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Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye, eds., *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013. xxiv + 290 pp. Contributors, illustrations, notes, works cited, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7083-2588-9.

Review by Elise Hugueny-Léger, University of St Andrews.

Most of the essays included in this collection were first presented at the conference “A Decade of Women’s Writing in France: Trends and Horizons 2000-2010” which took place at the IGRS, London, in 2010. The conference aimed to reflect on the trends which had emerged in writings by women in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Although the very notions of “women’s writing” and *écriture féminine* are regularly questioned, writings by women still represent a strong and exciting field in academic and literary criticism. This is not only because women writers embark on journeys to territories not always explored by men, but also because female writers and artists feature some of the most innovative and daring practices in the making of contemporary literature. As such, this collection of essays follows in the footsteps of other landmark studies (including *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction* by Elizabeth Fallaize, to the memory of whom this volume is dedicated [1]) which do not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of writings by women at a specific time and place, but hope to identify trends, features and narrative practices which also “say something” about their time and place of production.

The title of this volume, “Women’s Writing in Twenty-First-Century France,” opens its scope beyond the first decade of the twenty-first century and contributes to its broad appeal. Such breadth confers on this volume a certain responsibility because a collection of essays destined primarily to an English-speaking audience will be of invaluable use as an introduction to women’s writing in twenty-first-century France to those who cannot necessarily read in the original language, including learners of French. The choices made by the editors may eventually influence the syllabi of courses at the university level worldwide. France being a country that sees hundreds of books published each autumn for the *rentrée littéraire*, such a volume will contain just a few of the myriad of authors being published, and some “new names” will unavoidably have benefitted from media attention or the award of literary prizes. “What Passes?”—the question asked by Lynn Penrod in the context of translation—is therefore also a pertinent one to ask when selecting books and authors: to what extent is our knowledge of a culture influenced by what is available in translation and in academic criticism? As Diana Holmes notes, authors who feature in literary criticism are rarely representative of what most people actually enjoy reading. Are best-sellers and “innovative” books, those who traditionally present an interest to the researcher, mutually exclusive? Should researchers focus on challenging books which are not widely read, and leave behind books which have received (too much) critical acclaim and success? Also, how is one to respond to the authorial control which certain writers, such as Annie Ernaux, try to impose on their readership, as Simon Kemp notes?

Amaleena Damlé and Gill Rye address these crucial questions through their choice of contributions and the wide range of authors included. Annie Ernaux, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie NDiaye, Amélie Nothomb, all included in the collection of essays, have gained scholarly interest (in the English-speaking world at least, for some of them) as well as popular acclaim and literary prizes in France. As

Helena Chadderton argues, some books can be both accessible and challenging: Marie Darrieussecq exemplifies the ability to produce texts which are both *lisible* and can be enjoyed for their plot, but are also *scriptible* and highly stimulating, as they experiment with innovative textual strategies to narrate “experience which are not codified by language” (p. 184). But the volume also includes voices and practices which are less-known, but still worthy of critical attention because of their originality, their scope, or the powerful message they send. The fact that the works of Chloé Delaume, a relative newcomer, have seen a surge of interest and many publications in the past few years, testifies to the flair of the editors and contributors of this volume.

The volume opens with a very useful and thorough introductory chapter by Damlé and Rye, who provide a broader contextualisation of themes, topics and narrative features under discussion in the volume. As they note, the essays included in the collection attest to the diversity and vitality of women’s writing in France and, maybe more importantly, the relevance of these texts to broader social, cultural and political issues. The aim of this collection of essays is to identify themes and writing strategies which are characteristic of the start of the new millennium. This inevitably leads readers and contributors to ponder on what makes a trend. Is it the sheer volume of texts published on a topic? Or is it their very presence? Is there not a risk of identifying trends where only a few examples prevail amongst hundreds of publications, of overstating the presence of certain topics? Or is the significance and originality of a theme more representative than its recurrence? Lucille Cairns notes that a handful of texts dealing with the question of *l’enfant caché* have emerged in the past ten years. Yet what is significant is not so much their number as the coming to light of a topic which was previously absent from literary texts and which represents a breaking from silence and taboo.

Cairns’s contribution exemplifies a striking feature in this collection of essays, that is to say, the way in which literary texts published at the start of the twenty-first century reflect broader questions and changes in French culture, society and history. While most authors included in this volume may feature distinctively “female” voices and topics, they also reflect on issues which shape French society at large. In the first section of the volume devoted to “Society, Culture, Family”, Lucille Cairns and Susan Ireland reflect on how to deal with scars and taboos inherited from the past, in the context of Vichy (Cairns) and the *Harkis*’ “integration” in France (Ireland). In a volume which has “Life as literature” as subtitle, much emphasis is placed on the process of the transformation of lived experience through literature—Cairns insists on the fact that texts looking back to the Occupation include a great deal of reconstruction, so do texts written by second-generation or second-hand members of *Harki* families who inherit shameful accounts and memories, as Ireland argues.

Several contributors reflect on how to negotiate the question of hybrid identity and *métissage*: Andrew Asibong’s study on NDiaye, Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy’s chapter on Ananda Devi, and Hélène Vassallo’s contribution on Nina Bouraoui, all challenge the assumption that hybridity and “mixed identity” are positive attributes. Other contributions propose to rethink the notion of “family” as traditional family roles are evolving: Lori Saint-Martin focuses on the “absent father” in two recent texts and Natalie Edwards deals with the question of infanticide and its representation in literary texts. As such, many of these texts echo important debates which have taken place in France in the past fifteen years, such as the reclaiming of fatherhood by fathers, debates on postcolonial identity, the acknowledgment of France’s responsibility in deportations and massacres during the Occupation and the Algerian war, the coming to terms with the idea of a “shameful” past. However, by casting a different light on historical events and proposing the view of “indirect” witnesses, these texts (and contributions) challenge official discourses and preconceived ideas.

