



Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon

Nicole Brossard , Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (Translation)

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Carla Carlson is at the Hotel Clarendon in Quebec City trying to finish a novel. Nearby, a woman, preoccupied with sadness and infatuated with her boss, catalogues antiquities at the Museum of Civilization. Every night, the two women meet at the hotel bar and talk – about childhood and parents and landscapes, about time and art, about Descartes and Francis Bacon and writing.

When *Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon* appeared in French (as *Hier*), the media called it the pinnacle of Brossard's remarkable forty-year literary career. From its intersection of four women emerges a kind of art installation, a lively read in which life and death and the vertigo of ruins tangle themselves together to say something about history and desire and art.

Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon Details

Date : Published 2005 by Coach House Books (first published March 19th 2001)

ISBN : 9781552451502

Author : Nicole Brossard , Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (Translation)

Format : Hardcover 237 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Canada, Feminism, Poetry, Novels

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From Reader Review Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon for online ebook

Vishy says

I discovered Nicole Brossard through the book 'One Hundred Great French Books' by Lance Donaldson-Evans. Brossard's 'Baroque at Dawn' was one of the books featured there. I found the description of the book interesting. Unfortunately, the English translation of the book was out of print and used copies were difficult to come by. So I did some research on other books by Nicole Brossard. I liked the plot outline of 'Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon'. I got a used copy and finished reading it yesterday. Here is what I think.

Before I tell you what I think about the book, a few words on the author and the edition of the book I read. The first passage below is going to be a long rant. Pardon me for that.

Nicole Brossard is French Canadian. When one thinks about Canadian literature and Canadian writers, the name which comes to the top of one's mind is Margaret Atwood. And then probably L.M. Montgomery, Alice Munro, and Carol Shields. And maybe Michael Ondaatje and Rohinton Mistry. I also think about the Spalding mother-daughter duo, Linda and Esta, David Gilmour and Miriam Towe. (This list of names says more about my own ignorance of Canadian literature than anything else. Canadian literature is alive and kicking, rich and thriving. Me on the other hand – I need to read more and learn more.) Of course, the one thing common between all these writers is that they write in English. And so one normally assumes that Canadian writers write in English. One conveniently forgets that Canada has one province – Quebec – where the first language is French. Or at least I do. When I discovered that Nicole Brossard was French Canadian and she wrote in French, I was quite excited. I have never heard of a French Canadian writer before, leave alone read one. So I was looking forward to reading one of her books very much. While pondering on Nicole Brossard's background, I also wondered about something. I wondered what kind of literary prizes a French Canadian author can aspire to and win. Eventhough Canada is part of the Commonwealth, a French Canadian author is not eligible for prizes like the Booker, the John Llewellyn Rhys prize, the James Tait Black memorial prize and other similar prizes because her / his books will be in French. Someone like Nicole Brossard won't be eligible for the Orange prize because that is given only to women writers writing in English, irrespective of their nationality. I wondered whether a French Canadian writer would be eligible for the Prix Goncourt, the Prix Femina, the Prix Medicis, the Prix Renaudot and the like. I suspect all these prizes are awarded only to French citizens. This made me think of a larger issue – that a writer, who produces great works of literature, might not be known outside her immediate environment because she is not eligible for many of these international literary prizes. It is a real shame, isn't it? Nicole Brossard has been writing for nearly fifty years (yeah, that is right! It is forty eight years to be precise – she published her first book in 1965), and I don't know anyone who has read her books. And most of her books are not easily available in English. Which is a shame because she writes quite beautifully (more on this later). She deserves a wider readership.

Now on the edition of the book that I read. It is an English translation made in 2005. (The original French book came out in 2001). It is a beautifully produced edition. The paper is thick with horizontal stripes (it can be seen only when you notice it carefully – do you know what this kind of paper is called?). The fragrance of the paper is like that of a new book. The used copy I read came from a library which had given it away. Why would a library give it away? Did no one want to read the book? (The book looks practically unread). The good news though is that if the library hadn't given it away I wouldn't have been able to get the book. So that was good for me. Atleast one good thing came out of it.

Now on the actual book. 'Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon' is made up of six parts. The first part which runs for nearly half of the book follows the lives of four different women. One of them is an unnamed narrator who works in a museum. She talks about her life and about her feelings for her mother whom she lost sometime back. The narrator also talks about a writer she meets regularly at the bar called Carla Carlson. Carla always comes to Quebec city (where the story is set) to finish the current novel she is working on. The narrator and Carla have long conversations at the bar while they discuss about their lives – the narrator talks about her mother and about her work while Carla talks about her father and about her novel. The other two characters whose lives the book follows are Simone and Axelle. Simone is the director of the museum in which the narrator works while Axelle is Simone's grand daughter. Simone's daughter Lorraine leaves her home and city many years back when Axelle was a child and so Simone and Axelle haven't met for many years. Both of them somehow get in touch and plan to meet at a restaurant for dinner. The second part of the book goes for around ten pages in which Simone is walking around in her museum admiring different art objects when she receives shocking news. The third part is structured as a play and is set in a bar where the four characters meet, two of them – the narrator and Carla – by design and the other two by coincidence. The fourth part takes the story to Carla's room and the story continues as a play and reaches its conclusion. The fifth part contains 'Chapter Five' of the book that Carla is working on. The sixth part has notes which are found in the room at the Hotel Clarendon. There is an appendix after that which has the English translation of a Latin scene in the fourth part of the book and a list of books that Carla mentions in that part.

