

Mum in Academe

Juliet McMaster

AWA Woman of the year for 1999

[Patricia Clements , Department of English, introduced her colleague and friend Juliet McMaster who gave the following lecture]

First, my thanks: to the Academic Women's Association. for the great honour of this award; and to Pat Clements and Isobel Grundy, for nominating me, and for Pat's wonderful introduction, which I wish I deserved.

I know there were other nominees for this award more worthy than me. But I conclude that it has come my way this year because this year is my last, and so it's now or never: I'm retiring. And finally, thanks to my friends and family who have kindly come tonight; and especially and always, to Rowland.

I hope you'll forgive me if I talk personally and anecdotally tonight. As a specialist in the British novel, and one who works on a number of women writers like Jane Austen, Frances Burney, the Brontës, and George Eliot I could give you a feminist literary talk. But I know there are others here who could do that better than I. And because I'm just completing my last term of teaching, with my very last classes ever coming up tomorrow, I choose to look back at my long time at this University, first as graduate student and then-for thirty-five years! -as English prof. Please bear with me.

This is my swan-song!

This term I was asked to give a talk about my project the Juvenilia Press at Preview Days, and I did it with two graduate students who have worked with me in editions we're doing. The audience was mainly young high school students in Grade 12, all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed with the thought of launching soon into the big bad University themselves. But one of the people who talks to me afterwards was a mother, who had come with her daughter.

She introduced herself, and said she had read a story about me in the Journal a few years ago-I think it must have been the story about the Molson Prize. At the time, she said, she was going through a bad period, overwhelmed with looking after several young children, and despairing of ever doing something with her life beyond the care of others. The Journal story said I had four children. And she said to herself, she told me, "If she can have a have a successful career as well as having four kids, so can I." It seems that was something of a turning point in her life. She told me she now has a rewarding job, and her

kids are doing well and coming to university. She had never expected to meet me, she said; but she regarded this as an opportunity to come and thank me.

I was deeply touched. And it made me think how we become examples, sometimes, without even knowing it. And, for all the good that may do, it's worth sharing our stories with each other when opportunity arises.

It was because of that incident that I have decided to call my talk this evening: "Mum in Academe".

I'm afraid I don't really deserve the credit of having brought up four children, though I wish I did. Rowland and I have had two between us, Rawdon and Lindsey, now in their late twenties. And I have been privileged to be the step-mother of his other children, Geoff and Loren, though they haven't lived much of their lives with us. Today I'll have most to say about my daughter Lindsey, because it has been with her that I have shared most on the subject of being female, with intellectual aspirations.

As I look back on my long career at this University, in the context of being an academic woman, I realise that I have been very fortunate, perhaps more than most of you here, in having consciously experienced little in the way of sex discrimination. I know some of my colleagues would say that I have actually benefited from being a token woman in various contexts-such as in getting elected to the Royal Society, for instance. I'm not about to be apologetic about that, because we women have done more than enough of putting ourselves down. But I've speculated a little about why I have had it so good.

I believe that one advantage I have had was in going to a girls-only school, back when I was a kid myself, in Kenya. There are plenty of things wrong with segregated schools, God knows; but there is this major advantage: it takes sex right out of the academic context. I never had to worry about whether some guy I fancied wouldn't like me if I was too bright-because there were no guys around.

The kinds of rivalries and jealousies that happen in school were there a-plenty; but at least they didn't concern who was dating whom, or whether one should pretend to be dumber than one was in order to be popular. And because that hasn't been any part of what I grew up with, I've always had a basic assumption that I'd be judged on how good I am at a given job, not on how I'm dressed or how pretty or otherwise I am. That's quite an advantage. Like Pat Clements and Isobel Grundy, I went to Oxford, to St. Anne's College. And I still think of getting into Oxford, from the Kenya Girls' High School in Nairobi, as about the toughest thing I ever accomplished. A few years ago, when I was talking to the present Principal of St. Anne's, Ruth Deech, she told me that there was a kind of watershed around the late 1950s, when I took my BA: The women who came before, however gifted, however good their degrees, seldom made it into the work force, seldom achieved a career. Those were still the days when marriage meant staying home with the children: middle class husbands were made to feel ashamed if they weren't the sole bread-winner, children of working mothers were constantly reproachful. After that watershed period, she said, the statistic altered materially: suddenly a much higher

proportion of Oxford women graduates, even the married ones, managed to get into rewarding jobs, and keep them. Some critical mass must have been reached, and I just made it across the line. Lucky again! (Of course for Isobel and Pat, who are mere chickens in comparison with me, it has been a breeze!)

