



Mad Shadows

Marie-Claire Blais

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A harrowing pathology of the soul, *Mad Shadows* centres on a family group: Patrice, the beautiful and narcissistic son; his ugly and malicious sister, Isabelle-Marie; and Louise, their vain and uncomprehending mother. These characters inhabit an amoral universe where beauty reflects no truth and love is an empty delusion. Each character is ultimately annihilated by their own obsessions.

Acclaimed and reviled when it exploded on the Quebec literary scene in 1959, *Mad Shadows* initiated a new era in Quebec fiction.

Mad Shadows Details

Date : Published July 1st 1990 by New Canadian Library (first published 1959)

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Author : Marie-Claire Blais

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From Reader Review Mad Shadows for online ebook

Spencer Miller says

I read this book for school. I would love to read it in the original French, I feel a little bit of the affect must be lost in translation. Either way, it is a short quick read with lots of interesting images and ideas to explore.

Greta says

French-Canadian author, Marie-Claire Blais, is acclaimed for her fresh approach to Quebec fiction. Also considered a feminist form of literature in 1959, torching the traditional fiction of mid-century Canada. The afterword by Daphne Marlatt is enlightening.

Elisabeth says

Version française; La belle bête

Publié en 1959, c'est le premier roman de l'auteur. Le succès de cette première oeuvre l'incitera à faire carrière en littérature et à s'y consacrer totalement.

Thème: la beauté

Résumé: Louise, riche propriétaire terrienne, dorlote son fils Patrice, véritable Adonis. Cependant alors que son fils chéri est bête, elle délaisse sa fille Isabelle-Marie qui est laide.

Ton: On passe d'une certaine naïveté au mélodrame et au tragique. C'est sombre, noir, méchant, cruel, dur. L'âme humaine dans ce qu'elle a de plus vil et de plus macabre. C'est un écrit dans le ton des œuvres de l'époque, sans aucune légèreté. Comme si la réflexion n'était possible qu'en se meurtrissant.

Style: admirable... j'ai des croûtes à manger! Incisif, concis, efficace.

3.7/5... pour le choix des mots. Sinon, à lire un jour gris pour le rendre encore plus sombre.

Randy Mcdonald says

In his preface to the 1971 New Canadian Library edition of Québécoise writer Marie-Claire Blaise's debut novel, *Mad Shadows* (French *La belle bête*), Naim Kattan starts his discussion by noting that, when first published in 1959, the fact that it was a taboo-breaking novel written by a young woman led people to class her as one with Françoise Sagan. Kattan is right to point out that *Mad Shadows* has to be seen in the context of a Québécois society that, before the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, was dominated by an official insistence upon the superiority of the traditional and the rural elements of Québécois culture that stifled in the emergence of a modern Québec. *Mad Shadows* takes the tentative deconstruction applied to this myth in, among other novels, Ringuet's *Trente arpents*, and follows it to its logical conclusion. Set in a prosperous farm in rural Québec, the small nameless family--the vain and fundamentally helpless mother Louise, her

beautiful mindless Patrice, and her neglected, embittered and ugly daughter Isabelle-Marie--stumbles through one catastrophe after another, failing to resolve their mutual hatreds or to forge meaningful and durable relations with others. The continuity--of family, of bloodlines, of the land--that official culture praise is entirely absent in *Mad Shadows*, which takes all of its characters to nasty ends.

Is *Mad Shadows* a bit obviously propagandistic? Perhaps. The characters seem not to fully emerge as autonomous characters, being instead simple archetypes. That said, *Mad Shadows* still works rather nicely as the first novel of one of Québec's leading writers. Sometimes passion takes a relatively weak story far. Sometimes it should.

Samuel Sanchinel says

A shocking book to the über roman catholic Quebecers in 1959. It's allegories subverting patriarchy, religion the family make for fascinating reading. The use of irony was on par with poetic language used to describe the soulless. With a rural canadian setting, it overthrows the rural canadian values.

In class it was described as fairy-tale like. Consider the french title, *The Beautiful Beast*, sounds fairy-tale-like! With a close-ish reading one could see the parallels with snow white and cinderella used in interesting ways. A great read, and I'll probably be reading some more Blais in the future.

Susan says

Oh, my, this was godawful! I read it for my French Literature in Translation Course. A lot of the reading for that course is godawful, but the instructor makes some meaning out of it vis a vis French culture (and it usually involves the Catholic Church) and we have a good discussion on life experiences because it is for 55+ aged people who have great this to say anyway. But, this book was still godawful!

Andrea says

Terrible. Je déteste des romans ou les personnages ne sont pas réalistes.

Shawn says

I've probably read this book over half a dozen times. It's a quick read that always leaves me feeling uneasy. There is nothing beautiful in this world. The breadth of sorrow is breathtaking.

?Emily says

This book feels like a fairy tale. It is about a family that loves only beauty and is abhorred by ugliness. This leads to a hollow life for most members of the family. However, one person was perceived as ugly and was rejected. This leads to several violent events that destroy the family. I am not sure what I think of the story, but it will be discussed in class in a few weeks.

Czarny Pies says

This gruesome novel published in 1959 about a dysfunctional family comprised of a narcissistic son, a spiteful sister and a nasty mother was the first cannon shot in a barrage that his continued ever since showing us the ugly side of domestic life in today's North America. A relative of Ms. Blais once told me that anyone who had ever know her family would be inclined to forgive her for the extraordinarily nasty tone that has characterized all her fiction.

This is a great pioneering work for a dubious genre of which Canadians are quite proud. I remember seeing the National Ballet Version entitled *Mad Shadows* choreographed by Ann Ditchburn and featuring Veronica Tennant and Karen Kain which I quite enjoyed. I hope that the National Ballet will continue to revive this work from time to time.