When we look at the plot, the story told in 'Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon' seems simple enough. There are four women whose lives the book tracks and whose lives come together in some interesting way. Maybe there are a few surprises in the end. (I am especially intrigued by the identity of the narrator.). Though this is an important part of the book, this is not the whole book. The book is also about a few other things. Interesting things. The book is almost Joycean in its experimental structure. In one of the initial chapters, the unnamed narrator talks about James Joyce and how he refused to use quotation marks in dialogues. Then in one of the next chapters we see a dialogue where there are no quotation marks. This is the beginning of the Joycean game. Later in the book, something interesting happens. Though the narrative is linear, in the third and fourth parts the story is structured as a play – clearly inspired by Joyce. Towards the end of the fourth part, the four characters of the story get transformed into four characters in the novel that Carla is writing which is based on the life of the French philosopher Descartes. And that scene is enacted in Latin. When that scene gets over, the four characters get back to their normal selves. But one of the characters, Carla the novelist, speaks in two voices – as herself and as the Cardinal in the novel on Descartes. The fifth part which is 'Chapter Five' of Carla's novel, doesn't read like Carla's novel at all. It reads like a piece written by the narrator because of what it says and some of the clues that the author gives. When I read again this passage from the early part of the book (told by the narrator), after finishing 'Chapter Five' I saw things in a totally different light.

Our every encounter disturbs the meaning of Carla's novel. Refreshing it without her awareness. Even here in the bar at the Clarendon, in what Carla calls the mystery of a city that gives insight into the continent, her novel rips us out of history, out of the quiet temporality of bell towers and convents.

The sixth part which contains notes seems to be written by the author. But one of the scenes which it describes is the same scene which the narrator of the main novel is part of. It makes us wonder whether the author is the narrator of the novel and whether she is a part of the story. Then when we step back and think it comes to our mind that if the author is a part of the story and is the narrator in the story and the author meets Carla and has conversations with her and the 'Chapter Five' which Carla is supposed to have written seems to be written by the narrator and hence it seems to have been written by the author herself, we start wondering whether the narrator and Carla are the same person in actuality but separated into two characters in the narrative. And what about Simone and Axelle? When we start thinking more, our minds start

spinning...

I liked the inventiveness that Nicole Brossard cunningly employs in the book but this inventiveness hit me only after I finished reading the book and started to think about it. The thing which I totally loved while reading the book was Brossard's gorgeous prose. It was sublime, lush, delightful, transcendent, luscious, intoxicating. After reading a particular passage and falling in love with it, I thought that this was it. Now Brossard will get back to business and get on with the story. And then followed another intoxicating passage. And then another. And another. It was the kind of intoxication that one gets while listening to classical music, the kind which is pleasurable but on which one never gets drunk. Nicole Brossard is also a poet and it shows in her prose. I want to read this novel again just for Brossard's prose. As a sample, I will give below some of my favourite passages from the book.

While others march gaily toward madness in order to stay alive in a sterile world, I strive for preservation. I cling to objects, their descriptions, to the memory of landscapes lying fully drawn in the folds of things around me. Every moment requires me, my gaze or sensation. I become attached to objects. I don't readily let go of days by banishing them to the blank book of memory. Certain words ignite me. I take the time to look around. Some mornings, I yield to the full-bodied pleasure of navigating among seconds. I then lose my voice. This doesn't bother me. I take the opportunity to lend an ear to ambient life with an eagerness I never suspected. The idea of remaining calm doesn't displease me. Some days I make sure everything is grey, like in November, or somber, for I like storms.

Some time ago, while looking for a book in the museum library, I came upon a typewriter page sticking out of a book about diamond cutting. Prompted by curiosity, I read the first lines. I read and reread. Ever since then, this page is always with me. I sometimes read it several times a day Its meaning varies, depending on whether I read it when I get up in the morning, in the afternoon when the sun floods my work table or when I get back from meeting Carla Carlson. I don't think the page was part of a personal diary. Perhaps of a novel. Some days the meaning of the page seems obvious, on others it wavers like a conversation by the seashore where syllables are drowned out and pronouns merge with the noise of wind and surf. Today I memorized the page. Now it's part of me and can surge into my thoughts at any time. Whole or in parts, slowly infiltrating my everyday life.

