NATHAN RABALAIS


This intriguing collection of stories and prose poetry is Beverly Matherne’s sixth bilingual (French/English) publication, and follows her work of biographical fiction Lamothe-Cadillac: Sa jeunesse en France / Lamothe-Cadillac: His Early Life in France (2009). Matherne, who has roots in a small Cajun town west of New Orleans, is Professor Emeritus of English and creative writing at Northern Michigan University. Bayou des Acadiens / Blind River consists of twelve stories and prose poems, first presented in French and then in English.

The author’s ability to maintain a clear and emotive poetic voice in both languages is astounding. One could say that Matherne acts as her own translator, but in reality her linguistic capacities surpass mere translation. Perhaps the true beauty of this work is the way in which the French and English languages permeate and thrive off each other. The reader will find tasteful (and culturally relevant) smatterings of English in the French versions, and French in the English. For example, one might point to a pleasant recollection of the “gathering of piquants, thorns, from the picquant-mourette tree.” (84.) Her character affectionately evokes family members through nicknames (Nénaine, Tata, Doux-Doux). This mélange of French and English is a testament to Matherne’s cultural foothold in the bilingual context of rural Cajun country and affirms her dual-identity, negotiating between her Cajun and “American” selves. Matherne even expresses, through the voice of her character Jeanne, her fear of being “aussi déracinée que la plupart des Américains,” or “as uprooted as most Americans.” (51, 115.) However, Matherne’s poetic voice oscillates effortlessly between these two identities, proving them to be more complementary than mutually exclusive.

In a sense, to say that this work is “bilingual” is selling it short. Even the French-language stories contain distinct registers of French, ranging from the Cajun vernacular language of the author’s childhood, to the “foreign” French of a bacchanalian priest from France, to the narrator’s “standard” French. This intriguing aspect of the book is a testament to the linguistic complexity of Francophone Louisiana. Although this work is accessible to French- and English-speakers everywhere, a useful glossary at the back of the book clarifies the colorful vocabulary that may be new to
readers, like ouaouaron (bullfrog), rouaison (harvest), or tchaqué (drunk).

Matherne is capable of incorporating all of our senses into her writing. Case in point: “Le hangar à tabac” / “The Tobacco Shed,” the opening story of the book inhabited by poignant childhood memories. She describes home as “a triangle of farmland the color of chocolate,” where one can smell the drying tobacco and the summer rain “hammering galvanized roofs” (81). The reader is drawn into haunting memories of children playing, singing, and putting on a make-believe Mass with Life Savers serving as the Corpus Christi. Interwoven into this narrative is a nursery rhyme of sorts about the folklore figure, Madame Grands-Doigts, who for generations of Cajun children made an impression far from imaginary. Matherne remembers: “I thought of Madame Grands-Doigts, the stories Mémère used to tell. More than just a figure of folklore, Madame Grands-Doigts was real, ever present, and ready to gouge our eyes with her pointed fingernails whenever we misbehaved.” (86.)

Madame Grands-Doigts va t’attraper.
Madame Grands-Doigts va t’attraper.
Avec ses ongles bien acérés, […]
T’es fort en peine d’y échapper,
Madame Grands-Doigts va t’attraper. (86-87.)

Through such recurring memories, Matherne invokes those intangible remnants of a fragile cultural patchwork. These ephemeral glances toward her past allow the reader to peer into the persistent rêveries that seem to linger on somewhere in the background of Louisiana’s collective imagination.

Matherne’s writing covers a large gamut of emotions, memories, and spaces. From the belly laugh inducing comedy of “Les glissades” / “Slipping Accidents,” to the solemn, iconic references steeped in the author’s Cajun and Roman Catholic upbringing. Matherne offers us glimpses into the distinctive Cajun sense of humor, at times bawdy and carnivalesque, at times stoic and resistant in the face of life’s difficulties. “Amira,” a clever mise-en-scène of a conversation with a stranger during an overnight layover at the Detroit airport is an example of how people and places that have marked the author’s life become interconnected points of reference on the map of her poetic and narrative universe. The toponym in the work’s title functions as lieu de mémoire as well as point de départ from which Matherne traces a trajectory between her childhood in bayou country and her growth as an author. Somehow this journey is
as relatable as it is unique.

*Bayou des Acadiens / Blind River* is a welcome addition to a growing number of high-quality works from French-speaking Louisiana writers. This engaging text is published by Éditions Perce-Neige of Moncton, New Brunswick, which has already published poetry by several celebrated francophone authors from Louisiana in its collection *Acadie tropicale*, including Jean Arceneaux, Deborah Clifton, and Zachary Richard. In addition to being an exceptional and moving text, Matherne's bilingual work will also serve as a useful tool for students of French, specifically Cajun French speakers who are more accustomed to reading English. Matherne's most recent work is to be enjoyed and savored in French, English, and perhaps most of all, in both.