 25). In literature, we might speak of a "counter-reading" since, before modern feminism emerged, literary critics rarely discussed female friendships in fiction.

Does female friendship, in Québec women's writing, have the "immense force

de désagrégation des structures patriarcales<sup>31</sup>" Éleine Audet (2000: 217) claims for it? Here we see the lure of a heterosexual economy, even in a writer who focuses as intensely on bonds between women as Francine Noël. Divided energies, conflicting loyalties, and female rivalries are all signs of a malaise. At the same time, female friendships are deeply attractive and have strong potential for both personal and social transformation. By giving priority to female bonds, it is possible to avoid being simply a faceless, selfless wife and mother; female friendships are consistently portrayed, when successful, as non-conventional, warm, nurturing, and mutual. In the best of cases, they make it possible to rewrite the patriarchal script of rivalry and hostility towards other women, creating alliances that can be the creative force behind feminist solidarity. They mean choosing and nurturing another woman who is also, in a certain sense, oneself.

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<sup>31</sup>"a huge power to dissolve patriarchal structures".

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