

## A CONVERSATION WITH ANTONINE MAILLET

Jacqueline Chamberland Blesso

This is an edited translation of an interview held at Daigle's Bed and Breakfast in Fort Kent, Maine with Acadie's best-known author of 17 novels, including *Pelagie-la-charette* for which she was awarded France's most prestigious literary prize, the *Prix Goncourt*, in 1979, 13 plays (*La Sagouine* is her best-known work) and numerous translations. She is also the recipient of 27 honorary doctoral degrees.

**JACQUELINE CHAMBERLAND BLESSO:** I greatly admire your manner of introducing your language, and ours, to other Francophones and to the French. You did not lecture and you didn't make excuses. You simply used the language and then added a lexicon at the end. In "*Derrière chez mon père*," you used the words explaining them at the same time, which I also admire. How do people, especially the metropolitans, react to our language and to these mechanisms which you have used?

**ANTONINE MAILLET:** When you say metropolitan, you are thinking of France?

**BLESSO:** I don't like to refer to standard French because that implies that other French languages are inferior. Thus, I use metropolitans and the metropolitan language, if that is all right with you.

**MAILLET:** Very well. Actually, at first the French were rather perplexed in seeing this language. They were both perplexed and slightly puzzled and even a little amused, and also quite enchanted. But it depended on the level of the reader. A reader who had the habit of frequenting more than his Parisian neighborhood had much more openness and much more comprehension. At that moment, I quickly realized that they were very much interested in knowing that the French language extended beyond the hexagon. And not only that, but that it extended beyond time, because this Acadian language rejoins the ancestors, including the French. It's an old language. It interested them from the ethnographic and historic points of view and also, to a larger extent, in the literary sense. So, the reactions were quite varied. Some said: "Oh, I don't understand anything, so I'm not going to read it." Others said, "I didn't understand the first 30 pages, but I quickly got used to it. Then, it was easy." Still others said, "I had to read it twice," but they made the effort to read it twice. Generally, I would say that it was well-received.

**B:** Here in the Upper St. John River Valley, the border between Maine and New Brunswick, some people have rejected their language and their Acadianness because they were made fun of, because their language was removed from the schools and they were given the impression that the language is inferior. To be proud of oneself, one must be proud of one's language, heritage, patrimony, and culture. Your writings celebrate the culture and the language. Have you always affirmed your Acadian heritage, or were there moments when it was difficult for you to do so?

**M:** Yes, there were difficult moments. For example, when I was a child, I was very proud to be French, but I was a bit embarrassed to be Acadian. When I say Acadian, I don't mean being Acadian, but speaking this language that I imagined to be inferior. We Acadians had every reason in the world to feel inferior, because we were, or thought we were, in relationship to the Québécois, who were, or thought they were inferior, with regard to the French. So, we were always on the bottom of the social or cultural ladder depending on the circumstances; and we imagined that our language was really of inferior quality. When I started to write, I tried by every means to write in the most standard language possible, precisely the word we don't like. And I tried to write in the French style. I quickly realized that I couldn't; that I was in the process of fighting something which was stronger than I was on its own terrain—and that, therefore, it was better to bring it to my terrain, and there I could master it.

**B:** And tame it.

**M:** Tame it. And that is why I like my second book *On a mangé la dune*. I already began infusing it with the spirit, the mentality of the Acadian language. And the third book, which was *Les Crasseux*, and in the same way also *Don l'Original*, and right after *La Sagouine*. There I took the plunge. I worked briskly, and I wrote in the language of the region.

**B:** I believe that that is what has made your literature.

**M:** That is what allowed me to go off in my originality and in my personality. Otherwise, I was on the territory of others.

**B:** When did you realize the need to fight for the culture and the language, and was there a defining moment which led you to this realization?

**M:** I started very young. I started even in school. In my last book, *Le Chemin Saint-Jacques*, I recount an episode in the life of the heroine, who is at that moment a bit identified with who I was, at least for that particular experience. When I started the first scholastic strike in the history of Canada, I was about 12 years old. I protested; I refused to write my essay in English. I wanted to write it in French. I demonstrated, I testified that I could subsequently live in French in Canada, and that I could not only so live but that I could also earn my living doing so. And when the teacher asked me how I would earn my living in French in New Brunswick or in Canada, I answered, "I will write." And then she wanted to make fun of me. She said: "But, write where? In the *Évangéline*, in *La Revue des fermières*?" She was being ironic. It was there that I felt the point of her irony, which reinforced my feeling that I had a cause to defend. As you said, there was a moment. That moment was certainly very strong. And, I said, "No, I will write books, and I will write them in French." I had never said it to anyone. I had not even said it to myself that I would write books. But there and then I asserted it to defend myself, and I have never changed my mind.

**B:** And you made irony a part of your works, your writings.

**M:** Yes, that's it. That is to say, I was provoked by a sword and I also defended myself with the sword.

**B:** I am very concerned with the loss of the language in the Valley. The Church has abdicated its role of guardian of the language and there are no other institutions to continue it. A few parishes celebrate mass each week in French, but the homilies are in English. English penetrates every aspect of life. A few of the primary schools have accepted a program with the goal of bi-literacy. But other schools have refused it. What would you say to our students and to their parents to encourage them to learn to read and write their language?

