

Mom's Emancipation

by *Géraldine Farges*

By retracing the itineraries of their mothers, two authors reconstruct the lifestyles of two teachers in the 1960s and 1970s and their quest for economic and intellectual emancipation.

About: Christine Détrez and Karine Bastide, *Nos mères. Hugnette, Christiane et tant d'autres, une histoire de l'émancipation féminine*, La Découverte, 2020, 280 p., 20 €.

Nos mères (Our Mothers) is a book that is as disconcerting as it is fascinating. Christine, a sociology professor who lost her mother Christiane at the age of five, and Karine, a high school teacher with a degree in gender studies who was very close to her mother Hugnette without really knowing her, join forces to carry out a unique investigation, which is both intimate and socio-historical. *Nos mères* reveals the paths toward emancipation of two "ordinary" women (p. 6), who are placed in an era, a generation, and a profession (that of teacher). After first presenting the project, its methodology and its collective dimension, the book explores the traces left by Christiane at the *école normale*, where she studied to become a teacher, and in Tunisia where she was a development worker. It then turns to Hugnette, and notably her correspondence of more than twenty years with Simone de Beauvoir, before looking at the generation of girls who became women in the 1960s and who fought for their bodies to belong to themselves. An analysis of the reactions of Christiane and Hugnette's husbands, "the men of these women" (p. 279) and also the fathers of the authors, provides counterpoint.

Without exhaustively covering the content of each chapter, this review offers a synthesis of the book along three crisscrossing dimensions: the atypical character of

the volume, Huguette and Christiane's intersecting experience of teaching, and their relative emancipation from "close domination."

"A Slightly Crazy Project"

The book is neither a self-history nor does it involve a genealogical approach. Starting from life stories, it tries to departicularize Christiane and Huguette and to explain biographical orientations and bifurcations in terms of gender, social background, generation and socialization, without neglecting the effects of personal encounters. Concretely, it is about "thinking case by case", that is to say "taking into account a situation, by reconstructing its circumstances – its contexts – and thus reinserting them into a story: the story that is called upon to explicate the particular arrangement that makes a singularity a case" (Passeron and Revel, 2005, quoted on p. 13).

The project was born from an encounter in a bookstore, during which Christine and Karine talked about their mothers. Christine wrote a novel about her mother, whom she hardly knew.¹ For Karine, who was very close to her mother, a writer who left behind many documents and manuscripts, writing about her would be "too hard" (p. 6). So "Christine proposed this slightly crazy project to Karine: they would use the too-much of the one to fill the nothing of the other" (p. 7). On Christiane's life, there are only scattered traces available. The project, which is fueled by a personal quest, was done inventing the path as it went along, and it was punctuated by numerous encounters: with study subjects, witnesses to the lives of Christiane and Huguette, with scholarly colleagues who became allies out in the field, and with authors, in particular Annie Ernaux, who read the manuscript and offered suggestions.

Christiane and Huguette were both born in the 1940s and are now deceased. "Two women who have been put to rest" (p. 8) and whose lives could be recomposed thanks to the investigation. They were teachers and they both married teachers when they were very young. Nonetheless, a crucial difference in their *vitas* is related to their social backgrounds.

¹ Christine Détrez, *Rien sur ma mère*, Éditions Chèvre-feuille étoilée, Montpellier, 2008.

Two Beginner Teachers in the Mid-1960s

The daughter of a father who was a police officer and a mother who worked as a cleaning lady to make ends meet, Christiane studied at the *école normale* for girls of Douai (ENF). Interviews with Christiane's former classmates allow us to get to know what ordinary life was like in this establishment. While mostly studying to become teachers in the rural schools where they grew up, the students or "*normaliennes*" learn to excel: "dress, morality, language have to be exemplary" (p. 39). Like most of the students from working-class backgrounds, Christiane is preparing for the "*sciences ex*" baccalaureate at the ENF. Studying the files of the students/teachers in Christiane's class reveals the social differences: some *normaliennes*, from more privileged social backgrounds, will do the (more prestigious) "philosophy" baccalaureate and go on to study at the university or to teach at high school level. The investigation manages to make Christiane "terribly alive" (p. 30): her report cards say that she is "restless, she is childish, she has bad posture, she speaks badly, she does not know how to be organized. In short, she can't stay still in one place: above all, she doesn't know *her place*" (p. 42). "Her place," i.e. that of a teacher, representing the French Republic in the schools, obtained at the end of an honorable scholastic itinerary, marked by success (in the ENF entrance exam, in the baccalaureate), far removed from what her parents and, still more so, her grandparents had known. As it so happens, the inspector who carried out the inspection at her first place of employment expresses confidence in her, proof that the years she spent at the *école normale* have brought about a social transformation in Christiane, distancing her from her original social milieu.

Christiane also does development work in Tunisia with her husband Jean-Luc, whom she met at the *école normale*. At the end of the 1960s, mass tourism does not really exist yet, and trips abroad are rare. Development work is an adventure, a "magical" interlude (p. 85). Development workers experience boredom and idleness, but also new possibilities: for example, leisure activities like tennis and sailing, which are reserved for the elites in France. The "doubled" salaries (p. 107), the inexpensive luxury, the employment of household servants, change their lives.

