

Freakshow:

“Million Dollar Babies”

and the ***National***

Family-rama

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**TV
GUIDE**

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THE DIONNE QUINTUPLETS
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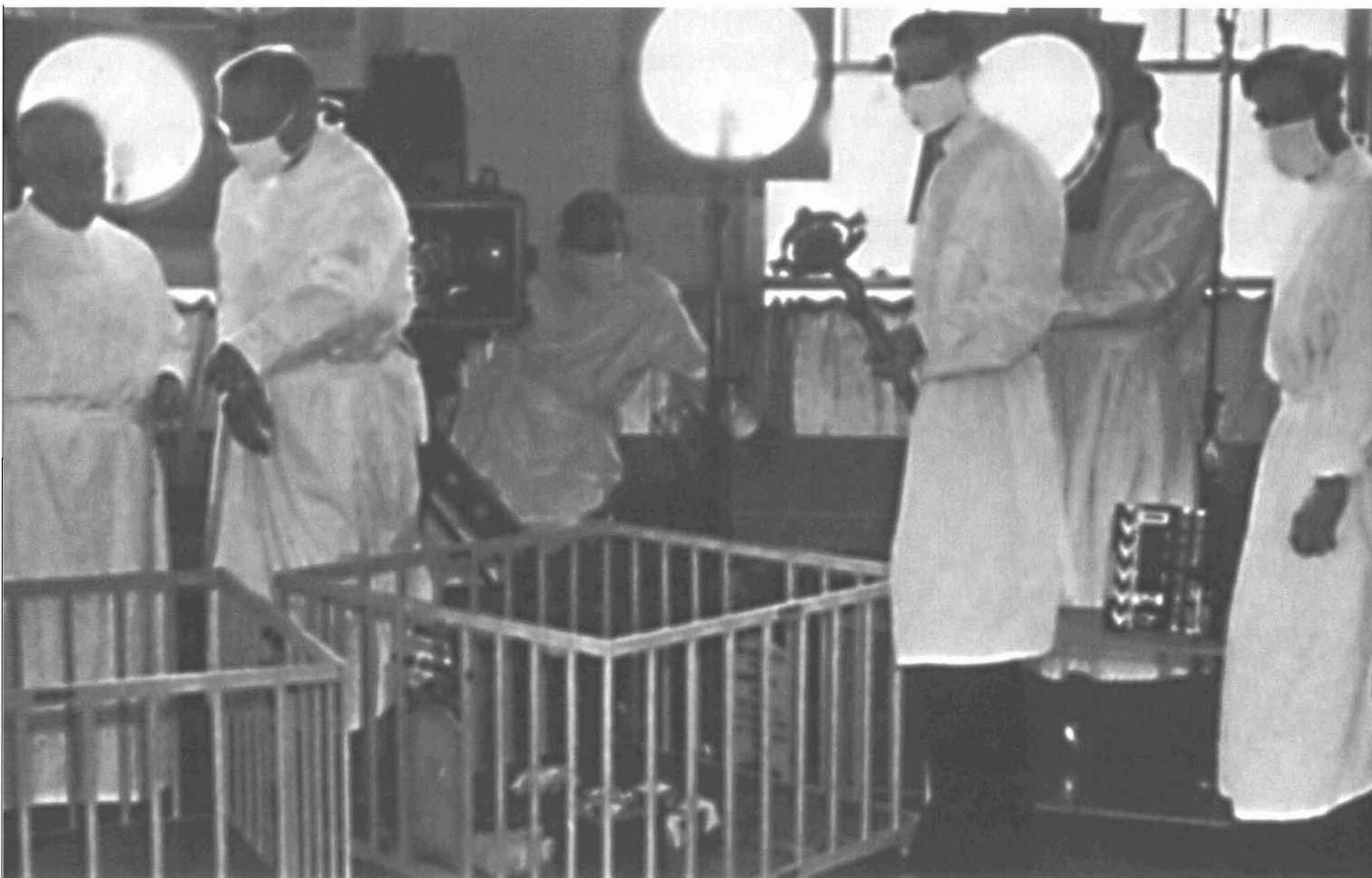
My concern in what follows will be with the family as “national treasure.” Taking the event of *Million Dollar Babies*, a made-for-TV movie (1994) about the Dionne quintts — world-famous for being the first quintuplets to survive more than a couple of days — I will investigate the “family-rama” that surrounded the birth of the French-Canadian sisters in the 1930s as well as its representation in the 1990s. That investigation will be informed by two main points. A first line of questioning addresses how the quintts served as an emblem of the commodification of femininity in the representation of the Canadian nation; a second line of investigation offers a critical stance from which to interrogate the cultural links between sexuality and colonialism and women’s role as breeders of the nation within this narrative.