**M:** That is to say that in the United States I know very well that things are different than in Canada. The official languages of Canada are French and English. Whereas, in the United States, that is not the case. But, in another sense, the United States does not prohibit someone from having more than one language. Because a language is a resource. And having two languages is having two cultures. Thus, even if we cannot, of course, ask a young American not to know English, we can certainly ask him to know a second language, which in this case is his language, that is to say the French language, in his being Franco-American, or the people of the Valley, as you say. And there, I say, it is a richness, it is...it is an asset. It is an advantage to possess two languages. Not only is it an asset to have a second language, but that they possess a second language, which is their language, which is the one which expresses their frame of mind. Which is the language they have held for generations and generations, since Charlemagne and Clovis, you understand? Therefore, at that moment, it would be a shame to lose a heritage which has come to them from so far, while the only effort which they have to make is to keep it living, to keep the flame burning, because they haven't lost this language. But it must be revived, rediscovered and used as a cultural trump.

**B:** If the language is lost, the heritage is also lost.

**M:** That's right.

**B:** In *Derrière chez mon père*, you have said: "We paste ancient words onto new images: *roulis de la mer* become *roulis de neige*; *poudrerie de canon*, *poudrerie de neige*; and *bourrasques de vent*, *bourrasques de neige*." These are all expressions which we use here. You also play with words, the way Rabelais did. You talk about *Tétines de souris*, *spitoune* and other such words. Like him, you expand the language. Du Bellay had challenged the French of his era to enlarge the language. If the *Académie française* admitted our vocabulary as well as the vocabulary of other Francophones, the French language would explode and might even surpass the English language, which has a larger vocabulary than the French of the *Académie*. What do you think of that?

**M:** I think that the French language has been, at a certain time, in Rabelais' era, before Malherbe, before Vaugelas and before the *Académie*, richer than now. It was very broad. But it lost 100,000 of Rabelais' words to the advantage of 5,000 from Racine, because among other things, it was decided to purify the language. It's not a bad thing to refine language. It's not a bad thing to fix it, to make it more precise, more concise. But it should not have been done at the price of losing such a rich, such an old patrimony, which was this language which issued quite bluntly from Latin mixed with Gaulish, Celtic and several other languages. Therefore, I find that French could be as rich as English if today we accepted not so much to search out the old words, but to conserve them where they are still spoken. If we asked for the contribution of the entire Francophone world, the contribution of Acadians, Québécois, Franco-Americans, Haitians, Senegalese, Indo-Chinese, the whole of the world which has kept this language alive, and which has added to it, and which has continued to enlarge it, at that moment, of course, we would have a much richer French language. Notice that this is starting to happen. At this moment, very, very slowly, like all institutions, the *Académie française* is introducing in its dictionary some Francophone words, that is to say from other countries, from other provinces. But these 70 words are not enough, you know. In addition they make such a song and dance out of it as if they had rendered such a service to humanity. Well, in reality, it is we who are rendering them a service. It is not because the *Académie* has just introduced in its dictionary the word "*Acadien*." The day when the *Secrétaire Perpetuel* announced this to me as if he were telling me something extraordinary, I said, "That's very nice, only the word "*Acadien*" is much older than the *Académie*. It dates from Verrazano, which is the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Académie* was founded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, you are late by a few centuries." So, in that sense, I find them quite timid.

**B:** You have said: "I don't believe that the Acadian language is a patois. It's an old language... We have invented nothing here: all the words that I use are French words, but old French words. Go and verify that, they're in Rabelais, in Villon, in Marguerite de Navarre, and even in Moliere." Here in the Valley we use "*greyer*," "*soubassement*," "*brassée the bois*" and "*mitan*." Is there something you could add to convince the people of the Valley, and elsewhere, that our language is anchored in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and before, that we should not be ashamed of it and that it is as important as the other French languages.

**M:** Yes, your question already contains the answer. That is to say that the Acadian language, since we are speaking of the Acadian or Franco-American language, which has Acadian and Québécois origins, this language is absolutely completely French. There are some rare words that we took from the Indians, *mashquoui*, for example, which is birch bark...

**B:** *Boucane*.

**M:** And boucane, yes, and *mocassin*, words like that. A few rare words, which we have taken from English, but those are neologisms. Those were words which did not exist, for example—*camion*. There were no trucks during Rabelais' time. So we say "*troque*."

Only the French say “*truc*,” and that’s French. We say “*troque*” and it is not. A Frenchman will say “*machin*” and that’s okay. We say “*chose*” and it’s not okay, while “*chose*” is more French than “*machin*.”

**B:** Yes. The Québécois say that they go “*magasiner*.” They have made a verb from a French noun, while in France they say, “*faire du shopping*,” which is English.

**M:** That’s it. On that subject, in France, there is a slippage now, a contamination of the French language by the American language which is catastrophic. The word is not strong enough. But, at any rate, to answer the initial question, I say, these words, this language, is extremely rich, beautiful, full of imagery, is not made of concepts but of imagery, precisely. It is more precise, more beautiful because one can visualize. Concepts are absolutely abstract. We don’t know. We don’t see anything, but when we talk about “grayer” a bride for her wedding, we see the rigging of the ship’s masts, and the sails of the bride. She is like the ship. Therefore, it is a heritage that we must not lose.

**B:** There is a question that always comes back. Which French language should be taught in school: the metropolitan, ours or both?

**M:** Well, it all depends because I would be against, for example, that the classical French language not be taught. When I say classical, it means the universally accepted French language. It is necessary to know that language.