When Mother died, I knew every feature of her face by heart. It's crazy how we never look at faces when we're speaking with people. As if, from not looking into the eyes too much or seeming not to want to insert ourselves into the other's thoughts, we end up seeing nothing. Mother couldn't defend herself. Her whole face was vulnerable to my worried gaze discovering the curve of her nose, of her eyebrows, eyelashes so short, wrinkles not as deep as I'd thought.

For a long time I believed it was good to let fiction into one's life. That this would make it possible to reframe existence, to unfurl landscapes so stunning that afterwards one couldn't help but love the most ordinary gestures and objects, for, once fiction had traversed them with its kaleidoscopic brilliance, everything comprising reality would shine with a thousand intriguing fires. Fiction was my foothold for touching light

Yesterday, Carla called me a passionate reader without knowing a thing about my reading habits. I think she meant I'm a passionate person and the word reader escaped her like a glass slips out of a hand. It's true that reading is part of my life, that it brings me pleasure, but at the same time it burns me. From the inside. As if, encountering m nostalgia, it ignites an unbearable elation in me.

It took me a long time to understand that human beings could find pleasure in one another. I long believed

that only necessary things like work, sexuality and providing aid in times of emergency, in times of great disaster and uncontrollable fear, were at the root of all conversations. I always felt I was living in the margins of friendships, which must, they say, be cultivated and maintained with precautions infinitely more subtle than those required for love. Just like the word agony was unknown to me, friendship is, in its essence, I believe, foreign to me. This I discover while talking with Fabrice and Carla. Increasingly, Fabrice is something like a friend. He has that anxiety that often makes men worried and bony yet philosophical. Fabrice transforms his anxiety into a generous tenderness. He knows how to distinguish between true knowledge and the danger of half-baked knowledge rotting in the interstices of lucidity.

What, in the end, is a life? What one has seen and told, what one avoids talking about or simply what one has invented and which has been lost over time, unbeknownst to us, very slowly just as one says a week has gone by already, the last day before your departure, three whole years of mad love, seven years of misery, a quarter of a century of war or a quarter of an hour spent waiting on a winter street corner for someone, something, that doesn't come, that won't come.

People think a ten-year old child is unable to think or to really want. Something. At that very moment, more than anything, I wanted my mother, her rough and busy gestures, her worried look, her blue eyes which, even when she was angry, always seemed soft. Looking in her eyes was like going to the movies. I always tried to do it as long as possible. Children rarely look into parents in the eye, but I always looked at my mother right in the eye. Eventually she'd laugh and say, 'Hurry up and look at me, we're leaving'. When I looked at her I felt like I was honouring her and getting closer to her dreams, to her real dreams.

To continue the rant from one of the earlier passages above, I just found two reviews of this book on the internet and both of them were in Canadian literary magazines (if you are interested, you can find them [here](#) and [here](#).) There was just one review in Goodreads and the first line of it read – “I just can't stand this book anymore.” Really? I am sad at all this.

I loved Nicole Brossard's 'Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon'. The inventive structure was quite interesting and intellectually engaging, but what I loved most was Brossard's sublime and intoxicating prose. I want to read this book again, just for that. I know that it is early days yet and we are just in March, but I have a strong suspicion that Brossard's book will be one of my top favourites this year.

Have you read 'Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon' or other books written by Nicole Brossard? What do you think about it?

Kathryn says

I probably just "didn't get it."

Writing was beautiful at times.

Not sure I would have finished if I hadn't recently visited Quebec and so enjoyed the references to places I visited.

Jonathan says

Beautiful, poetic and profound. Deserves a proper review, which I hope to rise to once I have some time. Until then - please see Kris' review, which is wonderful and says it all really...

Cheryl says

You don't read Brossard for plot, you read her for prose and form and theme, and maybe a dash of character in between. Words, dancing around within a jigsaw puzzle of their own, abstract, yet forward; in fact, for this reason, the second book of hers I read will be the experimental *The Blue Books*. After reading this, I felt like I did when I closed Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet*, as if I'd been on a tour with a genius of observance, and her product had been our guide.

To think, how much of life is about existence, about being able to cope with whatever is thrown at us; those who conquer find some level of success, and yet, even this success is still subjective. Life is about design, so it's always fascinating to come across fiction that seeks to illuminate personal design. Here, we have the intersecting lives of three women at a hotel, and the fanciful design of a writer's pen to unite the stories. This is possibly one of those books to be read when one is within a special "space" to receive it.

