

10-1-2003

## Francoise Mallet-Joris, by Susan Petit

Marie-Agnès Sourieau

Fairfield University, [msourieau@fairfield.edu](mailto:msourieau@fairfield.edu)

### Peer Reviewed

---

#### Repository Citation

Sourieau, Marie-Agnès, "Francoise Mallet-Joris, by Susan Petit" (2003). *Modern Languages & Literature Faculty Publications*. Paper 16.  
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/modernlanguagesandliterature-facultypubs/16>

#### Published Citation

Sourieau, Marie-Agnès. "Francoise Mallet-Joris, by Susan Petit." *French Review* 77.1 (Oct. 2003): 160-161. Print.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages & Literature Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages & Literature Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

PETIT, SUSAN. *Françoise Mallet-Joris*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001. ISBN 90-420-1216-1. Pp. 158. 25 €.

Devoted to literature since her adolescence, Belgian-born Françoise Mallet-Joris is a prolific author of novels, poetry, biographies, short stories, novellas, autobiographies, children's books, and texts accompanied by images. She is also a translator, essayist, editor of others' work, and lyricist. Recognized by a large readership as a major French-speaking writer, she has been awarded, during her long career, a number of prestigious literary prizes and honors. Yet, despite her wide-ranging work and international acclamation, only one book-length study on her *œuvre* has appeared (Becker's, in 1985). An up-to-date appraisal and comprehensive analysis has long been overdue, and Susan Petit's monograph comes at an opportune time to stimulate such research.

Petit, who has written several articles on Mallet-Joris, presents the author's life and work up to the publication of *La Double Confiance* in 2000. The short introduction focuses on key biographical elements that provide insight into the feminine consciousness, mystical quest, sexual identity, and family relationships that have nurtured the author's creativity. In the subsequent six chapters, Petit concentrates her study on the literary genres Mallet-Joris practiced the most, i.e., novels, short stories, biographies, and autobiographies. To analyze the corpus of sixteen novels, she follows the chronological order of their publication and groups them under headings indicative of the period and general theme that link them together. For each novel, Petit gives a detailed summary and, when appropriate, explains how characters or events in one may foreshadow characters and events in others. She also shows how stories connect with each other and with elements drawn from the author's own life and that of her family and friends.

In the first two chapters "An Apprenticeship" and "Fiction of Independence," Petit presents Mallet-Joris's "facile" early fiction of her rebellious years, and shows how, starting with *L'Empire céleste* (1958), she developed characters of greater psychological complexity. In the novels of this period, she particularly explores issues of adult responsibilities and of spirituality.

In "Fictions of Self-Discovery," Petit concentrates on the novels from the mid-70s to the early 80s in which Mallet-Joris expresses more maturity and technical control. Several works from this period are concerned with the influence of fiction upon individual lives, while others reveal the author's absorption with moral and spiritual issues. In those novels, she questions many facets of established conventions.

In the last chapters, "Mystics and Mothers" and "The Problem of Evil," Petit discusses Mallet-Joris's most recent fiction, which openly discloses her private self and her preoccupation with "spiritual life, the role of women in the family and society, and relations between mothers and children" (99). Combining historical and fictional figures, these narratives explore such topics as the relationship between spirit and body, mystical experiences and religious beliefs, the reality of evil both at the personal and societal levels, feelings of guilt, innocence, and grace, and conflicts between generations.

The chapter titled "Biography and Autobiography" offers a different perspective on Mallet-Joris's creativity. Petit discusses how the parallel practice of these two genres with fiction, over a twenty-year period, has helped to make her a more polished novelist as she expanded the scope of her themes and characters. By writing biographies, she "chose subjects with whom she felt affinities. Through her autobiographical books, she explored her life as a writer, a member of the

family, and a Catholic" (45). The last section of this chapter is particularly interesting for understanding Mallet-Joris's approach to her craft. Petit discusses essays that describe the emotional complexity of the act of writing, and define the writer as a public performer. She shows how Mallet-Joris's writing blurs any differences between reality and fiction, life and artistic performance, and finally between reader and writer. Susan Petit's *Françoise Mallet-Joris* is an important resource that should stimulate scholars to further their studies on such a thought-provoking author.

Fairfield University (CT)

Marie-Agnès Sourieau

McILVANNEY, SIOBHÁN. *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins*. Modern French Writers 6. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001. ISBN 0-85323-547-6. £18.95.

It takes courage to venture an overview of the work of an author who continues to bring out new books, as Annie Ernaux does, at a steady rate. In the case of Ernaux, moreover, the material in question is quite heterogeneous, ranging from early novels, to ethnobiographical texts, to personal journals of a very intimate nature. While it may be difficult to categorize such a corpus, one constant is what Siobhán McIlvanney terms its "auto/biographical" subject matter (3), and it is in that sense that a "return to origins forms the leitmotif of Ernaux's writing" (13). In her approach, McIlvanney espouses "a broadly feminist hermeneutics," drawing frequently on the ideas of Beauvoir and Bourdieu, both of whom emphasize the "formative influence of environment on subjectivity" (14).

This study is organized in an interesting way: in a given chapter, McIlvanney treats two (or in one case, three) works, on the premise that "each of Ernaux's texts has a potential sister text with which it either shares common ground or complements well" (15). Certain pairings are to be expected: the two earliest novels, *Les Armoires vides* and *Ce qu'ils disent ou rien*, in chapter 1, for example, or, in chapter 3, *La Place* and *Une Femme*, auto/biographical texts devoted respectively to Ernaux's father and mother. The logic of other groupings, however, is less apparent. In chapter 2, the attempt to base "a feminist reading of Annie Ernaux's portrayal of the female condition" (49) on two books as different as *La Femme gelée* (Ernaux's third and last novel) and *Passion simple* (the account of an affair with a foreign diplomat) leads eventually to the acknowledgement that any such interpretation of the latter is at best "problematic" (84). Or again, the fact that "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*," *Journal du dehors*, and *La Vie extérieure* all share a diary format seems a rather tenuous reason to consider them together, as McIlvanney does in chapter 4, when the motivation for writing and the degree of emotional engagement are so dissimilar: "*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*," which chronicles the mother's struggle with Alzheimer's, is intensely personal and introspective, while the other journals record observations of everyday life in the public domain. With the recent appearance of two more books by Ernaux (*Se perdre* in 2001, *L'Occupation* in 2002), moreover, one can imagine new combinations within the sort of format proposed by McIlvanney. *Se perdre* (FR 76.5, 1036-37), for example, the journal Ernaux kept of her affair, might now appear to be the logical "sister text" to *Passion simple*. Such musing aside, these latest publications do confirm the validity of McIlvanney's key assertion that "the recurrent intertextuality of Ernaux's writing [. . .] encourages the reader to re-engage with previous