**B:** It is necessary to have a language in common with all other French speakers.

**M:** That’s it, and that which is the very pureness of the French language. We must know that. That is not to say that we must speak *parigot*. Not at all, but the French language which many French don’t know either. That is to say that they sometimes speak a kind of local *patois*, a slang if we don’t want to use the word *patois*. But often Parisians speak slang. It is not that French we must teach. It is pure French, which has the genius of the French language, which has conserved its French roots. I think that is the language we must teach in the schools. Only I would add that we must also teach, as a heritage, as a treasure, the local language, the regional French, the language spoken by the people, while saying that it is an oral language; and that the other is the written language. And, that we can succeed, of course, in writing this oral language. The proof—I do it. But that it will remain the popular language.

**B:** Very good answer. I teach and when the occasion presents itself, I always say that this is the metropolitan word, but that one is the word we use in North America. The pacifist theme reappears in several of your works, in “*Don l’Orignal*,” “*Mariaagelas*” and “*Les Cordes de bois*.” But, in “*La Complainte du soldat inconnu*,” the soldier says: “Let me dream in peace of the life which I loved and of which I was robbed / for nothing / because my death has not served, / has not healed the quarrelsome nations, has not uprooted war, has not yet given the legacy of peace to a single generation.” It’s a

universal message, which shows the futility of war. Could you comment on this theme, and did you have a particular war or conflict in mind when you wrote it in 1986?

**M:** When I wrote that *complainte* of the unknown soldier, it was rather a commission. It was because I was asked to write it for a book that the United Nations, or UNESCO, I don't remember, was producing on the theme of peace. So a few Canadian authors were asked to write a poem or to write something, a text, on the subject of peace, and I wrote that. At that moment, it is not a message that I wanted to give, or anything. It was that I was answering a request. Of course, it is understood that it also corresponds with my personal conviction. I see war very much like that, war that is fostered by others but which sacrifices those who would rather have stayed home, who would have liked to have a life. And it is often the leaders of this world who decide to have a war for reasons which they have, for ideological reasons and often political or economic reasons; and they promote it; and they make young people fight war when the subsequent peace will not benefit them. That is why I wrote that. Now if in my other books I use the word "pacifist" or talk of that, it is because my deepest convictions are for peace. And I will say that I do not have a message to give. A writer does not have a goal when he writes. But his writings have a meaning. It is not the same thing. I don't write to give messages. I don't write to teach something. But, since I have personal convictions, they penetrate my writing.

**B:** It is not didactic, but it comes from your convictions.

**M:** It shows through in spite of oneself.

**B:** Then that leads to my next question. Except for the "*soldat inconnu*," which I saw as more direct, your pacifist, political, religious ideas never confront. You always veil them in the satirical voice of a funny and amusing character. *La Sagouine* takes away the sacred aura of the politicians, the clergy, the government, and she mocks the prevailing ideas of the time. Is that your nature? Do you approach life and people in the same manner?

**M:** I think that *La Sagouine* reveals a hidden side of me. I think that every writer creates a character because that character was in him. That doesn't mean that the character is he. *La Sagouine* is not I. She is larger than I am. She is more extraordinary than I am. But I surely carried her inside of me. That means that *La Sagouine* succeeded in saying a lot of things because she said them in a way that appears naive. *La Sagouine* can say anything, because she says it in such a way that she seems to be looking elsewhere when she says it. She never looks at anyone directly, she says it as if she were saying, "Why no, I was just saying that in passing." Perhaps the success of *La Sagouine* rests on the attitude she had while saying what she says. It is her character, it is her personality, and it is her way of saying things, which has made *La Sagouine* a success. She never gives lessons to anyone. She never says do this, do that.

**B:** She talks to herself.

**M:** She talks to herself. And, generally, when she realizes that she's said a little too much, then she turns to irony and does an about face so as not to appear as if she had spoken too bluntly to folks.

**B:** As to the theme of returning home, we have all read "*Maria Chapdelaine*," who is exhorted not to leave her homeland. In "*Pelagie la Charrette*," the Acadians have been forced to leave, but they must return. And even when they left, as Gapi says to Sullivan, "*Ceuses-la s'en avont revenu se bati' sus la côte une petite maison pour abriter leux vieux jours.*" [They came back to build a little house on the coast to shelter their old age.] In these metaphors which I understand to mean the discovery of self, even if one leaves the country, one always comes back "*chez nous.*" And the cart and the odyssey of all these people, this represents the voyage of life?