The last section of this volume (“Experiments, Interfaces, Aesthetics”), which focuses on narrative and aesthetic innovation, also reflects wider changes in a culture more and more dominated by visual components: as Shirley Jordan notes, the past decade has seen a wealth of publications juxtaposing text and image, which resist the idea that the self can easily be mediated, and which reflect on the use of

images to deal with demanding topics such as illness, loss or displacement. The inscription of loss and trauma on the body are key features of Chloé Delaume's productions too, and Deborah B. Gaensbauer's chapter is telling, as it sheds light on an author who has managed to rejuvenate the autofiction genre, a category dominated by male theoreticians and (wrongly) perceived to deal mostly with the revelation of private details in the public sphere. Both these contributions highlight the ability of writers to propose new types of representations to topics which have long featured in the scope of "women's writing."

Many contributions in this volume also echo evolutions in critical theory, including the emergence of third-wave feminism, post-feminism, and the resistance to the notion of *écriture féminine*—this is noted by Owen Heathcote when he contrasts Antoinette Fouque's *écriture utérine* with the radical "feminism" of Virginie Despentes, and views the "non-gendered" writing of Anna Garréta as a way of opening up new representations of the "human" in writings by women. Anna Kemp identifies the texts of best-selling author Amélie Nothomb as novels which resist feminist interpretation, although they praise the creative power of their female characters. Kemp argues that Nothomb's texts tend to eschew social and political concerns in favour of aesthetic ones—although it should be noted that even in Nothomb's fairy-tale world, social concerns are not absent, and are dealt in humorous ways through the question of community and solidarity.

If these texts have something feminine in common, though, it is probably the desire to break taboos and silence, to give voices to the unsaid, to question stereotypes. A feature which has always been central to writings by women is the merging of the private and the collective spheres. The exposure of private practices in the public domain has been widely studied in the past two decades, but in her essay on "confessions" of the extreme contemporary, Barbara Havercroft engages in a productive way with the model of "feminist confession" put forward by Rita Felski. As such, the role to be played by the reader is a recurring concern in these essays, one also expressed by Natalie Edwards when she discusses texts which deal with the difficult topic of infanticide—should the reader be voyeur, judge, or ally? This is also raised by Simon Kemp who focuses on Annie Ernaux's attempts to influence her readers, while paradoxically casting the authorial figure away from her autobiographical texts. The role of the reader is all the more crucial in autobiographical and autofictional texts where narrator and author share the same identity, as in examples chosen by Hélène Vassallo (in Nina Bouraoui's writing) and Barbara Havercroft (in Christine Angot's texts), and Havercroft makes a crucial distinction between Angot the author, and "Angot" the character.

This volume also includes topics which have been traditionally associated with the domain of women's writing, such as women's representation of the body, explicit sexuality, trauma, relationships, family ties. But it does so by questioning conventional representations of "good" motherhood (Edwards on "baby killers"), by offering nuanced representations of "modern" fatherhood (Saint-Martin on Despentes and Tardieu), by highlighting the role of lesbian desire (Vassallo on Bouraoui). As such, essays focusing on family ties and relationships break away from the mother-daughter dyad which has attracted so much attention in the past decades. Damlé's essay on representations of anorexia (in Nothomb and de Vigan) insists on the threat to the social order posed by anorexia, but tries to move away from the idea of anorexics as victims—her idea of the creative possibilities of the body (including the body of the "anorexic text," a text which challenges interpretations) might meet some resistance amongst readers who view the writing of anorexia primarily through the prism of illness and suffering.

Overall, this volume manages to cover a large range of approaches and authors, whilst retaining its cohesion. Most studies strike a good balance between contextualisation and close analysis, and when some essays lack one or the other, or have to take some shortcuts in their argument, this is most likely due to space constraints (Penrod's essay on translation would have benefitted from a case-study of what, thematically, "passes" in translation from French to English; Kistnareddy's argument that the topic of relationships between humans and animals is a recurring feature in recent women's literature seems rather over-stated; the "contamination anxiety" which Simon Kemp identifies in Ernaux's writing, and

which is not specific to her recent writings, is not contrasted with other representations of authorial control in contemporary literature).

Readers, whether they are undergraduate students or established scholars, will find the comprehensive list of works cited a very useful tool for further study or research. But more importantly, this collection of essays does manage to open new horizons and innovative lines of enquiry in the field of women's writing, by including texts which challenge conventional language and experiment with the limits of (self-)representation. And crucially, the texts included in this collection show that, following a decade marked by the public exposure of intimate topics, there are still taboos to be broken in the twenty-first century--taboos which often overlap between personal and collective history. Writing about them, and choosing to include these texts in such a volume, contributes to breaking silence and guilt, and eventually leads to empowering reading experiences. By showing that topics such as sexuality, the body, personal identity, or trauma, are not disconnected from wider historical, cultural and socio-political debates, this volume provides a fresh take on the famous assertion that the private is political.

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#### NOTES

[1] Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Women’s Writing: Recent Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1993).

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