

MARIE-CLAIRE BLAIS

Born: Québec City, Canada; October 5, 1939

Widely considered Québec's most important living writer, Marie-Claire Blais has written prolifically about the dark side of human experience.

BIOGRAPHY

Marie-Claire Blais was born in a working-class neighborhood of Québec City, Canada, on October 5, 1939. The eldest of five, Blais was a shy and unpopular child, although precociously obsessed with writing; she composed her first poem at the age of six and her first novel, about a boy sold to the circus by his father, at fifteen. By high school, she was totally devoted to her craft, spending long hours at her typewriter and reading widely beyond the prescribed curriculum. Her parents initially tolerated her writing, although they judged it a waste of time that would never earn money; one day, however, her mother read a manuscript she found in a drawer, and, horrified by its disturbing contents, threw it into the fire, provoking a major fight with her daughter.

Although her father, Fernand Blais, had a good job as an electrician at Laval Dairy, he struggled to support his wife and five children. As a result, Blais was forced, at fifteen, to cut her convent-school education short in order to earn a living. She worked in a shoe factory, then at a series of office jobs (nine in the space of a few short years), all of which she despised. She was repeatedly fired because bosses inferred, from the large stack of manuscripts she toted around, that she was doing work for other people on their time. A version of this unhappy period is distilled in the semi-autobiographical trilogy *The Manuscripts of Pauline Archange*.

With the independent income from her clerical work, Blais was able to move out into a room near Laval University, which she plastered with anguished and macabre faces of children, young men, and women cut out of magazines; these monstrous images inspired the suffering, tortured characters that populate her early novels. During

this period, Blais was writing feverishly and taking night classes in philosophy and literature at the university. It was there that she made two crucial contacts: Professor Jeanne Lapointe, Laval's first female literature professor, who became a mentor; and Father Georges-Henri Lévesque, head of social sciences and well-connected in literary circles. When Blais approached the latter for help getting published, he looked over her briefcase of messy manuscripts and encouraged her to come back to him with one coherent piece of writing. Two weeks later, she returned with the draft of her first novel, *La belle bête* (lit. "The beautiful beast"; trans. *Mad Shadows*), and Lévesque immediately took it to a publisher. The novel appeared in 1959, when Blais was twenty years old. It sold 5,000 copies in six weeks, earning her immediate national and international acclaim.

Based on this success, Blais secured a grant to study in Paris for a year, although she was unhappy abroad and moved back to Canada in 1960. She shared a house in Montréal with several university students, read widely in German and English, and continued to write. In 1962, she was discovered by the famous American critic Edmund Wilson, who helped her secure a Guggenheim Fellowship; she held it the following year in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her notebooks from this time describe her feelings of loneliness and isolation from the Harvard elite. They were published as a weekly column in the Montréal newspaper *Le Devoir* and later collected in *Parcours d'un écrivain: Notes américaines* (1993; trans. *American Notebooks: A Writer's Journey*, 1996).

From 1964–1969, Blais lived on Cape Cod with a community of artists and intellectuals that included Wilson and his wife, Elena, as well as the artist Mary Meigs and her partner, political activist

Barbara Deming. Blais read and wrote prolifically during this time, publishing her most famous novel, *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (*A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*) in 1965. The novel confirmed her as one of Québec's preeminent writers and was awarded the prestigious French Prix Médicis. She spent the next several years traveling among Brittany, Paris, and Montréal with Meigs, who had become her lover and would remain a lifelong friend.

Since the late 1970s, Blais has been dividing her time between Québec and Key West, Florida, which, since the 1930s, has been a famous hub for writers, including Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams, and Elizabeth Bishop. Blais is very private and seldom appears at public events, but she continues to write prolifically. Her most recent publication is the seven-part cycle of novels beginning with *Soifs* (1995; trans. *These Festive Nights*, 1997). To date, Blais has written over twenty novels, five plays, two collections of poetry, and a number of nonfiction works. Her novels have been translated into multiple languages, adapted into films, and won many prestigious national and international awards.

ANALYSIS

Over the course of a career that has spanned six decades, Blais has remained true to an affirmation she made in one of her earliest interviews: "I write about monsters because they are alone and unloved [...] I will always write about the ugly or the bad." Though differing in style and tone, her novels are united by their sympathetic portrayals of people who are "alone and unloved"; they are populated by the oppressed and marginalized members of society, particularly children, women, and racial and sexual minorities. Gritty and unflinching in their depictions of poverty, misery, and despair, Blais's works nevertheless contain forceful depictions of human connectedness and an abiding faith in the redemptive power of art.

Blais's early novels focus mainly on the lives of troubled children and adolescents. Her first book, *Mad Shadows* (1959), deals with the tortured relationship between a brother and sister, the former beautiful but stupid, the later intelligent but ugly. Her follow-up, *Tête Blanche* (1960), details the conflicting impulses of a solitary child who oscillates between cruelty and tenderness towards his class-

mates. Her most famous novel, *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* (1965), describes a year in the life of the children in a large, poverty-stricken rural family. The squalor, illness, maiming, early death, and sexual predation that befall the various siblings in this novel are typical of Blais's depictions of childhood as unprotected from the violence and brutality of society.