Million Dollar Babies: A stunt?

Why another movie about the quintts sixty years after their birth? Cinema already has its share with three Hollywood films produced by Twentieth Century Fox¹ and miles of newsreel shot by Pathé. Media and magazine covers have displayed over 100,000 pictures of the famous darlings and advertising campaigns for a multitude of commodities including Carnation Milk, Colgate’s Dental Cream, and Remington typewriters have used their image. Finally, the Dionne quintts are no longer five, but three — The Dionne Trio. After a pile of scientific, popular and academic papers have been written about them, and a recent special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*² was entirely devoted to their sixtieth anniversary, the made-for-TV movie came as the icing on the celebratory cake of this “classic of Canadian history” (as the network voice-over proclaimed at each commercial break).

The broadcast of *Million Dollar Babies* constituted a premiere in the history of Canadian television. The two-part, four-hour movie produced by CBC (Canadian Broadcast Corporation) and simultaneously broadcast on CBC and CBS in Fall 1994, is the very first made-for-TV movie authorized by the three surviving Dionne siblings. The miniseries retraces the early years of the quintts in the “nursery,” when they were under the custody of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe (Beau Bridges), supervisor for the Ontario government. *Million Dollar Babies* is based on the novel *Time of Their Lives: The Dionne Tragedy*³ which portrays the French-Catholic Mama Dionne as a virtuous woman fighting for the right to have her daughters with her. At least, that is what the producers tell us. What they do not tell us is that this made-for-TV movie is not typical of the cultural characteristics of Québec television. Too short, too simplistic, too cliché, too trash: i.e., too “American.” No wonder the movie was first broadcast on the national English-Canadian television. Besides, for English-Canadians and Americans, the Dionne quintts have always been northern versions of Shirley Temple . . . with a French twist.

When *Million Dollar Babies* was released in 1994, it seemed that the made-for-TV movie was another money-making stunt delivered to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the miracle girls. Displayed as the pride of the Canadian nation, their come-back in the media interestingly accompanied the campaign for independence that was aggressively taking place in Québec. Also, 1994 marked the return of the Parti Québécois to the political scene and the revivification of antagonism between francophone and anglophone communities in Québec. Ironically, at the peak of the nationalist fever in Québec, the made-for-TV movie directed by French Québécois director Christian Duguay was clearly playing with the clichés of cultural assimilation, language survival and the natural mission of good, Catholic, rural French-Canadian mothers to procreate for the sake of the race. The film clearly advocates the francophone position concerning the historical abuse of the francophone community by the English-Canadian authorities. The fact that the action



took place in Ontario rather than in Québec does not make any difference in terms of national politics. The Dionnes represent French-Canadians, regardless of location, thereby reflecting the condensation of the referendum to an issue of Frenchness. By doing so, it is almost as if the producers of the film reenact the battle for Québec's independence.

Featuring one of the most famous male TV-stars in the history of Québec television, the 'beau' Roy Dupuis as Papa Dionne, the French Québécois had to wait until Fall 1995 to get to see the series in French. That was right on time for the referendum for independence, but also perfectly tuned to echo the xenophobic speech delivered by Lucien Bouchard, leader of the yes campaign. Bemoaning the fact that Québec society has the lowest birth rate in the entire 'white race,' and calling on white French Québec women to "get back to their wombs" for the survival of the nation, Bouchard's speech reactualized the conception that women popping out babies in the new world is still the best means to insure a strong economy for the country-to-be. Eager to free the Québec province from the spirit of British colonialism, Bouchard was in fact deploying the typical



argument that for centuries has legitimized colonial expeditions: the expansion of the race. Hence, both the made-for-TV movie and Bouchard's speech keep the issue of our relation between ethnicity and society in the horizon of colonialism.

A national treasure...