I'm quite naturally able to sort out the emotions, words and sensations that emphasize the duty of existence. It's like rolling out a carpet under the eyes of a blind person. While the blind person makes do with the muted sound of the wool on the ground, I take possession of every movement of his face. I enter what blinds him, without losing track of the carpet and its diamond-point motif, always redder than blood.

You don't read this with your conscious, you read and depend upon your subconscious to take you towards heightened levels of reading ecstasy that remain a secret to most writers who struggle to impart this feeling to their readers, oftentimes failing. You know the feeling you get when an author intenerates words and proceeds, seemingly simply, with guts, soul, and some debonair? Read and it becomes clear: you're in the hands of a poet and wordsmith, someone who makes a game of words and enjoys spooling you along in this artwork called book.

"To burn is a verb that suits me." Burn and then experience the sting of a blister from her words, "the pain tears the brain like major matters of fact."

Pockets full of bits of paper and notebooks, I continued making note of low and high sounds, the soundless sentences that lodge at the back of my throat during the night and gave me sudden urges, like when we notice the softness with which early-morning light penetrates the drawn curtain or when it pours in as a single ray onto the pages of a well-written book left lying on the sofa.

It is all about words, words that leave you attentive to every nerve ending; the awareness of observational living. Ever viewed a person of the opposite sex with a writer's eye? See the shape of their dimple, the curve of their penciled hand, hear their r's roll? These are women viewing women and this is what the narrator does

so fascinatingly, offer glimpses into the lives of three very different, yet all ambitious women. There's a certain *je ne sais quoi* that enveloped my reader sensibility.

You don't read this to make much sense of the experimental form. You read it for movement and sound, rhythm and style. You read it to be engulfed by multi-formed narratives and imagery; you read to see how people view themselves through others. You read it for the art. Please do, read it.

When I was very young I started deconstructing words, messing around with their syllables, like when you shake a handbag until the last coin, the tiniest key, falls out.

Amira Hanafi says

I just can't stand this book anymore. I read *Picture Theory Picas Series* a couple of years ago and I loved it. But there is something I can't quite put my finger on that is so pretentious about *Yesterday*. I find the characters ridiculously tedious in their intellectual suffering. I don't know. I want to like it because I respect the author. But this book hurts me.

Stephen P says

Each of four women suffering painful losses have found means of closing themselves off from themselves and in any meaningful way, others. Despite the focus jumping from one to the other every page or two, a flux respecting the self absorption each is entitled to in their quest for an emotional survival of avoidance, all is expressed and seen through the-narrators-eyes. She is also one of the four women and is placed as a main character in this story. Their set intellectual discourse, if veered off track by the slightest alteration in emphasis, clinical parings of subject, alterations of verb placement, adverbial presence or unexamined absence, might explode into howling pain. At times I wanted to shake them by the shoulders imploring them to feel, something. Then I understood the magnitude of pain so vast that anything other than perfected concealment could cost the stability of a life. What remained sacrificed lay at least on the table as a small quantifiable stack of bills and coins of change.

I followed along with each, beguiled under prose lifting a precise poetic atmosphere from the sublime confluence of sound, cadence, whispered muteness. Two met for a scheduled lunch at a restaurant, two others arriving separately, one older the other much younger, happened upon them by coincidence. A good friend has been found dead in another country. It is announced at the table. It explodes into a muffled horror-show of alienation. Each scrambles for their spot, lines, a return to some form of colloquial harmony is vital. The alienation bartered for a silenced self preservation coils brutal, excruciating. I can barely move. Enhancing the seismic shiftings, the unseen climactic upheavals, are that the older and younger woman arriving separately and coincidentally were there due to an arranged luncheon appointment for each falling through. Grandmother and granddaughter estranged for many years, were supposed to have lunch with each other. Sitting at the same table, too many years intervening, they do not recognize one another. They participate in the set course of trying to help the guests establish an equilibrium, even speaking with each other, even being left alone with each other. If I had enough hair I would begin pulling it out. How could such gorgeous words be carrying such an unbearable contraband of explosives.

I don't know how much more I can take. Any microscopic slit in the beautiful style and I am going to implode and get another bowl of chips, pretzels, ketchup. If I bring back ketchup I best stick with chips so I don't get things mixed up. Oh, that's right, and my medications.

I turned the page and could not believe it. Not just the wait in anticipation of this book's arrival but the sheer reading experience- and there is a misprint. Yes, a misprint. It will add to the collector's value long after I am gone, especially if a small printing gone awry took place. Mine could be the only one but I am too far along, too involved. How the f... could this happen.

A Play. A script. Characters with lines spoken. Props and stage settings in place. Directions stated. All from another book or screen- write. Someone's going to pay for this. I'm going to phone... I'm going to get pretzels and eat them with ketchup. Actually not bad. Damn, I dropped my pills in the ketchup. There's at least two lawsuits here. Wait a second.