**M:** Yes, I believe that "*Pelagie*" has to be interpreted at several levels. The first level, of course, is a coming-home voyage of an exiled people that want to return home. That's the first level that everyone has understood. But there is also a search for self behind that. One must find oneself, and one cannot live that self outside of one's culture, one's natural heritage, one's memory, let's say. And one's language is part of that. Now, Pelagie has realized this—that people were going to disappear, not necessarily die, because each individual could become assimilated over there. But that would mean that a Leblanc became White. Understand? At that moment the Acadian lost his authentic personal identity. And he became another. In a sense, he died. And that is what she did not accept. Thus it was to recover, to give to each one, his own personal identity. And on other levels also, "*Pelagie*" is an epic. And, the definition of an epic is really the story that tells of the birth of a people in the fraction of a second which precedes its birth. That is to say, at the moment when two adversaries are fighting, one is going to give birth to his nation. Well, which one is going to win? If the nation, which is going to become X, loses at that moment, it will never exist. Thus, the battle which decides the moment, or just before one wins, it is then that the epic comes in and narrates. Then, once it is won, the epic is over. Take for example Homer's *Iliad*. Well then, it is at the moment when Achilles, yes or no, is he going to fight? And if Achilles does, the Greeks will win. And the Greeks do win the battle. Generally, the hero must be sacrificed. As you know, Achilles dies. But, it is at the moment when the battle is taking place, yes or no, will there be the birth of a people? *The Song of Roland* is the same thing. Roland dies. But at the moment when he sounds the horn, the battle is won because Charlemagne returns. Thus, the nation of the French is born, or the nation of the Francs in the era, is going to live. Well, Pelagie brings back her people. Is she or is she not going to reach the frontier? Is she going to get there? She does. The people are home, and the people will live. She has given birth, but she dies. It is an epic because without her the Acadian people would have died. Therefore, it is the birth, or rebirth, of a people, but told at the moment when it is decided. Thus, that is another level of "*Pelagie.*"

**B:** You deal with all aspects of life, as well as the scatological which I see in "*Pelagie*" and other works. Because that is part of life, one must talk about it. Thus, Maillet can talk about everything?

**M:** Everything, everything, everything which is human interests me, including the scatological. That is human also. There, of course, I am Rabelais' disciple. That is to say that there is a way of talking about everything, but with dignity and with respect. And humor is very helpful in elevating, precisely, the scatological.

**B:** The song "*Par Derrière Chez Mon Père*" goes in the direction of diminution and death. You take off in the opposite direction and enlarge the legend "towards life," and towards France. If one continues exploring in that direction, one arrives at the cosmic. Thus, the Mailletan work does not know any limits. It is open to everything?

**M:** It is life which does not have any limits. Precisely, I have a global intellect. My mind is much more synthetic than analytic. If you notice, my books don't analyze the psychology of the characters. I don't write psychological novels, because that needs an analytic mind, which I do not have. On the contrary, I like to synthesize. I am a character in a whole, and all of it starts by becoming a family, then it is a village, then a country, then a people, then a culture, then a civilization, it's the world, and finally, it is a place in the cosmos. And, in time, it's the same thing. It is time which is ours, the span of my life, then it is the span of my people, that is a few centuries, then it is the span of the human being, a few million years, then it is the time of creation. Thus, I always spill over in order to find my exact place in this spatio-temporal unity.

**B:** The oral tradition, magic realism, characters who do extraordinary things, legend, folklore, all play a very large part in Mailletan literature. Could you comment on these sources of inspiration and others?

**M:** I come from a tradition of oral literature. One must not forget. I can say a bit about myself, what Jacques Ferron has said of himself. He says, "I am the last of the oral tradition, and the first of the literary tradition." I am a little bit that in Acadie. That is to say, I have received my literary stock from two sources: in school, of course, with my professors who taught me literature, but also from these storytellers, narrators, drivellers, oral genealogists, all of these, who form the corpus of Acadian oral literature. Well, I am their heiress. Thus, inevitably, it is the meeting of two levels that forms the work which I have been able to create or have tried to create. That takes in all the baggage of legends, stories and beliefs. I realize that those belong to literature as well. Homer only wrote starting from what he himself called writing. He could very well have recited and it was written later. Thus, he is part of an oral tradition. Even Dante, who wrote so marvelously in the Tuscan language, the Italian language, was inspired by a whole series of beliefs and legends which circulated amongst his people. There is practically nothing but a jumble of oral tradition in that. Thus, if one looks at literature which would refuse to encompass that which is belief, and which would only reflect one's faith or belief, would extremely restrict one's universe, because the universe is not only made up of the living. It also includes phantoms, ghosts, those who have passed amongst us, who have left something.



**B:** Even while they were cloistered, from the point of view of responsibility, one can say that nuns were liberated women before the feminist movement. They were not the equals of their masculine counterparts, and they certainly are not even today. But even so, they were in charge of convents, schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, etc. even before their lay sisters had those kinds of responsibilities, as we see in “*Les Confessions de Jeanne de Valois*.” It is obvious that you have an excellent knowledge of ecclesiastical politics. Could you comment on that aspect of religious life?

**M:** That is to say that I am telling you about religious life as I saw it in Acadie. In Quebec it was that, but it was more strict. Consequently, their life was more rigid. They did not have the same intellectual liberty that you find in *Jeanne de Valois*. Nevertheless, they had as much responsibility. Quebec also had superiors who supervised large institutions. But one can say that in Acadie, since we are talking about Acadie, the nuns had, at the same time, this avant-gardism, this pioneer side of feminism, and at the same time they had this open-mindedness. They were culturally open-minded. Since we’re talking of scatology, I can assure you that Jeanne de Valois did not do too much without, but always with dignity. She could tell us stories with double meanings, you know. Why? Because it’s part of life. Thus, there was nothing...dirtiness doesn’t exist when it’s clean.

**B:** Here in the Valley, women were always named by their maiden names in burial and marriage registers. But I saw recently that they are named by their married names in obituaries. In business, for the most part, we address men. The idea being that women know nothing of such things. We’re not the only ones to do this, but here women are identified by their associations with men, thus so-and-so’s daughter, wife or mother, identifies women. In your works, women are strong like La Sagouine whose wit and spirit outshines “*les gens d’en haut*,” Pélagie, who guides a group of people in order to return to her territory; and *Evangéline Deusse* who starts her life anew at 80. They are larger than life and they manage to assert themselves. Evidently, they are like you. Could you discourse on the subject of the inequality of women?

