

Le tarot de Cheffersville by Felicia Mihali

Reviewed by:

Joseph A. Reiter

Québec author, publisher, and educator Felicia Mihali terms this work a docuroman. The docu half of the book chronicles a year of teaching at an Innu reservation school in the far north of Québec on the Labrador border. The town in the title is an obvious anagram of Schefferville, once prosperous due to extensive mining, but now reduced to a population of 600 from the high of 8,000 in the late 1970s. Four instructors from Montreal have signed on for a year at the Kanata school. Augusta, the French teacher, whose Romanian past and trajectory mirror the novelist's, recounts the ordeals involved in striving to educate the thirty high schoolers who have little interest in study and learning, and almost none for the proscribed curriculum. The teachers are absolute strangers to the lives of the Innu(sic) community, where unemployment, alcohol, drugs and domestic violence make for uncontrollable situations. The history teacher has reverted to showing movies, the math teacher is heckled, the ethics instructor feels physically threatened. Augusta, however, does not give up and retains the belief that she can somehow reach her students. Obstacles seem insurmountable—inhabitable weather, rare fresh produce, disinterested parents, teenage pregnancy, a non-supportive principal and unruly adolescents. Little by little, through her efforts to learn the culture, history and language of the Innu, and leave behind dominant societal values, she succeeds in engaging, and more importantly, understanding her students. The structure of this docu-roman is highly inventive. It opens in a realm completely different from an academic setting, where we meet the ancestral Innu [End Page 258] hunter god, Tshakapesh, who has left the moon and now roams the forest and tundra surrounding Cheffersville. Why he is in the company of Cerise, a Romanian gypsy, is a mystery. She insists in reading a tarot card, illustrated in the text, followed by an explanation of its meaning. The action then flips to the present—to school and town life. Each of the eleven chapters will follow this pattern—Tshakapesh's universe juxtaposed with Augusta's world. Other unlikely characters arrive at the hunter's lodge, and he educates them, and the reader, to Innu myth, the secrets of nature and the tundra, the importance of the caribou and spruce trees, and the art of respectful and joyful co-existence. The group now includes Augusta's mother Florica, the gypsy petty thief Pâris, two prostitutes, a coiffeuse, an old East European Jew—all persons (ghosts?) from Augusta's past. This eccentric society disbands in the last chapter as the Arcane tarot card is read and Augusta, with trepidation, prepares to return to city life. In a 2014 interview, when asked about her reading preferences, Mihali responded: "What I like is when a book deals with more than simple, soap-opera stories, books made up of layers of magic, history, wisdom, mythology [...] books that make me forget surroundings. It's fantastic when a story and the style in which it is written, challenges me." The reader will find all this, too, in Mihali's docu-roman.

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