

## AATF BOOK CLUB SELECTION 2007

### LILI MAXIME'S *OURAGAN SUR LE BAYOU*

Lili Maxime (real name Vaillancourt) is both an accomplished singer and writer. Born in the small village of Peribonka on the northern shore of Lac Saint-Jean in rural Quebec, Lili began to sing on the amateur stage in her early teens. At the age of 19 she stopped to begin her university studies, receiving a bachelor's degree in social service from Laval University and a master's degree in sociology from York University in Toronto. During her studies she had the opportunity to work as an assistant in Francophone Louisiana with a team of researchers from Laval studying the survival of the French language and culture. She actually spent seven years (1975-1982) in Cajun Louisiana where she mastered the language and became enamored with the culture of its people. *Ouragan sur le bayou* is in large part the inspiration of her passage in Louisiana.

In addition to her recently completed trilogy, Lili Maxime has authored numerous short stories and recorded an album of original songs entitled *Chanter même si....*

*Ouragan sur le bayou* (2004) is the first of a trilogy of novels on Francophone Louisiana entitled *Ma chère Louisiane*. It was awarded the 2005 France-Acadie Literary Prize at a ceremony in Paris. The novel takes place amidst the pelicans, magnolias, crawfish, and oil rigs of Cajun Louisiana and tells the story of a sociologist from Quebec who arrives in Louisiana to research its Francophone heritage and falls for a young Cajun singer-fisherman who is married to an Indian from the French-speaking Houma tribe. In addition to the two main characters, Hélène Simard and David LeBlanc, several others add a great deal of cultural richness to the work. They include among others David's parents, Anna and Viger (V.J. to most) LeBlanc, who represent the older generation; Margaret Collin, David's wife of Houma Indian heritage, who represents a "minority" culture to the Cajuns; Emery Guidry, David's friend and co-worker, who represents an extremely hard-working yet under-educated individual; and Simon Tremblay, another sociologist from Quebec who provides a contrast to Hélène and a detached view of the cultural horizon.

The novel and its characters offer numerous opportunities for comparison activities. Probably the most interesting is the comparison of Hélène, the sociologist, and Margaret Collin, David's wife, because both

are linked to the same man and both have very interesting backgrounds.

In addition to its intriguing story line and its interesting study of contrasting characters, the author presents the reader with a plethora of cultural information about south-



ern Louisiana. There is accurate historical information about the Acadian passage to Louisiana and numerous passages that describe rural Cajun culture. In the first chapter there are colorful and picturesque descriptions of Bayou Lafourche, probably still today the most rural of the Cajun parishes. It all begins with the following sentence:

*En ce 15 avril 1977, au royaume des fruits de mer et du pétrole, des cocodrils et du magnolia, les Cadjins du bayou LaFourche fêtent l'arrivée du printemps comme en 1765, en dansant.*

The novel includes several pictures of New Orleans, especially the French Quarter. The most important cultural passages describe the everyday life of rural Cajun communities as well as brief historical segments explaining the arrival of the Acadians in Louisiana. The *Grand Déplacement of 1755* as well as other historical events are described and discussed several times giving the novel a solid historical foundation. These cultural passages especially lend themselves to the application of the Cultures goal of the national *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Cultures, Gain Knowledge and Understanding of Other Cultures*. Standard 2.1

asks students to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied, and Standard 2.2 asks them to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. The discussion of the role of the *fais-dodo* and of *gumbo* in this novel is an excellent example of the application of these two standards.

Included in this work are passages written in very readable Cajun French that will fascinate AATF members. Two suggestions to help understand these passages include use of the glossary of Cajun words integrated in an appendix and reading the passages aloud. The latter suggestion helps us relate to our understanding of common everyday English such as "lil-boy," and apply it to French in expressions such as *tit-garçon* or *tite-fille*. Other expressions such as *asteure* meaning *maintenant* or literally *à cette heure, eusse* signifying either *ils* or *elles* ("eux"), *vous aut* and *nous aut* for *vous* ("autres") and *nous* ("autres"), and the use of the verb *connaître* for both *savoir* and *connaître* become so common place that the reader quickly adjusts to this oral variant of French. In fact, a great activity to

help understand the important difference between oral and written language would be to translate one of the Cajun French passages into common everyday English such as "Sorry, I gotta go." There is a fascinating conversation about language between Hélène, the sociologist from Quebec, and Emery Guidry, David LeBlanc's fishing partner with the former speaking "proper" French and Emery Cajun French (pages 69-76). It is also important to note that some of the cultural descriptions involving the role of men and women, modes of transportation, the gradual loss of the French language, and many other topics occur during conversations with the local characters.

Copies of the book may be obtained by contacting *Les Éditions La Grande Marée*, C.P. 3126 siège social, Tracadie-Sheila (NB) Canada E1X 1G5; e-mail [jouellet@nbnet.nb.ca]; Web: [www.lagrandemaree.ca]; telephone (506) 395-9436; fax (506) 395-9439. Please note that prices found on *La Grande Marée's* Web site are in Canadian dollars. On-line discussion of this work will be led by myself and its author, Lili Maxime. Sign up at [http://calvin.ednet.lsu.edu/~aatfbook/index.php].

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