

Book Reviews

Louise HARDWICK. *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013

One of the seminal books in French Caribbean literature is Joseph Zobel's *Rue Case Nègres* from 1950. The book, which was turned into a film in 1983 by Martinican director Euzhan Palcy, tells the story of how a child growing up on the countryside manages, by means of education, to escape a world of the cane fields and neo-slavery. Despite the success of Zobel's story and its impact on Francophone Caribbean writers, the genre of autobiography and childhood stories has received relatively little critical attention. Louise Hardwick's excellent study *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean* is therefore a most welcome contribution to the field. Taking as a point of departure the observation that childhood narratives have reemerged on the French Caribbean literary scene since the 1990s, Hardwick's study encompasses both autobiography and childhood narratives or *récits d'enfance*. In the introduction she defines and discusses these concepts and concludes that the French Caribbean *récit d'enfance* borders on autobiography but cannot be reduced to this genre. Rather, this particular form comes close to Serge Doubrovsky's notion of *autofiction*. However, according to Hardwick not even the broad term of autofiction can do full justice to the books she studies, especially considering the particular (post) colonial context in which they were written. Here, the story of childhood is at once both individual and collective, but more importantly Hardwick is particularly interested in childhood stories, not life narratives.

Hardwick argues that although the French Caribbean does not have the same history of autobiographical narratives as we find in the Anglophone Caribbean and in North America, where the slave narrative constitutes a solid genre, there is indeed another tradition of autobiographical writing that has, as she points out on numerous occasions, passed unnoticed to critics. The first chapter lays out the groundwork for this tradition. Here Hardwick gives the reader a sound and interesting background to the 1990s autobiographical boom as she sheds light on a number of marginal writers, thereby contributing to the rewriting of Caribbean literary history. As many critics, including myself, have pointed out, for far too long the writing of the French Caribbean history of literature has focused on a few major authors, which has resulted in an erroneous linear understanding of the development of Caribbean literature, starting from *négritude*, via *antillanité* and ending with *créolité* (What comes after? Nobody knows). Hardwick shows that the childhood topos has been persistent in writings from the islands and has appeared in many forms in the writings of marginal as well as established authors. For instance, the focus on childhood narratives highlights an area of literature where Glissant has not had a major impact on the generation of authors who started publishing in the 1980s. Hardwick does indeed talk about the childhood topos in some of Glissant's texts, but her reading makes it clear that this particular phenomenon plays a minor part in his writing and thinking (indeed, the autobiographical impulse was not his focus). However, it is noteworthy that whereas Hardwick mentions *La Lézarde*, there is not a single line on *Soleil de la conscience* or on later theoretical texts such as *La Cohée du Lamentin*, where the exact same childhood scenes present in *La Lézarde* reappear.

In the following chapters, Hardwick gives an impressive analysis of the genre of *récit d'enfance* with a particular focus on what Hardwick designates as the "post-1990s" starting with Martinican authors Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, then going via Maryse Condé to Daniel Maximin and Gisèle Pineau, all three from Guadeloupe, to end with Haitian author Dany Laferrière, recently elected to the French Academy. The approach chosen for each author is well thought-out, and by letting one author represent

a particular problem tied to the genre, she smoothly covers the main aspects of the *récit d'enfance*. Hardwick looks at Chamoiseau's *Chemin d'école* series through the prism of mimicry and schooling. She addresses the question of ethnicity through Confiant's books. Condé's *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* is the platform for questioning the notion of alienation, and Pineau and Maximin represent a geopoetic approach to childhood through the perspective of exile. Dany Laferrière is the only Haitian writer examined, and seeing that the Haitian context differs radically from that of Guadeloupe and Martinique, his books allow for further problematisation of the genre, as Hardwick shows how his narratives are a way to address the development of Haiti from the 1970s onwards. These approaches underscore Hardwick's main point, namely, that childhood narratives reflect and deepen other concerns that pre-occupy the authors examined and pervade Antillean literature.