I came to Canada, and to this University, because my then husband got a job here. I was rather proud of my Oxford degree, and thought I'd be perfectly qualified to get into a program leading to a PhD. But the Head of the English Department in those days was a bachelor of the old school, who thought scorn not only of PhDs (he didn't have one, you see) but also of women. "Are you a serious student?" he asked me, I remember. I didn't know then of his notorious misogyny; but I did feel I didn't deserve the question. He also told me that PhDs were not worth having, and that he had no intention of instituting one in his department. So I gave up, and betook myself to a job in the City Library. And there I might have stayed, but for another turn of fate to my advantage: that old-school bachelor retired, and Henry Kreisel took over as Head of English. Presently, I received a letter to the effect that he planned to launch a PhD program in English in the next year, and could offer me a teaching assistantship while I

took my master's degree in the meantime. I never looked back. And I became the first PhD in the Arts Faculty in 1965, when I also became an Assistant Professor in the English Department.

Having said I haven't consciously experienced much sexual discrimination, I find I'm remembering a number of exceptions. The interview with that Head of English was one of them-but subsequently I heard far more staggering stories of his attitudes. And another happened in the Phys. Ed. Faculty, during my graduate student days.

As a teenager in Kenya I had been an avid fan of swash-buckling movies. And being one who likes to put my fantasies into practice, I badgered my mother until she found me a coach to teach me fencing. I fenced at Oxford, and then I took to fencing here at the University of Alberta. When I was the President of the Golden Blades Club, and fencing for the University of Alberta, I had to deal with the Administration in the Phys. Ed. Faculty: not your most gender-sensitive location on campus, in those days. I had gone to see the administrator in question with my list of equipment needed, carefully matched to the budget available, and I went through the business with efficiency, as I thought. I didn't know why I was getting stone-walled: so far as I knew, it was a simple matter of communicating our needs and handing over a list. But I was getting nowhere. At that point I did accidentally what a more clued-in girl would have done well before: I dropped my books, and fumbled while picking them up. That was all it took: the male administrator was mollified, and I pulled off by my clumsiness what I couldn't pull off by my efficiency. If I'd gone to a co-ed school I'd have known how to do that sooner.

The fencing was a large part of my life during my graduate student days, and remained so until I had kids to take up my time instead. When I got the PhD, there was a nasty moment for me at the Convocation ceremony: I had been rehearsed on crossing the stage promptly after the Dean announced my name, and I had learned just how many seconds

the routine took. But when the Dean of Graduate Studies got my name, instead of simply announcing me, he held up his hand dramatically, and called out "STOP!" for all the Jubilee Auditorium to hear. O God, I thought, they've found me out at last. And I pictured to myself their forming a hollow square and ritually ripping off those ill-gotten robes and hood.

Instead, though, he made a special announcement about how I had become Alberta Woman Athlete of the Year as well as being the first PhD in Arts. "So, eminent Chancellor," announced Dean McCalla, "she has not only brains, but br..." -he fumbled, then corrected himself to more formal language-"... er, ...athletic ability!" So my other life as fencer became rather publicly part of my University identity. Early in my career as Assistant Professor I organised a "duel," as publicity for the fencing club, where the media were invited. It happened at dawn in Emily Murphy Park, and two boys from the Golden Blades turned out with sabres and the skimpiest of protective clothing. Our "bad guy" took a very real and agonising whelt across the chest, which he regarded as a mark of honour. That event made world television; but I don't think it much increased the membership in the fencing club!