**M:** Women have always had an inferior “status.” I’m putting it in quotations. Nevertheless, in my own family, my father was very broad-minded and my mother was a very strong woman who took her place. But it was understood that it was the boys who would first pursue studies. Not the boys to sit first at the table, not the largest piece for the boys. It was not a question of that. But to prepare for life, in principle, it was the man who would be the breadwinner. Hence, it was necessary to send the boys to college. I had a sister who was my brother’s age, one or two years younger, who was much more intelligent than he was, who was much more determined than he was, who was stronger than he was. Well, he was the one who studied medicine, and she was the one who became a nurse, while she was the one who wanted to go into medicine. But it just simply wasn’t allowed. She was sacrificed. She was ten years older than I was. My generation avenged itself on her. I mean to say, avenged her, if you wish. When it came down to me, it was I who became a writer. You understand? And not my little next-door neighbor. Why? Because I wanted to be. And I worked for it. Only if I had had the same age as my older sisters, perhaps I would not have been able to. So it’s good that things have

developed in that way. There was an era in Acadie when women were kept in an inferior state. When I was young, I heard it said, and it revolted me, that the wife would always be subject to, that is to say, submissive to her husband. That he is the boss and he could decide everything, and everything, everything, everything. Horrors! [Long sigh]. It revolted me, even when I was little. These were old beliefs. But, as we grew older, we realized that it was false. So...

**B:** Things have changed.

**M:** Surely, absolutely.

**B:** You studied and you wrote your doctoral thesis comparing Rabelais' language with that of the Acadians, and it has been said that you are like Rabelais in making the language explode. But you do not resemble him in his misogyny. I have long looked for an antonym for misogyny and I have not yet found it. That tells me that there are men who detest women, but that the opposite phenomenon doesn't exist. In your works you scoff at men and you bring them down a peg or two with a bit of irony. But I also see that you respect them. La Sagouine has a great deal of respect for Gapi; there is respect for Jean in "*On a mangé la dune*;" and Pélagie for Beausoleil and for the centenarian, Belonie, that extraordinary Belonie, who decides in favor of life when he has just given birth to his lineage. Can you talk about your attitude towards men?

**M:** Well, first I would say, to defend Rabelais, he was a misogynist, but it was of the era. He wasn't more than others. All men were misogynists at that time. And also, very often, what we call misogyny, are jokes, which Rabelais told at the expense of women. But I tell those same jokes. I find them funny. And people don't understand that I can be ironic or repeat these same jokes from Rabelais which are apparently misogynist. But one has to be able to laugh at oneself. One of Rabelais' classic jokes that I tell that I find very funny is about the man who beats his wife. And then when he is asked why, what has she done? He says, "I don't know, but surely she knows."

**B:** [Burst of laughter.]

**M:** Things like that are just funny. You laughed spontaneously and you are a woman. But we also laugh at jokes about men. Thus, I do not discriminate in that way. I say, men and women are equal. They are different. They are equal. I don't try to compete with men in a boxing ring. I would not try to run faster than a man, and things like that. Physically, I can very well see that they have more muscles that they have developed, but that doesn't matter. Hence, the question doesn't lie there. But I see that we have equality but that we are different. When I read a feminine author, I know that I am reading a feminine author. Why? Because she has a different mentality. When I read someone who is black, I know that I am reading someone who is black. When I read a Hispanic, I know it even when he writes in English. Why? Because culture influences style. So if culture, skin color have an influence, imagine what sex does. It would be ridiculous to say that a woman does not write like a woman. That doesn't mean that her subjects are limited. It doesn't mean that

she is going to write only about feminine topics. Nor does it mean that she's going to write only about the potato—or how to cook it. Not at all. She must tackle every subject. But she will do it in her feminine nature. There you have it!

**B:** Like Moliere, you detest hypocrisy, especially religious hypocrisy. I'm thinking of la Sainte and Ma Tante-la Veuve in "*Les-Cordes-de-Bois*." La Bessoune, la Piroune, and Mariaagelas are free spirits who have thrown off social and religious shackles. Do they represent your thinking?

**M:** Yes, in that case, it's very clear. These characters reflect what I feel. Everything which is *tartufferie*, everything hypocritical, whether religious, political or anything else, exasperates me. On the other hand, sometimes they amuse me. I don't detest la Sainte, but I detest her faults. But la Sainte in a sense has something amusing, funny, and likeable about her. She also is the product of her parents. Thus, in spite of everything, she is not unpleasant. But I disapprove of her attitude.

**B:** In the character of la Sainte, I see the philosophy of Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, "It's the best of all possible worlds." Were you at all influenced by Voltaire and also by other authors?

**M:** Not very much by Voltaire. I read Voltaire. I respect him as a writer, but it is not my family of writers. I have been influenced by many writers, probably very little by Voltaire. From that point of view, I would have preferred the style, language and spirit of Jean Jacques Rousseau to Voltaire. But the 18<sup>th</sup> century has had very little influence on me. Probably, it was because of the fact that when I was a student we would skip the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was the Age of Enlightenment, the age of reason, considered as atheistic. In school or in college the 18<sup>th</sup> century was pretty much on the index. So I was very much influenced by the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup>. Yes, I adored the romantics, even the naturalists, the realist authors. Then I studied the 20<sup>th</sup>. And, the 18<sup>th</sup> is the one I did on my own, afterwards. But, in school, in college, at that time, we did not study Voltaire.