A theme that spans all of the authors studied is the intricate question of the silenced and shameful past, a recurrent theme in Antillean writing (both fictional and factious) and how it resurfaces in the life and formation of individuals. She examines a passage from *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer*, where young Maryse Condé plays with a white girl who, during a role game that goes a bit too far, uses race to excuse her cruel behavior toward the narrator: she beats little Maryse because the girl is white and Maryse is black. This event marks the first time the young narrator is confronted with slavery and racism, questions that have been carefully contained by her parents. From another angle, reading Maximin and Pineau, Hardwick shows the importance of geography and landscape for remembrance, connecting individual destiny with that of a community. The water metaphor, for example, presents the middle passage as a giant deadly womb rather than a place of rebirth; it is a haunted space. On the other side of the spectrum, Hardwick explores how Haitian author Laferrière uses personal memory to restore Haiti's dignity. The movement in Laferrière's childhood narrative is thus the inverse of that which can be observed in Pineau and Maximin, but it still concerns finding ways to connect the destiny of the individual with the collectivity. In fact, all of the texts examined are, in one way or another, about finding different mediations between individual and collective memory, about the ten-

sions between the *je* and the *nous*. Hardwick offers literary readings of this dilemma and avoids theorizing, which is quite liberating, considering that the French Caribbean has been over-theorized at the expense of close readings and other, more literary approaches. Nevertheless, in regard to the tension between the *je* and the *nous*, I missed discussion about the fact that so many women write the autobiographies of their grandmothers or of other people in the family. Pineau's *L'Exil selon Julia* uses this strategy, but Hardwick does not go very far in her comments about writing about the self via others. This is worth noting since the strategy has been used by many Caribbean women. Look, for instance, at Edwidge Danticat's amazing autobiography of her uncle, *Brother I'm Dying*, or Maryse Condé's *Victorine les saveurs et les mots*, to name a few.

The book's broad approach, covering the French Caribbean from the overseas departments to independent Haiti, is informative and rich; Hardwick gains a lot from comparisons and parallel readings and manages to show the existence of a particular genre somewhere in between childhood memoirs and autobiography that seems specific to the French Caribbean. The only down side to such a wide perspective is, of course, that sometimes details slip by in the readings. Some elements are left uncommented, such as the question of the formation of a sexual identity in Chamosieau's last book or the question of publishing policies. Moreover, it would have been interesting to read a discussion about the implications of the Gallimard series *Haute enfance* and about the fact that Condé was asked by her editor to write about her grandmother. Hardwick follows a broad chronological structure, where each author is treated one at a time. So while Hardwick's clear style and structure make this book very pleasant to read, some points could have been better addressed with another, less direct approach. And in fact, the last chapter breaks with the general structure and addresses the topic using a more thematic approach. The chapter is devoted to the question of gender and the representation of parents, notably the female figure of the mother and grandmother along with myths of the woman as a *poteau-mitan* and a *femme-mata-dor*. This chapter is more critical than the others but remains very accessible and devoid of theoretical complications. As the chapter deals with gender, it

would have been interesting to see an analysis of gender issues in relation to the formation of the Caribbean child since the discovery of the opposite sex is central, for example, in Chamoiseau's last *récit d'enfance*, and it plays a notable part in Condé's last autobiography, published in 2012. But Hardwick's focus is mainly childhood itself, meaning that the seed of sexuality has not yet started to grow, so the fine line of passage between childhood and adolescence falls outside of her scope.

Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean is a remarkable study, and my criticism concerns details. Hardwick goes deep into some areas and, in others, she illuminates paths that may be pursued by future research within the field of Francophone Caribbean studies. Also, she has her reasons for choosing a more straightforward approach, and this choice will make the book very useful for courses in Francophone literature. With its beautiful style and pedagogical structure, it is a didactic masterpiece. Also, I should add that the broad scope will appeal to a wide audience. With this solid study of a literary genre proper to the French Caribbean in its extended sense, Liverpool University Press asserts its position as one of the leading publishing houses in the field, combining publications with more theoretical profiles, such as Nick Nesbitt's *Caribbean Critique* (2013), and thorough literary studies such as Hardwick's book.

Christina Kullberg