I think that my swashbuckling reputation has helped me, if anything: People haven't messed with me!

Many of us women in academe have had a tough time balancing our domestic lives with our professions. Again I have been fortunate, in finding ways to avoid conflict by combining them. Want to know how that's done? Here's one tip: marry your supervisor! That's what I did, although by the time we thought marriage my degree and Rowland's supervision were over and done with.

And since the subject is being discussed at the University level at the moment, I'll pause briefly on the issue of spouses in the profession. Rowland and I were lucky in that we were both already hired by the time we got together, and the institution couldn't easily fire us for getting married. The English Department has been hospitable to married couples: and though we have benefited from that, I firmly believe the University has benefited too. It gets almost double the work out of the two spouses: the amount of shop that has got talked at our mealtimes would fill books. And in fact most of the books we have written have had their ur-existence as curtain lectures or supper conversations.

Then the kids arrived. It does take management: I had Rawdon on a post-doc, and Lindsey in a summer. I've heard that women athletes are recognised as having a material advantage right after childbirth: they're able to run further, sprint faster, and jump higher. Well, after my kids I've had a burst of energy too: two of my best articles, as I judge them, were written immediately after those birthings.

But as they get beyond the sleeping-infant stage, kids take time, no doubt about it. And I have had the agony, familiar to working mums, of the child whose earliest words included the cry, "Mummy, don't go!" It was in those early days that I had to find ways to bring my work to share with the kids, and so far as I've been a specialist in the English

novel. But when my kids were small I took to teaching courses in Children's Literature as well. That way I could do some of my classroom preparation while reading bedtime stories. I've done a lot of that in my time! I've also marked papers while reading them aloud: mind you, for that I have to set the right kind of topic: "Write a fifth book of Gulliver's Travels," reads one of my essay topics for the first-year survey course. "Write and illustrate your own story for children," reads another, for a children's literature course. Those essays went down pretty well as Saturday-afternoon reading-aloud matter. And after all, a child is a real authority on stories for children.

I've had some memorable exchanges with my kids over children's literature. Kipling's Jungle Book became an exciting text for Lindsey as it had been for me. I'll share one of our exchanges with you:

Lindsey knew a story from my childhood in Kenya that was told me by my uncle, a man who bred animals for zoos. He had a chimpanzee called Susie that lived in a tree, tied with a long rope. When I was still at the crawling stage, he told me, Susie managed to grab me, and she retreated with me up into her tree, enjoying the experience of having a real live doll up there. My mother got very up-tight about the matter. But my uncle produced a banana and waved it seductively. Susie, it seems, conducted a brief internal debate: "Baby, banana? Banana, baby? BANANA!!" So she traded me.

Well, when I read her the Mowgli stories from The Jungle Book, Lindsey was particularly struck with the ritual oaths uttered by Mowgli and his jungle friends. "Now, by the bull that bought me!" exclaims Mowgli. "Now, by the broken lock that freed me!" swears Bagheera. Lindsey was very envious. "I want an oath like that too!" she announced. But she was exasperated that she couldn't think of an incident sufficiently defining of her own identity. "It's easy for you, Mum," she said bitterly: "You can say, 'Now, by the Banana that bought me!'"

My discourse with Lindsey on feminist issues goes far back. Because there was no instruction in art at the school Rawdon and Lindsey went to, I used to give them drawing lessons myself on Sunday afternoons, and a bunch of neighbourhood children joined in. For their pictures, I gave them subjects from fairy tale, myth, and literature. Before Christmas one year, when Lindsey was six, the subject was the angels' visitation to the shepherds on the night of the nativity. We were planning something like speech balloons, with the angels trumpeting "Peace on Earth, good will towards men!" Lindsey was very prompt "What about the women?" she asked cannily. Books have been written on that subject!

