BOOK REVIEWS

Love Upon the Chopping Block by Marou Izumo and Claire Maree (North Melbourne, AU: Spinifex Press, 2000), 175 pp., $ 14.95.

Love Upon the Chopping Block is a delightful book, a dual biography,co-written by Japanese Marou Izumo and Australian Claire Maree (called JJ in the text) that tells the story of an international relationship that also crosses the borders of race, language, age and narrative conventions. It is a vehicle for discussing Japan's recent lesbian history, but also the joys and frustrations wrought by the struggle for queer visibility and personal happiness in a heterosexist environment. It is not a 'coming out' narrative, rather, it is a complex duo-'testimonio' that explores two cultures simultaneously.

The title of the book and the first chapters are translations from a book of the same title published by Izumo in 1993. Taken from a word-play on the Japanese proverb *Manaita ho ue no koi* (the carp upon the chopping board), it refers to situations where there's no choice but to leave things to fate. In Japanese, *koi* (carp) and *koi* (love, passion) are homonyms. Structurally the book contains both Izumo's and Maree's essays as alternating chapters: from their initial meeting in a gay bar in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ni-Chome district, to a year-long stay in Australia with Maree's family, through the many struggles they wage to live together as a couple. Like international lovers in most countries, they must contemplate various strategies to stay together, e.g., for Izumo to adopt Maree, or for her to contract an in-name-only marriage to a man (rejected as a tactic); the former method has been chosen by some women to be protected under Japanese family law. Like marginalized queers elsewhere Maree and Izumo grapple socially and psychologically with their invisibility. What would happen if Izumo were to fall very ill or die? How do you get a landlord to rent to you when one partner is not Japanese and the couple is not seen as 'proper family'? The patriarchal Japanese bureaucracy even insists on a 'respectable family' stamp as guarantee for a lease, which means a lesbian couple must enlist the aid of a father or male professional. Maree describes the complications of being *gaijin* or a foreigner, especially when visas and housing are hard to obtain. Early on she had no choice but to return to Australia and complete her undergraduate degree before she could return with a valid Japanese visa.

Izumo's commentaries at time diverge from the topics of activism and lesbian survival but provide a riveting account of her upbringing in a tradition bound Japanese household. Socialized to be submissive and always use submissive language towards her father, she reveals the frustration of such compulsory 'silence' when she was a child. Her own first-hand contribution to Japan's lesbian and gay history from the 1970s through the 1990s is valuable, if tantalizingly brief. She graciously mentions other pioneers like activist Kakefuda

Kiroko who published "Oh Being Lesbian" in 1992, a year before her own autobiography, "Love Upon the Chopping Board." Izumo also discusses several groups and key events such as the 'coming out' into public view of *onabe* and *okama,* transgendered and transsexual communities more generally, and she describes the AIDS Foster Project in Kyoto, one of several queer activists' campaigns which resonate with international parallels. After returning from Australia where they participated in the annual Sydney Mardi Gras, Izumo and Maree organized the formation of a dance troupe and the building of a float that became a center piece of the first Tokyo Gay and Lesbian Parade in August 1994. Maree also details their involvement with the growing LGBTQ community, especially lesbian and feminist networks. In particular, they gained fame for legally registering the first 'joint living arrangement' document of same sex partners in Japan. In this they were criticized by some lesbian feminists for mimicking heterosexuals; however, they argued that by 'registering' their relationship they were able to 'subvert the marriage and *koseki* (family registration) systems which give rights to limited groups in society' (127).

While this is a slight volume, it provides a real sense of the complexities of their lives as a lesbian couple in Japan. What is central throughout the text is Izumo's and Maree's commitment to one another, for this is overall a tender love story that is well worth reading.

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No se lo digas a nadie (Don't Tell Anyone) by Jaime Bayly (España: Sexi Barral, [1994] 2002), 493 pp.

Jaime Bayly's acclaimed 1994 novel has not yet received the attention that it deserves in the English-speaking world. Although a film was released in 1999, whose screenplay was also written by the author, the novel does not have an English translation. What is interesting to note is the scandal that the film caused in Peru, even to the point of forcing the Peruvian government to ban the first film with a related gay theme ever produced in the country. Notwithstanding, *Don't Tell Anyone* (the movie) received praised in Spain and in every international film festival that it was presented in. The novel, although significantly different from its film adaptation deserves as much attention for the plot and messages that it conveys about the state of homosexuality and homosexuals in a traditional patriarchal and machista Latin American society.