**B:** Well, my next question was about Voltaire. When you talk of planting cabbages, it reminds me of Voltaire's recommendation to tend one's garden at the end of *Candide*.

**M:** That is not from him. In fact, he said it, but it was older than that. To plant cabbages, Voltaire then used a current saying of an image which already existed. Thus, it's the tradition that I imitate, not Voltaire.

**B:** So, planting cabbages is like life's work and goods, our goods. And your personal cabbages are your works?

**M:** There, I'm not sure. Yes, in a sense, I am cultivating my garden. It is, moreover, Voltaire's most beautiful phrase. It is not from him. It is beautiful to end *Candide* with it.

**B:** In Beckett, the character cannot stop talking, and the more he talks the more he degrades himself. In Maillet, it's the opposite. The character grows while he expounds. The silence of le Stop in "*Evangeline Deusse*" makes me think of the powerlessness of the Acadians. Evangeline Deusse shows him, and shows us, how to get out of this helplessness—it is by speech. We must talk, we must explain, we must commit ourselves and we must write. Is that what Mailletan commitment is?

**M:** Well commitment, but I would point out that I have never thought about that. You are making me aware that it is true that le Stop is mute. You saw him like that. But, I had not thought that he could represent a silence that should be shaken up, without a doubt, without a doubt. But, my commitment is always more profound than what I can see. Surely, each character represents a part of myself, but I am not always aware of that. You know, writing is a voyage into the subconscious in an extraordinary way. And one does not know what one is writing.

**B:** A voyage in the discovery of self. While discovering other things, one discovers the self.

**M:** It's a voyage to the exterior and to the interior at the same time.

**B:** The Valley is an interior logging and farming region. But I think that the smell of the sea has always remained in our nostrils. Our folks like to go to the ocean and love seafood. You have said, "Acadians were born with their feet in the water." The sea can represent many things—hope, birth, death, life and even the garden of Eden. Could you tell us about the significance of the sea in your works?

**M:** Acadie is under the sign of the *anima*, contrary to the *animus*. You know, the *anima* is everything about the living which is visceral, which is complex, which is nocturnal, lunar, that is to say the live, that which is emotional. While the part which is *animus* is that which comes from the mind, it's the cerebral, it's light, it's the sun. Well, the Acadians are a people of the sea; thus, a visceral, complex, live, restless, continually agitated people. So the sea has terribly influenced us, not only because there were fishermen, because there were *complaintes*, because we have shipwrecks, all of that, of course. But it is deeper than that—the symbolism of the sea which is made of this life and death which are in a continual struggle. The sea is the very symbol of life and death. Well, this has entered into the collective Acadian subconscious. I would even say that the shell or shellfish, its form is like the egg for us. Birth—we are each in our shell and we come out like Venus from her shell.

**B:** What a lovely image! Capitaine Beusoleil navigates on the ocean and Pélagie could have traveled in the same way, but she chose a route on land, in the forests and in the marshes. You also talk about the fields of clover. Thus, the land is also important for you?

**M:** Yes, I am, I don't want to say torn, but divided between the sea and the land. I have as much affinity with the land, the smell of the earth, the sight of buds opening. All of that is as inspiring for me as the ocean. It is the two. I know the mountains less. I cannot say that mountains would inspire me. I would go and I would visit there willingly for a while, but I would not live in the mountains. It is not part of my imaginary world, of my imaginary surroundings. While the land, the forests and the sea, yes. And the starry skies.

**B:** Gapi says: "*J'avons rien fait de nos vies, peut-être, ben; ben j'avons point fait de tort à parsoune, toujou ben*" [We haven't done anything with our lives, perhaps; but we haven't done any harm to anyone]. That is poignant. It shows the goodness of the people. Do you think there are many people today who can say that they haven't done any harm to anyone?

**M:** That is to say, even Gapi could not say it, but he said it. It is a way of justifying oneself and saying that we had nothing. But precisely because we have nothing we cannot take it from others. Others, who are rich have taken it from someone, while we have nothing. Thus, we have not hurt anyone. It's true that the more humble people are, the less one can reproach them. Poor people do not dominate, do not crush, and do not conquer. That doesn't mean that they don't quarrel amongst themselves. But I want to say that they are not the rulers.

**B:** "*L'Ile Aux Puces*" makes me think of the Acadian community. It is the English who have made the earth tremble. You have said, "*ceux de ma race—que Dieu leur pardonne*" [those of my race, may God forgive them]. Once again, you have surrounded history in myth, without mentioning the antagonists directly. Except in "*Pélagie*," you rarely talk about the "*Grand Dérangement*." Given the subject of the book, it is impossible not to mention it. The Jews say that we must never forget tragic events. What is your attitude concerning the remembrance of the "*Grand Dérangement*," and what should be our attitude with regard to this? Should we always treat it as the central event of our existence? Or else, as some other folks say, should we forgive it and forget it?