Since interweaving children and career was almost a matter of survival for me, I became pretty canny myself about ways to combine them. It helps a lot if you enjoy both sides of the combination; and I do. (It was sad for me, when our kids grew up, because they wouldn't play with me any more. And I've never grown out of playing myself.) When our Department became host to the conference of the Children's Literature Association, and I was on the organising committee, I decided to put that group of kids to work. The Sunday drawing lessons expanded to become an exercise in writing and illustrating their own

books. Those home-made volumes became part of an exhibit at the conference that went with my paper on the home-made children's book. Before I began my paper, I called on little Theo Smith-five years old at the time-to read his own home-made book to that audience of scholars of children's literature. I still remember adjusting, the lectern to its very lowest stop, so that he could have his book to "read" before him. He did the job with enormous aplomb, and won his own round of applause.

I have never published that paper, because it goes with a large number of slides of the children's art work. But I have given it, or versions of it, in many different places and contexts, including schools here and elsewhere, the Edmonton Association of Children's Writers and Illustrators, and the Edmonton Art Gallery. And I fear I've never, handed over any royalties to the children whose work has been so much admired.

One of the places I gave it was at the Bnai Brith Foundation in Kingston, when I was a visiting scholar at Queen's. I called it "Writing With Children," and made the point that kids do more creative things if adults work alongside them. I gave more academic papers during the rest of my visit, but the member of the English Department who was looking after me came to that presentation too. Afterwards she wanted a heart-to-heart talk about the issue of having a career and children. Her partner had children from a previous marriage, so left the decision to her. She knew she wanted a career, and was wondering if she could have kids too. But the old biological clock was ticking, and she knew that she needed to decide sooner rather than later.

Well, some nine months later I heard from her about the birth of her little girl. Perhaps I have a streak of the missionary about me. I have to admit that my close friends have joked about Juliet's "Don't-get-a-tubal" talk. I want to say in my own defence, though, that Cathy's career, and her little girl, continue to flourish.

There are other kinds of offspring besides the biological kind. And for this Association of Academic Women I'd like to pause over one way in which as women we act in some sense as parents and mentors to each other: that is, by nominating each other, for this or that position or honour. In 1980 I was nominated for fellowship in the Royal Society, by another woman, Francess Halpenny. At that time women fellows were as rare as hen's teeth. Since the letter about induction instincts new fellows to appear "in a business suit," that perhaps wasn't surprising! I have been busy in my day nominating a number of colleagues for fellowship, especially women: because it's notable (or for a long time it was notable) that men don't nominate women. A male Fellow at the University of Toronto put it to me that I should nominate Linda Hutcheon: and when I suggested that since she was his colleague, it would be best and easiest for him to do it, he seemed to think there might even be some impropriety in such a nomination. So since Francess nominated me, I nominated Shirley Neuman, and Shirley nominated Pat Clements, and Pat Clements nominated Isobel Grundy: and so goes that biblical listing of "begats." I think that makes Isobel my great-grand-daughter! But since she and Pat have nominated me for this occasion, some reversals of the genealogy!

What happened to my career when my children grew up? -you may well wonder. Well, my new baby at home is a border collie, Sylvie, who plays with me to my heart's content. And my baby at work is the Juvenilia Press. All that work on literature for children, and all that association with children, meant that paying attention to literature by children was a natural next step. Twelve-year-old Jane Austen, and thirteen-year-old Charlotte Brontë, and fifteen-year-old Louisa May Alcott, and seventeen-year old Margaret Atwood, are now the children who write books for me and with me. And I still share them with my students. Once a sappy date, always a sappy date.

And Lindsey? She is now in the PhD program in English at UBC. We have had great rejoicing in the family this spring, because she has just got her first SSHRCC fellowship, and I have just got my last-for the support of my the Juvenilia Press and my research in childhood writings. She was born the year that I became the founding President of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada; so I always know how old that Society is. She has put in a proposal for their conference this year and so have I. And if the program organisers have any sensitivity at all, they should jolly well accept us both. For this last year of my career, we deserve to be a Mum and Daughter in Academe.

[Stop Press: The very day after I delivered this address, I had a phone call from the current President of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada to tell me that my paper and Lindsey's had both been accepted. Halleluia!]