

Scrabble

by Sally J. Bellerose

When I beat my 92-year-old mother at Scrabble she said, “Up yours, Little Girl.”

I was gleeful that I had won and that she raised her clenched fist as if she was shoving a piston up my, well, as she would say, *troods-Z-q*. She smiled all the while like the sweet old lady and tough old bird she is.

Depending on her mood when she tells the story, my mother has a ninth- or eighth- or sixth-grade education. Since she turned 93, more and more often, she speaks in a language that is not English but not quite French. When my father was dying, and it took him four years to depart, my parents spoke *dat* jumble of language to each other. They both claimed they couldn’t speak French. They spoke Canuck or French Canadian—English words and phrases mixed-up with what I now suspect is *Joual*,* a word neither my mother nor I had heard before her grandson moved to Canada. A word I can’t pronounce.

Until I was eleven and my *mémère* died, I spoke *dat* funny kind of French at home when I spoke to *Mémère*. If my grandmother’s spoken language was not written, what language was written in her prayer book? Did *Mémère* read at least a bit of what she called “serious” French? Perhaps she knew her prayers by heart and the book was something to hold as she moved her lips in prayer.

Mom can’t spell for *merde* and I can’t figure out punctuation. But Mom can’t spell English words like only a hard-headed girl, going to grammar school during the

Depression, with parents who were barely educated in two languages, can't spell English words.

But Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the woman can play Scrabble. In English. I have seen her beat her M.D. granddaughter and my teacher sister, not lately, but up until a few years ago, before my father died.

One of my favorite things to do as a kid was to watch Mom play Scrabble with her “betters.” Or, as she might say, “People who think their *merde* tastes like ice cream.” Dad was terrible at Scrabble. “Well I’ll be damned,” he’d say, incredulous and insulted when an opponent challenged *petoit* on the grounds it was not a word in English and, anyways, he had spelled it wrong in French.

I come from a long line of poor and vulgar winners. My mother once sucked seventy points out of a well-placed “e” on the last move of the game. She was uncontrollably jubilant.

Used to be. My mother has not beaten me at Scrabble for several years. But she plays Word Jumble alone and she beats herself every time.

* Historically, Joul speakers have been poor and often illiterate. The language was basically nonexistent in print until Michel Tremblay started writing plays in the late '60s. Joul was first brought to the page, at least in popular culture, as dialogue.