No se lo digas a nadie is the coming of age story of Joaquín Camino, a young man the reader is introduced to at the opening of the novel. The narrator takes the reader through a series of adventures where Joaquín, the second of three children to the upper-class Camino family in Lima, Peru, will experience what it is like to be different from everyone else. The protagonist will question as well as explore his sexuality at an early age with his schoolmate Jorge, who, in order to "justify" his sexual intimacy with another boy, will force Joaquín to first play the role of his "slave" and later that of a woman as he explores man to man relations. The knowledge by others (Joaquín's family and the school principal) will force Joaquín to come to terms with the reality of his sexual orientation and with his country's denial of its existence, thus playing with the idea expressed in the title, don't tell anyone (a connotation to the idea that homosexuality, even in late 20th century Peruvian society must remain in the closet).

As Joaquín ages in the novel the reader continues to follow his sexual adventures and promiscuity, but the author assures us that the protagonist is responsible enough to go and get an AIDS test to ensure that he is not infected nor is he infecting anyone else. Through his adventures, however, Joaquín is exposed to the realities of discrimination and prejudice that exist in his world, both from his ultra-machista and traditional patriarchal father and his overprotective and religious (and marianista) mother who "spoils him" too much, justifying his father's fears that his son will turn out to be homosexual. Even with his "occasional" lovers, Joaquín's fears that he is too different to remain in his country are supported by the fact that many of his companions see their homosexual relations as a phase they are going through and point out that they want to get married and have children. Why? Because, as they say, it is what society expects of them. They do acknowledge, however, that there are things that they need from men, establishing the fact that they will not deny that part of themselves, but that it will have to remain a secret, something no one can find out about.

Even Joaquín plays into this role as he experiments with heterosexual sex, all the while recognizing that he is different and accepting it even at the risk of being alienated from his friends and family. This hetero/homosexual dichotomy is also reinforced throughout the novel via other binary relations, including the images presented of the "cholo" (indigenous population in Peru), the notions of machismo/marianismo, the role of women in contemporary Peruvian society, and religious fanaticism and terrorism (via an indirect correlation to the Shining Path). Other themes such as globalization are introduced as another way of juxtaposing the homosexual theme that is central in the novel.

Bayly's narrative concludes with a confrontation between father, mother and son on the issue of sexuality as well as the reinforcement of the existing gender dichotomy. Rather than divorcing her husband, particularly after finding out about the numerous affairs on his behalf, Mariuchucha believes that God wants her to do everything in her power to maintain her status as a wife. Her

husband, Luis Felipe, on the other hand, sees his marriage as an obstacle to his happiness, but must maintain appearances for the sake of the family name. Finally, Joaquin, in a confrontation with his parents regarding his own sexuality, accepts who he is, confirms it to his parents, and, as a last act of defiance, repudiates all the teachings imparted on him as to how to be a "real man." *No se lo digas a nadie (Don't Tell Anyone)* does not solve any issues, but instead presents a current situation, leaving the conclusion open for further exploration and discussion.

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BRICK LANE by Monica Ali (New York: Scribner, 2003), 369 pp., $25.

Brick Lane, a first novel by Monica Ali, is a sensitive portrayal of U.K.'s Bangladeshi community as seen through the eyes of a young immigrant woman from a village in Mymensingh. Nazreen is sent to Tower Hamlets in London's East End at age eighteen when her father arranges her marriage to forty year old Chanu, a struggling immigrant full of plans, none of which ever come to fruition. Her English vocabulary consists of "sorry" and Athank you," but Chanu sees no need for her to try to learn more; this situation underscores her forced isolation in London. Her daughters eventually teach her English, and also her gossipy friend Razia, but initially Nazreen's London is so constricted that she's afraid to leave her council estate. Instead she spends time fascinatedly watching Torvill and Dean "ice e-skating" on television, that is, when she is not stitching zippers and buttons on clothes as a home-based garment piece worker.