**M:** I think that the answer is neither one nor the other. Life must be built on the past, so that this past can be a base for growth. To brood over this and to never wish to forgive, never forget the tragic events in order always to demand reparation for this, is a negative attitude that the Jews perhaps hold. I don't know. But, nevertheless, it is a negative attitude. And I believe that it leads nowhere. On the other hand, to sweep it all away, forget completely, to deny this, means to deny ourselves. Besides we would not do that. If we put a blanket on something dirty, on a pile of manure, it does not mean that the manure isn't there. It simply means that we have hidden it. Thus, to put a bandage on the pus, we have not treated the wound. So we must acknowledge the wound. We must see it. We must know our history. But we must start from there, climb on top of it, and then go elsewhere. Especially we must not reproach the descendants of those who have done this to us to be the culpable ones. Not anymore than I want to be reproached for what my ancestors did to the Indians, understand? Because at that moment, we are never done. It's

an infernal circle because there is always this institutionalized hate. And that is unhealthy on every level.

**B:** On the subject of returning to infancy in “*Par derrière chez mon père*,” you have said: “The game of remembrance is perhaps the most maddening, but it is the most fantastic.” The fantastic plays a large role in your writings and you like to return to childhood. You like the simplicity and honesty of children like Radi?

**M:** The game of remembrance is the most maddening because we cannot relive it, because we must give it up. That is to say, the game of remembrance is maddening because we will miss the way our childhood was all of our lives. On the other hand, it is the most marvelous because we can relive it in our memory, and because we can endlessly start our life anew by remembrance. Thus, remembrance maddens us and fascinates us, the two together. And I believe that at the core of the writer there is a being who is frustrated and fascinated at the same time, because he plays with memories, because he is in an imaginary world. Thus, childhood is where everything is decided. Goethe said that everything that he has written, he already had it, he had already stored it within himself before the age of 12. I said that to a psychologist, who answered, “Before the age of six.” Apparently, before the age of six our life is already decided. Be that as it may, childhood is fundamental for the writer. Whether it is a happy or unhappy childhood, he cannot be a writer if he has forgotten his childhood. I remember someone who said, “I remember absolutely nothing before the age of 10.” He cannot be creative. Perhaps his conscious memory has forgotten, but the subconscious has not forgotten. That is because the writer is the one who plunges into his subconscious like an underwater diver who goes to the depths of the gloom of the ocean to find the treasures that are hidden there. And he doesn’t see what it he is searching for. Then, when he surfaces he has his hands like this [she shows her hands open], and he might have some small pebbles, perhaps some mud in his hands, then here you are: there is also a pearl. Therefore, he must go. He goes and he comes back with things. That means that if we do not have a rich subconscious, we come back with little pebbles. But why do we have a rich subconscious? Because we have stored up during our whole childhood, and during the time when our mother carried us in her womb, and during all the time when our ancestors transmitted to us, who carried everyone. Thus, we had the remembrance of the time when we were in the stars. That is what I say. And these memories are embedded somewhere. They are not in the memory, but they are in the viscera, they are in the genes. Indeed, the proof—a baby knows how to swim, because he remembers the time when he was a fish, you understand? So I say that the writer is the one who has the best subconscious memory which is called, precisely, the subconscious, and who has the courage and the technique. That is where virtuosity or talent comes into play to go and find this.

**B:** Like Proust’s madeleines...

**M:** ...Like Proust’s little madeleines.

**B:** In the Valley, a few years ago, there was a big discussion on the subject of who is an Acadian. You know that we are a mixture of Acadian and Québécois. So, it was said, he has an Acadian parent and a Québécois parent. Is he Acadian? And the whole gamut of possibilities. How would you answer this question? Who is an Acadian?

**M:** I would answer that I do not renounce my father because I have a mother, and I do not renounce a grandfather because I have a grandmother. I take everything. And so he who is lucky enough to have a mixture...sometimes I regret not being a little bit more of a bastard. I am too much French, in a sense. All my ancestors are French, as far as I can trace. So, I say to myself, mixtures are a blessing. Because instead of saying I only have the history of France, I would very much like to have possibly the history of Russia or the history of Spain, or the history...you understand? Thus, if we are Acadian or Québécois at the same time changes absolutely nothing. We are both. Instead of saying I am only half-Acadian, I am twice that. I am fully Acadian and fully Québécois. I say, let's not renounce anything.

**B:** What do you think of the separatist movement in Quebec?

**M:** I am against it. I voted “no,” and I will tell you why. First, I am Acadian, and it is understood that the separation of Quebec would be catastrophic for Acadie and for all North-American Francophones, particularly Canadians. Thus, as an Acadian, I cannot favor the death of my people. But as I am the adopted daughter of Quebec—that is to say, since I have lived there for 25 years—I must not vote against the interests of Quebec because I am Acadian. So if I could truly see that Quebec's interests lay in separation, I would abstain from voting. But I am personally convinced that for Quebec this is not a good thing. I am convinced that Quebec defends itself better inside Canada. That the culture, the language, the heritage, the personal identity of each Québécois are better protected within Canada than a small group of 6 million lost within 300 million English speakers. Because then it becomes a North-American people. While now it is approximately one-fourth of Canada. Thus, 7 million within a population of 30 million can defend themselves. But 7 million within a population of 300 million cannot defend themselves. Further, Canada has always had a tradition of protection of French. Because at one time the French were more numerous. Or, even, they were half-and-half or one-third. Thus, Canada has developed a tradition of protection of French, even if it is not always well applied, even if the federal government has made all sorts of errors, even if sometimes the English do the job poorly. I agree with that. But, nevertheless, Canada is more receptive, is a better defender of the French language with its bilingual law, etc. than would be North America. The United States would have no reason to make gifts to Quebec. It is not in their tradition. Therefore, I am convinced that Quebec defends itself now because it has to fight. The day when it imagines that the cause is won, it's finished. In any case, right now my thinking is very clear on this that the separation of Quebec would not save Quebec, but would lose it—in the long run.