Homosexual identity and community are other central concerns in Blais's writing. Although she has deliberately resisted being called a 'lesbian' writer, preferring a more universal label, she has dealt directly with lesbian experience in several of her works, first in a monologue written for the feminist theatrical collaboration *La nef des sorcières* (1976) and then, most famously, in *Nights in the Underground* (1978). Building on the themes explored in her monologue, this novel presents a more encompassing view of Montréal's lesbian scene, offering a hopeful vision of mutual love and support among women. This utopian ideal is however called into question in subsequent novels, including *The Angel of Solitude* (1989), set in a lesbian commune, which paints a grim picture of a world ravaged by AIDS. Her 1995 novel, *These Festive Nights*, similarly depicts a group of friends who have assembled to say goodbye to a male friend who is dying of the same disease.

In spite of the poverty, frustration, and cruelty that are ubiquitous in Blais's writing, there are, nevertheless, recurring sites of hope and optimism in her work. Although relationships are fraught and often unsuccessful, Blais depicts the continuous striving to forge meaningful connections with others. She also remains committed to the power of art, with artists of all kinds appearing throughout her writing. In particular, her later novels contain many descriptions of the transcendent beauty of music. Blais has also described her recent work as a kind of polyphonic music, with each character contributing a strain of the melody to build a massive human chorus.

Blais's style has evolved over the many decades of her writing career. Her earliest novels read almost as fairy tales, featuring larger-than-life characters and dreamy, non-specific settings. *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* (1965) marks a shift to a more realistic mode: its characters are more nuanced, its landscapes more specific. Blais will continue in a realistic mode in *The Manuscripts of*

Pauline Archange (1968), which closely describes the lower-middle class Québec society in which Blais herself grew up. At the same time, this novel will inaugurate a use of a lyricism that will come to characterize her writing.

Her most recent novel cycle, comprising the seven-part series inaugurated by *Soifs* (*These Festive Nights*), make use of a highly poetic, stream-of-consciousness narration that drifts in and out of various characters' perspectives. These novels are characterized by long sentences spanning multiple pages, connected by repeated commas and coordinating conjunctions. The difficulty of reading this writing replicates the violence of the books' subject matter, which includes poverty, racism, rape, refugees, and other pressing social issues. At the same time, this technique allows Blais to connect her characters in time and space and thus to paint a massive fresco of humanity in all its variation.

UNE SAISON DANS LA VIE D'EMMANUEL (A SEASON IN THE LIFE OF EMMANUEL)

First published: 1965 (translation 1966)

Type of work: Novel

Satirizing the poverty and conservative values of Québec in the early twentieth century, the novel spans the first year in the life of Emmanuel, born into a large, indigent rural family; the narrative details his impressions and the grim fates of his many siblings.

A Season in the Life of Emmanuel was quickly canonized as a classic of French Canadian literature upon its publication in 1965. It was awarded prestigious prizes from France and Québec, and established Marie-Claire Blais as one of the most important writers of her generation.

By contrast with the dreamy, fairy-tale settings of Blais's earlier novels, the landscape of *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* is unmistakable: cold, snowy, dominated by the omnipresent Catholic Church, and consequently populated by enormous families, this backdrop satirizes life in rural Québec in the early twentieth century. In France,

readers were charmed by the book's quaintness. Back home, however, reaction was polarized: while some criticized its dismal view of society, others hailed it as an opening salvo in a cultural revolution that was just beginning to gain momentum.

The book takes place in the 1940s–50s, a period during which the Catholic Church held tremendous power in Québec. The Church not only promoted conservative values (tradition, authority, family) but moreover directly oversaw education, healthcare, and social services. Many families, like the one depicted in *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel*, were large, agrarian, and poor. The election of a Liberal government in 1960 brought about a period of dramatic modernization and secularization that came to be known as the *Révolution tranquille* (Quiet Revolution). Writers, artists, and intellectuals played a huge role in rejecting the conservative mores of the past and articulating a vision of the future; *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* is considered one of the most trenchant social critiques in the literature of this period.

The novel opens and closes with the perceptions of the newborn baby Emmanuel, the youngest of sixteen children living on a farm with their mother, father, and grandmother. Though it is winter, Emmanuel's mother, who is never named, returns to work in the fields immediately after giving birth; she and the father barely appear in the story and are largely absent from their children's lives. Instead, it is the grandmother, Antoinette, who raises the children; an imposing figure, Grand-mère Antoinette runs the household with a frightening and brutal efficiency.