The social gap separating Huguette and Christiane is evident in the different paths they took to becoming teachers. On Huguette's side, her father was an engineer and her mother an employee of the postal service, and her paternal grandparents were teachers in the public schools in Lozère. Already a mother, Huguette obtained a baccalaureate in philosophy in high school, like her husband Gaby, despite the fact

that he came from a more working-class background. The couple turns toward teaching at the urging of Huguette's family, two "coerced vocations" (p. 116). Moreover, Huguette does not depart from the "royal road" that the *écoles normales* represent at the time, she is not integrated into the network of her former pupils and feels isolated in her work. She and Gaby teach in Lozère, where teaching conditions are difficult. Huguette works in an unsanitary "shanty school." Huguette (more than her husband) suffers from the material conditions, which her childhood had not prepared her for. Sensitive to injustice, Huguette sends a letter to Simone de Beauvoir, who replies.

It is the start of a new life: a first article published in *Les Temps modernes*, then a book, *Institutrice de village*, published in 1969 by the Mercure de France publishing house. The book is a success and it is still talked about today in the valleys of Lozère. Articles in the press and an appearance on the radio program *Radioscopie*, "a monument of the audiovisual landscape of the time" (p. 130), give Huguette a certain notoriety. Writing does not make her life as a teacher any easier: Huguette is accused of being a spoiled child, of demeaning the teaching profession, of showing disdain for rural communities. Moreover, this is her only success in writing: despite the fact that Simone de Beauvoir reads them prior to submission, her later manuscripts are rejected. Nonetheless, for Huguette writing is not only a way of rehabilitating a "*déclassé*" social condition, it is also a form of emancipation with respect to her condition as woman.

Rethinking the Emancipation of Women Case by Case

The trajectories of Christiane and Huguette bear witness to the weakening of "close domination" (Memmi, 2008), between children and parents, husband and wife. In the 1960s, women leave the home by way of studies, work and youth culture. Nonetheless, "modern" women are confronted by numerous contradictory demands: "work, get married, have children, be beautiful – but in moderation, elegant, but without spending too much, while still taking care of everyday, domestic tasks" (p. 252). By way of everyday, underground forms of resistance, Huguette and Christiane will challenge the constraints and try to reinvent their condition. But they do so in different ways.

If, at the *école normale*, Christiane makes friends, discovers Sheila and Françoise Hardy, and flirts, development work constitutes the decisive escape route. Tunisia

represents “liberation from morals, far from the constraint of the family’s stares” (p. 107): Christiane may have had a lover there, or perhaps she did not, but she certainly wanted to get a divorce, to give Jean-Luc custody of their two children, and above all not to have any more. As a “mother with an abandonment syndrome” (p. 273), she has her tubes tied, a practice that was encouraged in Tunisia at the time. Christiane dies in a car accident in Tunisia at the age of 26; Jean-Luc decides not to talk about her anymore, and many questions will remain unanswered.

If Christiane’s forms of resistance are individual, Huguette’s are more collective. In high school, Huguette flirts with boys whose ideas are similar to her own. Huguette undergoes a feminist socialization by virtue of her readings and her correspondence with Simone de Beauvoir, in whom she confides. Her book brings her a journalist as a lover. Pregnant with a fourth child, she gets an abortion, “a crime of *lèse-maternité*” (p. 272), which in 1972 could constitute an act of militancy. Huguette joins the Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC). If she changes her first name and uses her maiden name again, Huguette will never feel truly “unchained” (p. 216), not managing to divorce or to “alleviate her original status of *déclassé*” (p. 206). In her letters to Simone de Beauvoir of the time, she describes “increasing serenity, which it can be hoped is not only renunciation” (p. 149).

A Balanced Book

Nos mères is a book that is balanced in several respects. The product of a kind of “detective work” (p. 86), it reads like a novel, creating effects of anticipation, rendering the life of an era by way of the details of letters, cafeteria menus, outfits and hairstyles, borrowing from the style of Georges Perec. Overflowing in details, the book is a goldmine of information: for example, on “pedagogical families” meant to facilitate unions between men and women studying to be teachers, on the romantic relationships between girls in the *écoles normales*, on the “shanty schools.”

A socio-historical investigation based on unevenly plentiful biographical resources, the book accepts its imbalances, which may seem to be lacking in the analysis if the book is read out of interest in its “subthemes”: the condition of teachers or of women. There are thus few contextual elements provided on the experience of the substitutes who, like Huguette, are going to join the teaching profession in large numbers in the 1960s. From the perspective of four ordinary lives (many pages of the

book are devoted to Jean-Luc and Gaby), both feminine and masculine gender norms are explored. But the book makes you want to know more about these men who would have liked not to have children, to have fewer, or to have them in other ways. And what can be said about those teachers who, like Jean-Luc and Gaby, nourished the desire to jump to another profession very early on?

Built on emotion, the book also provokes it: as the authors (re)discover their mothers, we feel a deep empathy for this astonishing experience in the field. But the book is not a novel. Even if the authors do not hide any of the “blows to the heart,” they narrate “the investigation that takes precedence” and that makes the emotion less intense. The investigation that creates new connections, renews existing ones and makes it possible to recreate the family: proving that the relationship to field work in the social sciences is also a way of experiencing life.

Further reading

- Memmi D. (2008), « Mai 68 ou la crise de la domination rapprochée », in *Mai-juin 68*, D. Damamme, B. Gobille, F. Matonti, B. Pudal, Paris, Les Editions de l'Atelier.
- Passeron J.-C. and Revel J. (2005), « Penser par cas. Raisonner à partir de singularités », in *Penser par cas*, J.-C. Passeron and Jacques Revel, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS.

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