I believe the pills despite the ketchup is working, or not. The characters are the same on stage as who was in the novel? Yes, but the narrator, despite her own prolific pain and loneliness escorting us through this captivating story, still herself, is now but another character on the stage. So who is this offstage telling us about what is happening on the stage. I look around the room ruling out the tropical fish and fern. Hold on. The fern is slightly suspicious and the scenery props are moved backstage with new provenances added that look like, yes it is quite clearly the aging author Clara's room. Her story, the manuscript, is tacked in consecutive pages to her wall. Each actor in turn steps to the wall reading their part. No problem.

So everything I've read so far has been a part of or a play, kept or discarded, that I am and probably have been seeing through the eyes of the playwright-who may or may not be the author of the book, or the fictional author of said book I am supposedly holding in my hands-and recited through the manuscript of one of the characters within the script and on the stage, previously reported by the stage character called, narrator. I phoned poison control reporting, "I took my medications with ketchup. What should I do?" They hung up first.

The play ends in italics: The narrator comes and stands in front of Carla, who thus disappears from view just as the whole scene goes to black. Curtain. Or

Finally an intermission to use the bathroom. Despite the conjuring with time my bladder believes it has been a while. But wait. The theater lights have not come on. Not even blinked. The curtains open as though never closed. I recross my legs. It is the infamous chapter five which Carla has procrastinated about handing over for possible publication of her novel. Or is it? Is this Brossard or her fictional counterpart staging a Chapter Five of the character Carla's novel? Her speaking through Carla-who I thought already disappeared from the stage and was now waiting on line in the dark to use the Woman's restroom-questioning her own relentless note-taking as a means of not living life.

"In the evening, back at the hotel, pockets full of bits of paper and matchbooks I continued making note of low and high sounds... By taking all these notes I thought I could go forth into the unspeakable... The notes I took were like brief outings that allowed me to go and rummage through my mother's thoughts, to sweep into Simone Lambert's arms and to run between the pages written by Carla and the book I read during the last thirty years." At the end of the paragraph, "More notes still to return to the idea of a we, of continuity under the sun."

She makes note that by making notes she is tempting herself to slip out into the real minimalist world waiting

outside the hotel. But finally, at the end of this section she remains with a notebook under her arm, "...I make note of everything that could pass for a story."

The last, final section is about notes found in the room at the Hotel Clarendon. In large part these are reminders what to make these characters do, say. She reminds herself to reread the unfinished manuscript. At times she realizes her growing sadness and isolation, that she might be losing her sense of judgement-acknowledges taking notes of a stray dog dying before her. These are notes. Where is she now?

"They say memory is ungovernable silence. So all the better that writing makes it possible to redirect the course of things and to irrigate where the heart is dry and demanding.

It's just a little sentence for healing."

The meta, meta-fiction, the restrained precise language, in my reading of this extraordinary book, serves to cover the depths of sadness, isolation of this woman mourning the loss of her mother and connection to others now, in her writerly world. What is uncovered is one possible source of creativity but in the end she is left in this hotel room to finish her manuscript, alone with her words.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Probably the Highest Average=Star Rating on gr. Full Fathom Five's what I see. Read it. Read her. Here's some books ::

Our Lady of the Flowers
To the Lighthouse
Paradiso
L'Obéissance
Benito Cereno
Le monde sur le flanc de la truite
The Euguelion
Running in the Family
The Book of Promethea
Heroine
Childhood
Tomorrow in the Battle Think on Me
Molloy
Crossing the River
The Last of the African Kings
Time Regained
The First Man
Fortuny
The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches
Death of Virgil
Fountainbleau
Le soir du dinosaure
Blue Eyes, Black Hair

Un homme est une valse
My Year in the No-Man's-Bay
Les derniers jours de Noah Eisenbaum
Pereira Declares
Two Stories of Prague
Next Episode
Cobra
La vie en prose
The Lesbian Body
Technique du marbre
Mauve Desert
Extinction
The Opposing Shore
Thérèse et Isabelle
La déconvenue
Meroë
These Festive Nights
In the Shadow of the Wind
The Christmas Oratorio
Le livre du devoir
Nightwood
The Tin Flute
E. Luminata
The Palace
Parc univers
The Sea
Microcoms
Dios No Nos Quiere Contentos
La nuit
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter
The Swallower Swallowed
Paulina 1880
Memoria
Dust over the City
Pylon
A Universal History of Infamy
The Autobiography of Alice B. Tokas
Jos Connaissant
The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman
Nous parlerons comme on écrit
Life: A User's Manual*
[203f ; it. 236 with answer=key]

"...where I leaf through novels that make me want to write. I always buy at least one book so I can have the pleasure of a new novel in front of my stimuli-starved eyes. That's how, here and there, over the years, I purchased....."