Although he is the titular character, Emmanuel functions largely as a framing device for the narrative, the real protagonist of which is his brother, Jean-Le Maigre: much of the story is devoted to the latter's exploits, and some of it is even excerpted from his memoirs. Intelligent and rebellious, though suffering from tuberculosis, Jean-Le Maigre chronicles his experimentation with sex and alcohol, which he undertakes with his brother, Fortuné (known as "Number Seven" because he is the seventh child). He also speculates with alarming accuracy about the future of his various siblings, correctly predicting that his sister, Héloïse, will end up in a brothel. Jean-Le Maigre ultimately dies of his illness in the religious boys' school to which he has been sent against his will.

This outcome has been read as an allegory for the fate of the artist in a cruel and ignorant world.

Jean-Le Maigre's siblings fare only a little better: many of them die, some escape to the city to be preyed upon by a lecherous ex-priest (Number Seven) or maimed in an industrial accident (Pomme). Héloïse is kicked out of her convent when she is discovered masturbating and eventually finds work as a prostitute. Ironically, however, she enjoys her vocation and is able to send money back to her family, who are apparently none the wiser about its origins. Moved by her love for the departed Jean-Le Maigre, Grand-mère Antoinette softens slightly and closes the novel with a hopeful assertion about the future. Thus, although *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* largely depicts the abject misery and poverty of life during the early twentieth century, its ending can be read as an optimistic affirmation of a brighter future.

SOIFS (THESE FESTIVE NIGHTS)

First published: 1995 (translation 1997)

Type of work: Novel

Poetically interleaves the stories of various interrelated characters on a tropical island.

While Blais has experimented with many different styles and forms throughout her novels, *These Festive Nights* represents a turning point in her work. It not only inaugurates her longest sustained project—to date, there are seven books in the series—but moreover introduces a new poetic style that has come to characterize her later writing.

The novel follows a number of loosely-related characters on an island (reminiscent of Key West or the Caribbean) on the eve of the new millennium. Many have gathered for a three-day party planned to mark the birth of a new baby, Vincent, and the close of the twentieth century; others have assembled to say goodbye to their friend Jacques, who is dying of AIDS. Orbiting these events is a diverse array of people from varying backgrounds and social classes. Some are wealthy and privileged, like the lawyer Renata and her husband Claude, a judge. Others occupy the other end of

the socioeconomic spectrum, for example, the refugee Julio, a little boy and the only member of his family to have survived the capsizing of their raft. Though differing widely in their experiences, all are nevertheless united by the struggle to escape suffering and find meaning in a world that is often unjust and uncaring.

These Festive Nights picks up on many of the themes previously explored in Blais's novels, including illness, violence, and art. Renata, convalescing on the island after having lost a lung to cancer, is tormented by the injustices she witnesses in the law and in society more broadly. She is haunted by the execution of a black prisoner in Texas and the many other failures of the justice system, including its unwillingness to punish eleven young men acquitted of raping a young girl on a kibbutz and its remorselessness towards a mother (perhaps erroneously) sentenced to death for killing her son. The narrative dwells at length on her thoughts about racism, classism, and the sexism she has both seen and experienced firsthand. While the book contains many themes that typify Blais' work, they are here given renewed urgency by the approach of the new millennium: the reader is forced to wonder what kind of world the baby Vincent and his generation will inherit.

Blais weaves together her characters' storylines by way of an omniscient stream-of-consciousness narration that moves in and out of their various perspectives. This technique was pioneered by modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, who used long phrases and non-standard syntax to communicate their characters' inner lives. In *These Festive Nights*, the seamless transition from one individual to another creates the sense that they are all connected; Blais has likened her writing to polyphonic music, with each individual singing one role in a giant human chorus. Another hallmark of Blais's late style, pioneered for the first time in *These Festive Nights*, is the use of long sentences, spanning multiple pages and connected by commas or conjunctions. This technique creates a breathless effect in the reader, which mirrors the asthmatic breathing of the baby Vincent, whose struggle to draw breath punctuates the story. It also mimics the frenzied pace of a world rapidly hurtling toward the new millennium. If Blais' use of a unifying stream of consciousness creates a utopian sense of commu-

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nity, the difficulty of her writing simultaneously evokes the painful side of human experience.

SUMMARY

Blais is widely hailed as Québec's most important living writer. Her early novels were instrumental in establishing the literary voice of a culture undergoing a huge social transformation: her depictions of the poverty and misery of Québec's lower classes helped galvanize the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. In the intervening years, Blais has become known for her stylistic audacity and trenchant depictions of human suffering. Though differing widely in style and tone, her novels have repeatedly tackled such topics as child molestation, AIDS, racism, rape, and other social taboos.

Myra Bloom

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Le jeune homme sans avenir, 2012; trans. *Nothing for You Here, Young Man*, 2014
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Discussion Questions

- How does *A Season in the Life of Emmanuel* satirize life in rural Québec in the early twentieth century?
- People have likened Blais' later novels, beginning with *These Festive Nights*, to the work of high modernists, such as Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. What is similar or different about their styles?
- In many novels, Blais describes dysfunctional or abusive relationships. What comment do you think she is making about human connection?
- How do Blais' novels reflect her claim that "I write about monsters because they are alone and unloved [...] I will always write about the ugly or the bad"?

POETRY:

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