Read it if you are interested in Canadian literature. It is a landmark in our country.

Amy Rose says

I liked it overall. Although the novel, as a whole, is amateurish, it has many interesting themes. The novel rejects certain conventions and norms. Sincere love is completely absent and beauty does not equal goodness. Blais plays with the binary of the beautiful and the ugly, portraying both as capable of behaving in ugly ways and becoming ugly. In fact, in the end, the boundary between the beautiful and ugly merges.

Also of significance in this novel is Isabelle-Marie's intentional burning of the grain fields near the end of the novel. When she does this she severs her ties to the land and to the way of life she once lived. This is, perhaps, a nod from Blais to the Quiet Revolution which was occurring in Quebec at the time of *Mad Shadows* publication.

There's so much symbolism and so many themes to dig into in *Mad Shadows*. Although I wouldn't recommend it as an introductory novel for readers looking to get into mid-twentieth century Can. Lit. as there are, I believe, far better examples of writing from this period, but it's definitely worth the read for any student or curious lover and explorer of Can. Lit.

Rebecca McNutt says

Very strange yet gripping story; *Mad Shadows* is a Canadian novel telling of a blatantly dysfunctional family in a powerful and unforgettable way.

Fab says

[The story takes place in Quebec before the *Révolution Tranquille*. It's the story of Louise, Patrice and Isabelle-Marie, a mother and her two children. She does only like her son for his divine beauty and refuses to see his profound intellectual deficiency and soullessness. Isabelle-Marie, extremely ugly and jealous of her

brother, cannot any longer bear the injustice that her mother inflicts upon her,

Catfantastic says

I know that I'm supposed to consider the author's flat, detached, distant style, and the resulting incomprehensibility of the characters, to be a mark of depth, even genius. But I am a big girl now, and Lawrence Perrine is not the boss of me, so I will say without apology that this book left me cold. It's like the author is crouched at the lip of the abyss in which these characters are trapped, squinting down at them, inventing reasons for them to do what they appear to be doing, and occasionally poking them with a sharp stick.

Maggie says

This book I read in about 14 hours, 6 of which were in a bar where I was frequently paraphrasing the ensuing action to my companion. He would come back and say, "What's happening now?" and I'd say, "Well, the boy who is the personification of beauty is about to get in an Oedipal struggle with the father figure, who walks with a golden CANE, and the mother's vanity has given her face cancer that she is trying to conceal with makeup, and the "ugly" girl is beginning a relationship in the green world with a blind man who "sees" her as beautiful."

Mylène says

I love Marie-Claire Blais' writing but find that so much of what I love got lost in this translation. I don't know whether it's just the downside of having previously enjoyed her in the original French and finding any translation lacking, or if the issue is with this particular translation. It's still a short gorgeous burst of a book to read, although I look forward to tracking down the original in French and suspect I'd rate the latter higher.

Falina says

I find it hard to enjoy books in which I dislike every single character. You'd think that since I disliked all the characters in Mad Shadows I would be happy at the end, but seeing them self-destruct wasn't satisfying, it was just depressing.

Jamie E says

Mad Shadows is by far my favourite Canadian novel. Technically it's a novella since it is so short, but every page; every sentence matters. It always surprises me that this book, as all Blais' books was originally published in French. Either the translation was masterfully done or Blais' work transcends language barriers flawlessly.

Mad Shadows is both deeply symbolic and viscerally obvious. In such a short read your sympathy for the

characters switches and re-aligns so many times you'd think you had plowed through an epic 700 pager. In one chapter Isabelle-Marie looks at her brother after a horrifying incident and says something so simple, so cruel and so devastating, the image of it has stayed with me for years.

Paroles says

Once upon a time there stood an evil farm where Hatred, Vanity and Vengeance ruled... Marie-Claire Blais's *La Belle Bête* reads easy, but offers its reader no comfort, as the world of this Quebec author is cold and frightening. The characters are torn away by their passions, but the only true feelings here are hatred and envy, any positive feelings are either fake or selfish or borne by people who are either blind or mad (i. e. mentally blind). Physical beauty is one of the central themes (as the title implies), but it is always accompanied by a physical or mental flaw, and always - by a flawed soul. Yes, in her novel Blais leaves no place for hope, no "crack" through which the light would get in. And yet it is an interesting work.

The novel was published in Quebec at the end of 1950s, but it without a doubt has a universal appeal because it is void of any local color, of any common details or social commentary. Like in Shakespearean theater with its stage set only by a board with a word "Forest" on it, here the author introduces places of action by naming them "farm", "forest", "lake", etc., but no further details are given. Any common objects that are mentioned play a symbolic rather than descriptive role (all those mirrors or a gilded cane...). There are no laborers on that farm, except the daughter works there when she has nothing else to do with her life (and no details of her work are given, she just "spends her time" there). And so we have a universal and poetic parable about a vane and unjust mother, her ugly daughter and a handsome son, that and a Shakespearean number of corpses by the final scene.

At this point I would like to mention that the novel was written by a 20-year old and I dare say it shows. I would be curious to read her later works.

Dylan says

Not exactly a feel-good read, but a fast and interesting one. Mad Shadows is very difficult to describe without pretension or grandiosity, because it really is a story about the meaning of lofty concepts like beauty, ugliness, envy, vanity, family, and yes, love and hate. Actually, it's a far more direct examination of those ideas than most books that receive this sort of description. The three main characters are portrayed as Greek gods as much as real beings, Patrice overtly so. Although they are small people, like all myths they each embody and are defined by different essential qualities (see previous list), and are shaped by both those aspects they possess and those they don't. To be honest, reading about this and that character struggling with their essential nature normally bores me to tears, but Blais' writing is concise and unaffected, and she forges strong, clear links between the human drama and its broader symbolism. It's good literature.