*The list (either rendering) looks superior on the printed page, this lovely paper ::

Typeset in Granjon

Printed and bound at the Coach House on bpNichol Lane, 2005

Translated by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

Edited and designed by Alana Wilcox

Cover design by Stan Bevington

Cover image, *In that inner space*, by Betty Goodwin [1994, Graphite and oil stick over gelatin silver print on translucent mylar film (Cronaflex), 94 by 73.6 cm]. Courtesy of the Galerie René Blouin, Montreal.

:: you are encouraged to read this on paper of course.

Garima says

It's true that reading is part of my life, that it brings me pleasure, but at the same time it burns me. From the inside. As if, encountering my nostalgia, it ignites an unbearable elation in me.

The sanctity of past lies in the painting we draw every following day by dint of a color palette extracted from the precious moments which makes a *yesterday*. Small but significant details are steadily added with delicate brushstrokes and the image which emerges in the end becomes an integral part of our life archives. We keep it safe along with some unfinished stories, some random notes and cover them with a shroud of hope that someday we will return to them to relive those yesterdays or to form a new montage of fortuitous tomorrows. One such remarkable montage is created out of the five parts comprising this marvelous little book.

The world has changed. Reality flickers. Around reality, reality still and again, giving the impression that everything goes on following the quiet rhythm of syntax and seasons. But where does reality lodge? Yes, the world is changing. Life crashes into life.

In a bar at Hotel Clarendon, four lives are busy crashing into each other but not fatally. Four women have come together through common sentiments signified by different life stories and each one of them is in search of some crystallized vision which can bring them closer to an elusive reality. These four women form the four arcs of a single heart through which feelings come forth in soothing streams. A Director of Museum of Civilization lives among artifacts but is distanced from the living around her, the work of a young girl involves studying the living world but this study hasn't turned into a practical experience, a novelist is engaged in creating sad characters from happy lives and inventing drama out of the life of dead Descartes; and an unnamed narrator records everything in the form of notes – her fascination with ruins, her love for words and how everyone misuse them, her criticism of the present century and her obsession with fiction.

Fiction was my foothold for touching light. I knew how to make it enter my life like others allow sex, violence or gastronomy into their thoughts. Truth be told, I exaggerate the importance of fiction because I'm quite naturally able to sort out the emotions, words and sensations that emphasize the duty of existence.

Nicole Brossard is an ingenious writer. Her art is an endearing mixture of old traditions and new ideas. She has a penchant for philosophies but she likes to play with chaotic ambiguities too. Her words speak for themselves. They don't need any extolment to affirm their beauty neither they demand any universal acceptance. They walk on their own singular path and create glorious patterns on the way to an unknown destination. They decide when they want to breathe, when they want to laugh, when they want to sing, when they want to cry. Even when they sleep, they dance to the tunes resonating in a dream world. They don't take

any false pride in their existence but they exist with a belief that without them, *poetry* is incomplete. In short, they are alive and essential. So make this book a part of your tomorrow.

We don't notice enough how, in spite of everything, life organizes itself so as not to fail us.

Kris says

I owe a big thank you to Ali and The BURIED Book Club for bring Nicole Brossard's work to my attention. She's my favorite discovery of 2013 so far. I'm also embarrassed not to have known her work before. She's a poet and a novelist, a queer feminist who has been lauded in her native Canada. (You can watch her 2011 reading at Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania at the PennSound site at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/....>)

Nicole Brossard

Yesterday, at the Hotel Clarendon has been lauded by some as Brossard's most impressive work. Originally published as *Hier* in 2001, this English translation captures the blend of poetry and prose, the intertwining of the personal and the historical, the delight in language and the overall sense of humanity for which she is known.

The novel is structured in five parts. The first introduces us to four women: an unnamed narrator who works in the Museum of Civilization in Québec City, writing up the geographical provenance and dating the artifacts; Simone Lambert, an archaeologist and museum director for whom the narrator works; Carla Carlson, a writer who travels to Québec City whenever she is writing a novel, and who is friends with the narrator; and Axelle Carnavale, a geneticist who is Simone's granddaughter. Each of these women is coping with loss: the narrator is mourning the death of her mother, which taught her what the word agony really means; Simone is haunted by the disappearance of her daughter, Axelle's mother Lorraine, years ago, as well as mourning the death of her lover Alice Dumont years before; Carla continues to explore themes around her father's death in her fiction; and Axelle is coping with anger and loss over her mother's disappearance. In addition to the interpersonal relationships that we see tying together these women, we also can trace common concerns and connections among them, particularly revolving around themes of ruins and time, history and artifacts, preservation and loss, and memory.

