

Annotated Bibliography Mireille Best

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Works by Mireille Best

Best, Mireille. *Les mots de hasard*. Gallimard, 1980.

Best's first collection of five short texts is comprised of works that are all marked by her signature style: idiosyncratic use of punctuation, stream of consciousness exploration of the inner workings of her narrators' minds, a wry sense of humor, and a firm grounding in working-class milieus. For the most part, Best's protagonists are lesbians. In addition, she demonstrates great empathy for working-class married mothers such as the protagonist in "Le livre de Stéphanie."

----- *Le méchant petit jeune homme*. Gallimard, 1983.

Best's second published work opens with the longest of three texts. Titled "Des fenêtres pour les oiseaux" this story was lauded as a "chef-d'œuvre" in the French press. This first story focuses on three children raised by their grandparents, a fishmonger and a dockworker. The second text focuses exclusively on a group of women traveling in the south of France and takes on the cruelty to animals involved in bullfighting. The final text explores the fraught relationship between an American alcoholic artist and a French woman.

----- *Une extrême attention*. Gallimard, 1985.

This collection takes up issues related to illness, mortality, and desire. The six stories explore both aesthetic and historical topics in a manner that grounds the texts in post-war France. Best participated in an authors' roundtable on *Apostrophes* shortly after the publication of this book.

----- *Hymne aux murènes*. Gallimard, 1986.

Best's first novel follows its protagonist, Mila, as she leaves her working-class family for a medically-necessary stay at a sanatorium filled with other young women who are suffering from a vaguely-defined medical condition. In this all-female environment, Mila encounters a wide range of characters who fall along the entire spectrum of sexual identities (from strongly heterosexual to strongly lesbian). Best explores a variety of female relationships with an emphasis on friendship that expands traditional notions of lesbianism and female sexuality.

Camille en octobre. Gallimard, 1988.

This unconventional coming-of-age novel recounts the story of Camille, a teenager coming to grips with both her sexuality and her intellectual curiosity while growing up in a working-class family. Neither abandoned nor shamed by her community, Camille nonetheless struggles to find herself as she embarks on an affair with her dentist's wife. The novel includes sympathetic portrayals of working-class married women and the issues that define their lives: endless domestic chores; distant, sometimes violent men; and limited employment options.

----- *Orphéa trois*. Gallimard, 1991.

In her final published collection of short stories, Best gathered four texts under a title which was evocative of Greek mythology, an ongoing interest for Best. Here, Best explores relationships marked by conflict and loss, often due to interference from a third party. Throughout, Best crafts meditative, reflective texts that demonstrate her continuing effort to illuminate the human quest for identity and for connection with others.

----- *Il n'y a pas d'hommes au paradis*. Gallimard, 1995.

The third and most ambitious of Best's novels, this book explores the love story between Josephe and Rachel. Best draws complex family portraits of both characters, contrasting Josephe's cold and destructive mother with Rachel's affectionate and loving one. The novel is set against the politics and horrors of the Spanish Civil War and World War II and reflects a deeper concern for international affairs that is only hinted at in Best's earlier novels.

Critical works on Mireille Best

Aurivel, Rolande. "Parcours à travers l'œuvre de Mireille Best." *Archives, Recherches et Cultures Lesbienes*, no. 4, June 1986, pp. 73-75.

This study offers a brief introduction to Best's early works.

Cairns, Lucille. *Lesbian Desire in Post-1968 French Literature*. The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002.

Cairns does an excellent job giving an overview of Best's works in the context of post-1968 lesbian literature. In particular, Cairns focuses on the representation of desire and fully explores the treatment of sexuality in Best's work.

Garréta, Anne F. "French Lesbian Writers? Answers from Monique Wittig, Jocelyne François, and Mireille Best." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 90, 1996, pp. 235-241.

This insightful interview helps the reader situate Best with respect to two authors who were her contemporaries and who shared some of her concerns. Best shares with Wittig a desire to "universalize" the lesbian experience. In this important interview, she articulates her desire to reach a wide audience for her work.

Jarczak, Barbara. "Stille woorden over het werk van Mireille Best." *Lust en Gratie*, vol. 18, June 1988, pp. 8-27. (*Translation in French by author available.)

Ricouart, Janine. "Enfance magique ou infernale? Un regard socio-critique sur l'œuvre de Mireille Best." Special Issue of *Women in French Studies*, 2003, pp. 150-65.

This article explores the fundamental question of intersectionality in the work of Mireille Best. Ricouart masterfully explains how Best upends many stereotypes of working-class people as homophobic and unaccepting. Best's unique ability to demonstrate empathy for working-class characters while holding them accountable for their sometimes limited worldviews is detailed in this article.

Schechner, Stephanie. "The Lesbian Body in Motion: Representations of Corporeality and Sexuality in the Novels of Mireille Best." *Lesbian Inscriptions in Francophone Society and Culture*, edited by Renate Günther and Wendy Michallat, Manchester UP, 2007, pp. 123-42.

In this article, I demonstrate how Best deploys images of water and fluidity to represent bodies and desire in her novels. Drawing parallels between Best's novels and the work of Monique Wittig, my analysis is informed by notions introduced by Lucille Cairns in her earlier work on Best.

-----. "La lutte contre la normalisation: représentation de l'adolescence lesbienne chez Jovette Marchessault et Mireille Best." *De L'Invisible au visible: l'imaginaire de Jovette Marchessault*, edited by Roseanna Dufault and Celita Lamar, Les Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 2012, pp. 155-68.

This article compares Best's work with that of the Canadian lesbian author, Jovette Marchessault. While both authors depict lesbian heroines who resist the heterosexist and misogynistic acculturation that their communities impose upon them, Best does so in a manner that allows her to retain a certain empathy for and connection to the heterosexual women around her. Marchessault develops a militant style that more forcefully rejects the way in which young women are conditioned to accept a limited range of options. This article represents an effort to situate Best's work in an international context.

-----. "The Young Woman and the Sea: Lesbians Coming of Age in Coastal Communities in the Novels of Mireille Best." *Women in French Studies*, vol. 11, 2003, pp. 50-63.

This article explores how Best exploits metaphors related to water to simultaneously convey the fluidity that marks her protagonists' quests for identity and to ground her works in the coastal community in which she was raised. Drawing parallels with other female authors who have deployed water imagery, the article seeks to provide a general introduction to Best's novels in terms of both their content and style.

Schenk-van Witsen, Rosalien. "Nommer le désarroi: Het werk van Mireille Best." *Rapports / Het Franse Boek*, vol. LXII, no. 2, 1992, pp. 64-70.

Waelti-Walters, Jennifer, *Damned Women: Lesbians in French Novels, 1776-1996*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.

Waelti-Walters makes a compelling case regarding the literary merits of Best's novels in this overview of her work. The book helps Best's readers understand where her novels fit within the canon of French literary representations of lesbians. In a chapter comparing Best to her contemporaries Jocelyne François and Hélène de Monferrand, Waelti-Walters succeeds in marking Best as a unique literary voice who participated in an unorganized, yet important, movement toward the positive representation of lesbians in French novels.

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Schechner, Stephanie. "Mireille Best." *The Literary Encyclopedia*, First published 20 July 2015, [<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=13478>, accessed 19 May 2016.]

Articles in the popular press

N.B. These articles are not, for the most part, indexed or available digitally through the Bibliothèque Nationale de France although most can be accessed there in hard copy. As a result, some publishing and author information is incomplete. If you would like access to any of these articles, please contact me at saschechner@mail.widener.edu as I have digital copies of the entire dossier.

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