**B:** What are you passionate about?

**M:** Life. Life and the broader aspects of life. Well when I say that I don't mean only: I get up in the morning, then I have my coffee, then I go up to the attic, then I work, then in the afternoon I receive guests, then in the evening I eat, then I go to the theater. Not that. That, yes, I already have that. But the power to transmit that life by reliving it introspectively and writing it, then in reconstructing it, then in adding to the seventh day of creation, the eighth. That is, by adding to life everything that life has not given me, all the beings I have not known because they remain possible beings. In the last book I have written, which is called *Le Chemin Saint-Jacques*, a lot of the answers which I give you would already be in my book. And, indeed, there is a little boy who has drowned, the young Firmin Richard. When I was coming over this afternoon, I was alone, and I was driving, and then I was thinking, if he hadn't drowned, he could very well have married. Who would have been Firmin's descendants? In other words, all of the possible beings. Last week, I was looking at my brother and my sister-in-law in a family photo. From this couple, there are six children with six wives or husbands, and their descendants. An immense family photo. And that is only one brother. Imagine now, my uncle Donat, who was my father's brother. There were 300 of his descendants in that photo. You understand? Thus, the descendants of my grandfather, now, are in the thousands. So, I say to myself, that is what I am searching for. Thus, to answer your question—that is what I have a passion for—it fascinates me to recreate the real world and the feasible world and the imaginary world and to have it nourish this creation.

**B:** What do you detest?

**M:** Reason. Everything that is reason, everything Cartesian. But here I would like to digress a little. One must not accuse Descartes of being Cartesian. Descartes was more open than those who have analyzed him, than those who have succeeded him. But, at any rate, what we call Cartesianism, that is to say reasoning reason which decides everything, the narrowness of those who "I believe what I see." I detest that, because it means that they deprive themselves, that they cut off all that would be the rest of the world which they do not see. Or also, all that is, precisely—only for whites—we deprive ourselves of everything which blacks could have brought us. Only for men—we deprive ourselves of everything women could have brought. Only for the rich, and so on. Thus, everything which limits life, which diminishes existence, exasperates me. Which leads to, in conclusion, that I cannot be racist, nor anti-Semitic, nor anti-old, anti-young, anti-black, anti-white.

**B:** Who are your heroes?

**M:** Very often, old people, and old people who have not necessarily been educated. There are some who have been educated. Others are self-educated. They are self-made men, and that life has made. They have developed a wisdom, a sort of prudence, in the noble sense of the word. Not fearful, who does not dare. Not at all. But the great prudence to make the right choices in life. Those are my heroes. Those who have dared,



who have attempted the great adventure of life to its limits, who have not balked in front of anything, who have not given up.

**B:** Do you have any advice for people who write and are trying to write?

**M:** Yes, I have one piece: never imitate another. Never be second best. Being first best means being oneself. If I try to write like Shakespeare, I cannot be better than him. Thus, he will be number one and I will be number two. If I try to imitate Giono, same thing. One must never write what someone else has done; but it is necessary to discover what constitutes oneself, how I see things, and not how I look at them through the eyes of someone else who has seen them before me. There you have it. That is the advice I would give. Let's discover how we laugh, how we sneeze, how we walk, how we see the world. Well, that's what I must tell with my words—my way of looking at the world and not how the other sees it. Because fashion, I detest fashionable writing styles. Someone invents the *nouveau roman*, everyone writes the *nouveau roman*.

**B:** Yes, yes. I have always thought that in the *nouveau roman* form is more important than content.

**M:** Yes, a form which, finally, becomes so stereotypical that it is then no longer form. It's taking six pages to describe a doorknob.

**B:** Or to describe a tomato. Do you have any other advice for the people of the Valley?

**M:** To be proud that they are unique in the world. They are Franco-Americans. That means that they are of French origin, and that origin is noble, it is beautiful. It is a heritage of a very old civilization, of a great culture. They have received that heritage. They have transplanted it on American soil, which is nothing to look down on either. Thus, here is the meeting of two riches—the French ancestral richness and the present American richness. So it's important to be proud to be that and to try to exploit it to its maximum. Then, to say that it is unique, because the African Francophone cannot tell about this. Nor the French Francophone. And the Louisiana Francophone will do it differently. The Franco-American is the only one who is able to tell what it is to be Franco-American. So he must consider it as a source of pride, as a richness.

**B:** Is there something else you would like to tell our readers?

**M:** Read. Read. Because every time we read a book, we penetrate into the thought, the subconscious of someone, in a sense, richer than we are, or at least as rich as we are.

**B:** And having a different experience.

**M:** And of a different experience. So one enriches oneself by seeking out the best of the other. And generally, someone who writes a book puts the best of himself in it. Instead of simple chance meetings in the street: "Hello, how are you? Ah, yes, your father is ill. I am sorry." Instead of that, it is a meeting at the level of what is most important to

someone. Thus, a reading is a meeting of two people at a very high level who wish to understand something more.