The second section, The Urns, focuses solely on Simone, and introduces another loss that helps to bring together the four characters at the bar of the Hotel Clarendon in part three. Part Three is written as a play, complete with stage directions and a heavy emphasis on dialogue. Section four, Carla Carlson's Room, continues the play format, complete with a scene all in Latin (don't worry -- there's a translation in the back). The novel concludes with Chapter 5 -- which is written by the narrator, and followed by a series of notes that helped to produce this novel. This metafictional structure, this awareness of form and direct consideration of the process of writing, is one of Brossard's hallmarks, and she carries it out with style, humor, and depth.

This is a novel of ideas written by a woman in love with language. She intertwines the rational and the emotional, language with the sensual, with acumen and insight. When I was reading the book, I couldn't stop myself from posting lengthy updates, because Brossard's prose is so magnificent.

For example, here is the first paragraph of the novel, as the narrator introduces herself to us:

While others march gaily toward madness in order to stay alive in a sterile world, I strive for preservation. I cling to objects, their descriptions, to the memory of landscapes lying fully drawn in the folds of things around me. Every moment requires me, my gaze or sensation. I become attached to objects. I don't readily let go of days by banishing them to the blank book of memory. Certain words ignite me. I take the time to look around. Some mornings, I yield to the full-bodied pleasure of navigating among seconds. I then lose my voice. This doesn't bother me. I take the opportunity to lend an ear to ambient life with an eagerness I never suspected. The idea of remaining calm doesn't displease me. Some days I make sure everything is grey, like in November, or sombre, for I like storms.

Simone remembers her lover Alice in the following passage:

Passing by the urn called royal, Simone repeats to herself urn, shoulder, belly, hip. And suddenly water is streaming over Alice's firm body. Their life together reappears like an alternation of precious moments between the shortage of water on the sites of the past and the abundance of chlorinated water in the bathrooms of the hotels they stayed at on a regular basis: the cool water of the shower under which they multiplied their mouth to mouths, the boiling calming water of the hot tubs, the stimulating water jet they learned to aim accurately at their clitorises, which split time in two or, depending on circumstances, into a thousand fragments that splashed the eye and then gently went on to merge with the idea of happiness and the salt of tears. Urns of life and daily chores which, held at arm's length above women's heads, were illuminated by their energy or which, passing through their rough and wrinkled hands, poured tender milk into the mouth of a child or fresh water through an old mother's parched lips.

Brossard conveys the visceral impact of bad news received by Simone with such power that it took my breath away:

Eight-oh-four and ten seconds in the evening. The news came via Simone's cellphone like an axe blow to the ear. The news fell into her phone like a two-year-old from the fifth floor the news fell into her phone like a knife slash into the gums the news made a blackfly buzz in the phone the news spread through Simone's body spilled tons of toxins into her brain left a trickle of saliva at the corner of her mouth unravelled the quiet thread of life the news sent shivers down Simone's spine nailed her to the front of Niche Number 7 of Centuries So Far.

And throughout the novel, Brossard explores more philosophical or abstract themes with the same grounding in lived experience, the same attention to language:

Can gravestones be thought of as ruins? Can they be said to fire the imagination and awaken our knowledge as the necropolises of ancient worlds do? Is it possible to discuss inner ruins, childhood landscapes degraded by time or learned constructions of the mind, such as stoicism and altruism, eroded by the biting breath of new beliefs? Can one talk of philosophical ruins? I sometimes find myself imagining my contemporaries, arms akimbo, circulating amid ideologies fallen into ruin, finally able to examine them in their most remarkable and sombre aspects. Theories about progress and communication whose finest images so far are the mere carcasses of a lot of small things whose lights have gone out. I also sometimes edge along sites constructed entirely of incomplete images whose broad lines end in the shape of a root or a tailspin, images left stranded like old symbols incapable now of bearing fruit, and about which we don't know what danger or new attraction will have turned off from using them those who originally designed them for the pleasure and intelligence of their world.

This is a beautifully written, deeply thoughtful novel that embodies Brossard's sense of humanity. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Joshua Loong says

<https://joshualoong.wordpress.com/201...>

This may be the most experimental book I've read this year but I absolutely loved it. I would absolutely recommend this book to anyone looking for experimental literature that just pulls you in.

The story follows four women at radically different stages in their lives but finding themselves enraptured in conversation after meeting at the bar of the Hotel Clarendon. It's a novel about grief, about mothers, about history and writing, and so much more. Its a novel whose main driver isn't about where the plot is going, but about the amazing places a late night conversation can go. Brossard just effortlessly manages to speak so profoundly from sentence to sentence. A wonderfully, beautiful book that after putting it down, I felt like picking it right back up again. I rated it a 9/10.

The book has a very nontraditional structure for a novel. The first half is composed of a series of one to two page vignettes, switching between the perspectives of the different women. The second half is written in the structure of a play. Something that may seem strange at first, but was done extremely well in my opinion.