Throughout the novel there is the longing and tug of "back home." Chanu plans to return to Bangladesh "when I am a success," but success never comes. He rants against "ignorant types" who prevent his promotion and distances himself from fellow Bangladeshis he calls "peasants," but his Open University degree is never finished, and he ends up framing his certificate for "cycling proficiency" instead. A complex and sympathetic character, Chanu is too warmhearted to be merely an overbearing patriarch. Like Nazreen, the reader learns to appreciate his kindness and understand that his "unhappy eyes" in his "round, jolly face" reveal he knows he has failed.

Nazreen and Chanu's marriage is notable only for its silent ordinariness, a condition which leads to her progressive unease. "How difficult it was, this business of sitting still," she notes, but there was "nothing to complain of, there was Chanu, who was kind and never beat her. And there was this shapeless...thing that crawled across her shoulders...made her restless and listless." At such a time, young Karim erupts into Nazreen's life. Almost every day he drops off piecework for a new sewing job and she sees that he possesses qualities that everyone desires. Karim is full of ideas about the injustices Muslims experience (the Oldham riots and September 11, 2001 events are retold) and aims to organize against local white nationalists. The smoldering attraction between Nazreen and Karim is beautifully portrayed.

Terrible things happen over the years. Nazreen's sister Hasina, whose letters to her are interspersed throughout the novel, and who made a love match only to have it end badly, is raped then forced to become a prostitute to survive. She has a friend whose husband drenches her in acid. More than one woman commits suicide because of a husband who beats and humiliates her. Nazreen and Chanu also suffer, especially when their infant son dies. Nonetheless, the book is full of hope and humor. Nazreen's character is changed, fortified by experience, and she becomes less passive, even brave.

Although nothing is resolved in the end, much seems possible. Nazreen, Chanu, Bibi and Shahana have to decide whether to return to Bangladesh. Chanu's desire to return home, Nazreen's adultery, and the televised destruction of the World Trade Center intersect to crystallize the Muslim immigrant experience: ordinary Muslims are just as afraid as everyone else, but for different reasons.

Brick Lane unfolds slowly, but Monica Ali's skills as a writer make us care deeply for her characters. By telling one immigrant woman's story, one day at a time, she captures not just the tedium of it, but also the ever changing and rich texture of that life.

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***BEOWULF*: translated by Bertha Rogers**. (Delhi, NY: Birch Book Press. 2000.) 129pp. $20.00.

Ms. Roger's invigorating translation of the epic poem, *Beowulf*, brings it to life for a new generation of readers. This narrative text captures the Anglo-Saxon classic in terms a modern reader understands and enjoys. The pacing and rhythm beg for this version to be read aloud, very loud aloud. The military descriptions portray the mighty hero in a deserving manner. The intensity of the hero's battles with Grendel and his mother leap off the page while the insightful comments made through the story cause self reflection all along the path to the end.

The ending provides, as ever it has, the timeless message to all readers and generations that all things must pass and every hero dies, yet somehow the hero's life overshadows the lives of the moral weaklings who ran from conflict in their time.

The attention to detail and time invested in this translation shines throughout the piece. The lean and clean page setup makes the reader at ease with the work which traditionally translates into much denser spaces with smaller text. The author also provides the beautifully detailed illustrations clarifying a deeper dimension to the entire work. Appendices, one providing person and place listings and one providing a chart of tribes and genealogies, add further value.

The book uses a readable typeface of 12 pt. Binney Old Style and is printed with metal text type on a monotype system "worked by hand." The vellum paper feels and looks fantastic. The overall book portrays a work of craftsmanship containing a work of art built onto a classic literary piece.

This edition is suitable for all libraries and personal collections and the special printing and production qualities make it the perfect gift for all scholars, young and old.

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Utopia, Forgiveness and Freedom Explored in *Femspec* Short Fiction, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2002.

Femspec is a crisp literary journal that focuses on science fiction, fantasy, surrealism, folklore, myth and other supernatural genres from a feminist perspective. The three short fiction pieces in the latest issue of Femspec (Volume 3, Issue 2, 2002) are all appealing. Two of the three positively transport the reader to another time or place.

"Protection," by Tananarive Due, explores the way a society cares for its children. Mothers are chosen by the state, and they give their children over to be raised in a collective environment called "Protection." In this story a woman spots a small, unattended boy outside a grocery store, and decides to take him home even though the penalties for such behavior are severe.

