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Speaking of the Speechless: Babies in Canadian Literature / Janice Fiamengo

Making Babies: Infants in Canadian Fiction. Sandra Sabatini. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2003. 264 pp. \$59.95 cloth. ISBN 0-88920-423-3.

Sandra Sabatini bases her study of infants in Canadian literature on two premises: the first, that representations of childbirth and babies reveal the myths, modes of self-understanding, and social organization of a culture; the second, that the considerable body of Canadian fictional texts about infants has been almost completely neglected in literary criticism to date. Theresia M. Quigley's *The Child Hero in the Canadian Novel* (1991) and Laurie Ricou's *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (1987) are studies of children rather than infants, and the tendency of most critics is to ignore the pre-linguistic child, seen as outside agency and consciousness and therefore of negligible literary or social significance. Yet just as cognitive psychologists of the past 30 years have increasingly recognized the complexity of infants' affective, cognitive, and communicative abilities, Sabatini argues that infant representations are a powerful index of changing social and literary assumptions. These assumptions pertain not only to the meaning of babies themselves — which Sabatini argues has undergone a profound change — but also to the changing relationship between the female body and power as well as the shifting social roles of women and men.

Sabatini begins by noting that, in tandem with medical successes in reducing infant mortality and social efforts to protect and regulate infant health in the early twentieth century, the child assumed a new value in North American society. An explosion of statistics and advice books brought public attention to the baby as a precious resource and potential citizen; at the same time, infants emerged in Canadian literature as a sustained focus of narrative interest. Sabatini organizes her study in decades to chart an ever-increasing proliferation of fictional infants. Her first chapter establishes the binary poles structuring infant depictions early in the century. In L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* books, babies are mainly idealized creatures who bestow joy at their birth or grief when they die; however, a counter-narrative emphasizes the drudgery, exhaustion, and ill health they represent for poor women. Frederick Philip Grove emphasizes the burden of repeated childbearing for rural women in *Settlers of the Marsh*, but he includes a romantic narrative linking mature love with desire for children. In the 1940s and 1950s, Sinclair Ross, Charles Bruce, and Gabrielle Roy explore the meanings of illegitimacy in narra-

tives that ostensibly reinforce but covertly question the stigma attached to it. Roy, in particular, evokes sympathy for the disgraced mother by highlighting her disproportionate suffering.

The transformative moment comes in the 1960s and 1970s, when women writers — propelled in large part by the feminist movement — overcome the silence that had cloaked their bodily experiences. In joy and anger, they begin to detail the meanings of pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, childbirth, and motherhood, determined to explore the pain and mess of previously unspeakable experiences. Simultaneously refusing and celebrating their “biological destiny,” Margaret Laurence, Audrey Thomas, Margaret Atwood, and Marian Engel articulate the ambiguity of female bodily reality. From this point on, infants are increasingly a focus of representation, both by male writers expressing reactions of tenderness and wonder from the 1980s onward and by a later generation of women taking maternal ambivalence in new directions. The volume ends with a study of Terry Griggs’s comic and transgressive depictions of infant consciousness.

Sabatini’s discussion covers the full range of responses to and constructions of the infant, from desire to rejection (and even infant murder) and everything in between. Her decision to set the literary texts within their changing social contexts (the increasing medicalization of childbirth at mid-century, the sexual revolution, women’s increased access to abortion, and the expanding role of fathers) creates a compelling narrative of development. The generalizations, however, do not always stand up to scrutiny. The claim that Montgomery and Grove “offer a sustained engagement with babies that is unique for the early part of the century” (32) ignores the work of Nellie McClung (*Sowing Seeds in Danny* [1908]) and J.G. Sime (*Sister Woman* [1919]), both of whom write about the impact of babies on women’s lives. Sara Jeannette Duncan’s “A Mother in India” (1903) is a provocative exploration of myths and realities of motherhood in the colonial context. Sabatini’s assertion that illegitimacy began to be discussed in the 1940s neglects the Victorian preoccupation with the subject, evident in Canadian novels such as Joanna Wood’s *The Untempered Wind* (1894) and Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), which examine the effects of illegitimacy on mothers who submit to or defy social opprobrium. Greater awareness on Sabatini’s part of the variety of Canadian literature might have complicated her pattern of emergence and development.

Sabatini employs theorists and theoretical concepts — Julia Kristeva on the semiotic chora, feminist rebuttals of penis envy — to demonstrate that representations of pregnancy and infants, not unlike gender, race, and class, are always ideologically charged and culturally mediated. She effectively demonstrates their complexity, but specific theories and citations are not always put to good use. In the first chapter, for example, we are told that, in both Montgomery and Grove, “binary oppositions of real and ideal prove unstable” (45). In practice, however, the reading does not demonstrate this point, indicating, on the contrary, that the opposition between “good” and “bad” babies is a structuring principle in the texts of both authors. The dynamic presence of the two representational poles is not itself evidence of a process of deconstruction. Furthermore, I found puzzling the author’s repeated references to Toni Morrison’s meditation on Blackness in American literature. Sabatini explains that, “While it may seem strange to draw here on the thoughts of an African American theorist and writer, there are provocative similarities evident between the invisibility of blacks in literature and infants in literature” (67). The differences, however, are far more significant, and if the point here

is the centrality of what is assumed marginal, many more appropriate contexts could have been cited.

One of the most engaging chapters treats the feminist fiction of Thomas, Laurence, Atwood, and Engel. Unfortunately, a serious reading error undermines the discussion of Atwood's *Surfacing*. Sabatini's argument is built around her assessment of the plight of the narrator, "who has left one baby with her former husband and aborted another" (120). In fact, the novel makes clear that the story of the divorce and the abandoned child is an elaborate lie created by the narrator to cover over the intolerable truth of her abortion. The abandoned baby is a trauma-induced code for the aborted fetus. It is a shame that neither the author, in the course of her secondary reading, nor the numerous academic readers of this book in manuscript form caught this misunderstanding. That the author has not been well served by her editor is also evident in a number of awkward quotations and factual/grammatical errors, such as the repeated use of "cliché" as an adjective.

These errors in conception and execution weaken a critical study that, in its choice of texts, approach, and fundamental argument, presents a fresh and provocative reading of Canadian fiction in the twentieth century. Many scholars will appreciate the new avenues of inquiry opened by Sabatini's work, which establishes the potential and validity of her subject.

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English-Canadian Women and Literary Culture Reconsidered / Cecily Devereux

Literary Culture and Female Authorship in Canada 1760-2000. Faye Hammill. Cross/Cultures 63. Rodopi, 2003. 245 pp. US\$35.00 paper. ISBN 90-420-0905-5.

As its title indicates, Faye Hammill's *Literary Culture and Female Authorship in Canada 1760-2000* is a study of women writing in Canada from the establishment of British North America in the second half of the eighteenth century to the present. Focusing on six women writers from different periods, this study undertakes to chart patterns of representation along the lines of gender and literary production and to provide ways of understanding the circumstances in settler Canada that have led to what Hammill sees as the continuity of these patterns across more than two centuries. The book is primarily concerned with the representation of authorship in works by women writers, as an index of a particular cultural problematic: all six of the writers in the study, Hammill suggests,