Here's a quote I absolutely loved:

Fiction was my foothold for touching light. I knew how to make it enter my life like others allow sex, violence or gastronomy into their thoughts. Truth be told, I exaggerate the importance of fiction because I'm quite naturally able to sort out the emotions, words and sensations that emphasize the duty of existence.

Nate D says

Silence and words, mothers and daughters, creation and ruination, pleasure and loss. This feels like a culmination of Nicole Brossard's work, at least up to its point in her writing, pulling together the more abstract themes of her early work with the her post-Mauve Desert higher cohesion, even as her forms become more wildly experimental and heterogeneously composed. Brossard is a philosopher of art and living as much as poet, and every finely-cadenced phrase (even in translation!) invites close study of its multiplying thoughts. Already, I feel the need to re-read from the start.

As another superimposed layer upon Brossard's concerns here, I couldn't help but think of Helene Cixous' *The Book of Promethea* and her theory of *écriture féminine*. I admired Cixous' concept here more than her (intentionally circular, echoing) execution there. Here, Brossard uses this ovoid structure of slow-revolving development to its fullest potential. No idle comparison point, Brossard's feminism had to informed of Cixous', and sure enough *Promethea* turns up in a late reading list within the text. In Clarendon, she demonstrates that she has internalized the possibilities of that previous work and perfected them.

For some reason, I've previously focused on Brossard's pre-Mauve Desert work. Hence forth, I clearly need to be diving further into all that came after.

Heather says

Brossard's writing is like a diamond exhibit. So much word-full perfection presented by a master cutter of facets to bring out each poetic angle of brilliance into a meta-fiction concentrated centrally under spotlight precision. Yet for some reason, I am left partially blinded by too much beauty.

"Yesterday at the Hotel Clarendon" has imbued me with a strange ambivalence. Where I am not sure if Brossard's words love her more, or if she loves her words more. I think I may understand Brossard's *raison d'être* for the structure of this novel, that which is to deconstruct by adding multidimensional layers by which interpretation is deliberately baffled. The *raison d'être* for her content is to combine linguistic philosophy of semiotics with poetics and in doing so she may believe the semblance of a 'story,' can fill the void, or the absence of meaning. The symbolism that she uses to accomplish this is found in the many aspects of representational 'ruins,' whereby Brossard uncovers her diamonds and writes poetry upon her discovery. Perhaps in the hope that her audience will each have a unique 'reader response.'

Eight-oh-four and ten seconds in the evening. The news came via Simone's cellphone like an ax blow to the ear. The news fell into her phone like a two year old from the fifth floor the news fell into her phone like a knife slash to the gums the news made a blackfly buzz in the phone the news spread through Simone's body spilled tons of toxins into her brain left a trickle of saliva at the corner of her mouth unravelled the quiet thread of life the news sent shivers down Simone's spine nailed her to the front of Niche Number 7 of Centuries So Far.

My initial reader response to this passage:

Oh my God, this is amazing poetry... it must be the most perfect poetic paragraph rendering of a stroke that I have ever encountered. Oh wait a minute ... "The security guard reappeared in the entrance, hesitating because of Simone's haggard look." Okay, now somehow he will discover her state of ill health. "Fabrice Lacoste had just been found lifeless in a pine grove . . ." All right, this was a description of shock, not a stroke. I feel let down by this build up - as a matter of fact it was overdone - 'tons of toxins into her brain' - is this not hyperbole? - yes it is ... 'Unravelled the quiet thread of life,' - sounds like the coil of life ending.

Yet for some reason, I am left partially blinded by too much beauty. As if anticipating perfection makes flaws that much more visible, as though I must turn a blind eye to imperfection. I am left wanting to hear more about the fate of the young girl who discovered the world's largest diamond. I am left wanting to see a very undiamond-like symbolism, a motif thread of narrative laying on the blank velvet background tying the diamond to its origin, its finder, and also to a step later. Similar to being left in a state of needing to know that the actors of Slum Dog Millionaire were left better off for their cooperation and knowing that they were not.

Am I just a poor reader who desires resolution in all fiction? I think not. It is in this partial blinding wherein lies my answer of this I am sure. I am unsure, though, what this answer is. Although my ambivalent response is one of both a vague welcome appreciation and a rather strong dissatisfaction, - a strange and contrary juxtaposition, I cannot neither give "Yesterday at the Hotel Clarendon," an endorsement through rating, nor a condemnation. This is a first for me - being unable to rate a book.

Perhaps because of this postmodern offering not having a well presented and unitary theme other than the slightly touched on themes of female identity and trust between women, it doesn't come together for me. Or perhaps it is because it reads both like a good explorative essay on semiotics combined with a great book of poetry than as a work of fiction.

I'm not sure if I read this offering correctly, maybe I need help to decipher this text. Any help would be appreciated.