What makes "Protection" effective as a utopian society tale are the format and the use of a female to espouse the state's propaganda about motherhood and child-rearing.

Ms. Due tells the story in flashback via a letter to the editor. The format allows her to deftly weave in the political system that considers staring at a child illegal, kidnapping okay if the kid gets put in "Protection" and infanticide as possibly justifiable. In this skewed legal system, the narrator's actions make perfect sense even though they might make the reader's breakfast less pleasant.

One can argue that criminalizing motherhood goes back to Medea, and the state raising its children still happens in Eastern Europe if a child somersaults well. To have a single woman, however, complying with her barren lot in life, and promoting "the only good child is a collectively-reared one" to such extreme is ironic, to say the least. I could not help thinking of the Vietnam-era expression, "In order to save the village, we had to destroy it!" If Ms. Due's other works are as pithy and succinct as this one, I can't wait to read them.

Ms. Due is the author of four other novels, most recently *The Living Blood*. Her short story, "Patient Zero," has been included in two *Best Science Fiction of 2001* anthologies.

The second piece of short fiction in this issue of *Femspec* is the enigmatic "Love Story With Living Ghost," by Carol Guess. It is an allegory about two female lovers, Patience and an unnamed narrator. The memory of a former lover, Ghost, haunts the narrator. Most of the story is devoted to a conversation between Patience and the narrator throughout which they try to determine whether Ghost is dead. Patience knows this former lover is alive and infringing on their current relationship. She encourages the narrator to forget and forgive Ghost, to come to peace.

The imagery around character, Forgiveness, was remarkable. In one passage, the narrator describes seeing Forgiveness rush by in a train. The narrator is convinced Forgiveness has eluded her, but Patience suggests this is not necessarily the case. "Here's the schedule of trains that circle the city. One

of them is Forgiveness, one of them Self-pity, but no one will tell you which is which."

The image resonates because to forgive someone requires fully acknowledging the pain that person caused. If the one who forgives does not get past the pain, it can turn into self-pity, to wallowing.

The idea of trying to find the right vehicle, going in the right direction towards forgiveness, is an effective analogy. Carrying the analogy a step further, the narrator states, "Forgiveness is a local. It makes all the stops." Truer words about forgiving ourselves or those we've loved have not been spoken. Complete forgiveness is a lengthy, arduous process of acknowledgment, accountability and letting go. It is a lot like getting on a train, getting off, and back on again. Premature forgiveness the illusion of forgiveness creates distance in many relationships. Perhaps some new characters in Ms. Guess's sequel could be "Acknowledgment" and "Accountability."

Guess is the author of two novels: *Seeing Dell* and *Switch*. Her memoir, *Gaslight*, was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award.

The third short story is a surrealistic piece, "A Dream-Question for the Angels," by Rebecca Lesses. Dream Questions are a Jewish tradition from the Middle Ages. Jews believed they could dream true dreams by asking angels to appear "at the border of sleep, and give answers to their questions." The narrator has lots of questions about dreams.

Most of this story is the narrator's dream of being a prisoner in a detention home. The house is bleak and cold, and odd for a prison. Life goes on almost normally except for guards locking prisoners in nightly, and the specter that prisoners can be killed any day, at any time by the guards of Director.

The prisoner lives with her lover and her lover's son in a dank, basement cell. A wall separates the detention home from the rest of the town. One day the narrator is summoned to the Director's office. This is a truly frightening experience since many prisoners leave the office tortured; many do not leave at all. Strangely, the Director asks the prisoner to deliver a package to a house in town. The prisoner will receive extra food in exchange. Although she doesn't know the contents, she leaps at the chance to go beyond the wall and the potential reward of extra food. The rest of the dream comprises the prisoner's journey and the horrific contents of the package.

When the narrator then wakes up crying, secure and warm in her own bed, she asks: "Who or what am I mourning? Did I know these people, and do I know the manner of their death? Was it really me in that prisoner's uniform?"

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This story's success lies in its examination of universally-held assumptions about waking and dreaming life, about entrapment and freedom. Are we free when we're awake, or is it our daily life that imprisons us? When we dream, are we really free to go to another time or existence? Are we imprisoned

for life with the knowledge of our own mortality? Anyone who has ever had the desire to know or live another existence can relate to the narrator's questions for the ages and angels.

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