I was not interested in revisiting the quints story until, in the midst of the Québec referendum, the three Dionne survivors began to campaign for their own independence. At the same time that the miniseries was hitting the French-Québec television, Cécile, Annette and Yvonne were launching a bomb: *Secrets de Famille*⁴, a book relating their life in the "big house" following their reunion with Pa and Ma Dionne. The new autobiography totally demystified the French-Canadian family as "guardian of identity." The three sisters idealize their early childhood, claiming that their cocooned life in the nursery was the only family environment that they ever relished, while denouncing the sexual abuse and emotional exploitation that the family reunion brought.⁵

Two documents, two amazing stories. On one side, a made-for-TV movie celebrating the French-Canadian Family and the sacrificial mother as the basis for racial survival; on the other side, a disturbing testimony that could be read as the death of a nation based on the traditional family structure. Interviewed on all the major networks — American and French Québec — the famous Dionne sisters denounced the participation of their parents in the circus surrounding their existence as quints. According to Cécile, Annette and Yvonne, the return home did not provide the expected safe environment that the Dionne parents were promising. In one of the most emotionally charged interviews granted on the French-Québec network Radio-Québec, Annette confessed to Janette — our Oprah — that the big house was never free from exploitation. Describing the life of sexual and physical abuse that they had to endure, the sisters added to the narrations of oddity that the media had propagated about the Dionne family's history.

Such denunciation might sound ambiguous given that the Dionne sisters did authorize the producers of CBS and CBC for the rather sympathetic portrait of Oliva and Elzire Dionne (played by the skinny Céline Bonnier) depicted in *Million Dollar Babies*. Asked about the discrepancies between their account of the Dionnes and their sanitized portrait in the made-for-TV production, the sisters insisted that the mini-series is based on a period of their life when they still longed for and, at the same time, feared what life would be like with their parents. The fact that the Dionne quints had little contact with their biological parents in their first nine years of their life might explain why they endorsed the sympathetic and rather romanticized picture of the Dionne family.

Both the book and the television version condemn quite vigorously the role of the Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn and his government in the guardianship of the quints.⁶ *Million Dollar Babies* focuses on the custody battle between the two "fathers" of the girls: the glamorous "daddy Dafoe" and the down-trodden farmer, Oliva Dionne. This story is a quintessential case study in Canadian history: the poor Catholic French Canadian farmer against the Anglo-Protestant establishment.⁷ In this sense, *Million Dollar Babies* follows the conventions of the mini-series genre — an underdog's fight against an all-powerful institution.

In the movie, this fight is all about the public display of the different parties' interest in the custody of the quints. The family-rama consists of, on one side, the quints as darling freaks of the Crown, and on the other side, Pa and Ma Dionne as curiosities because they appear in variety shows in order to raise money from their status as the quints' parents. In the film, Oliva orchestrates their tour, but in the Dionne sisters' autobiography, Ma Dionne is an equal accomplice to the parents' publicity and to the side-show scenario that characterized their early years. The Dionne sisters' version undercuts the loving and nurturing image that the made-for-TV movie portrayed. In this way, the Dionne sisters' "individual" memories converge in the form of a collective

history that challenges the traditional vision of the unified, victimised French-Canadian family. According to the terms of that history, their parents are condemned as money grubbers.

The Dionne parents undertook a tour of fairs and variety shows in the United States as part of their crusade to get public attention for their battle with the Ontario authorities. That tour receives a powerful depiction in the made-for-TV movie. In one scene, the parents appear on stage as a "special attraction" sandwiched between dancing girls and clowns spitting fire. Standing in front of a painted backdrop of the image of the five wonders, the parents try to gain public sympathy over the fact that they are not a happy family following the Ontario government's decision to award custody of the quintos to Dafoe. The scene draws on the melodramatic elements of their profession as unfortunate parents of the quintos while at the same time the crowd mocks Oliva the procreator. This sequence clearly makes apparent the freak show quality of the Dionnes as well as the family-rama that surrounded the quintos. However, even if the narrative mostly suggests that the Dionnes are honest working folk, the raucous parade of the other artists in the tour gives the entire scene a carnivalesque tone.

Interestingly enough, if one freak show was legitimized on the basis of scientific concerns and experiments, Oliva and Elzire Dionne's use of the public eye was considered an exploitation of their indecent fertility. In the made-for-TV movie, there is a strong parallel between competing versions of the stakes involved in the custody battle and the struggle against the assimilation of the French minority in Ontario. Furthermore, both battlegrounds are the exclusive domain of the different men involved as they vie for the simultaneous position of father of the girls and father of the nation. Making matters even more complicated, there are not just two contestants for the role. Marianne Valverde, in "Representing childhood: The multiple fathers of the Dionne quintuplets," argues that, in the battle over the quintos, there were five 'fathers' involved: Dr. Dafoe, Oliva Dionne, the government of Ontario, the Catholic Church and the media.⁸ In this quintfatherland, there was little or no room for the mother, Elzire Dionne.

Million Dollar Babies privileges this narrative of the father thereby 1) reinforcing the traditional alliance between Church-State-Economy (the holy Trinity) in the construction of the nation; and 2) marginalizing Catholic mothers as the 'milk cows' for the survival of the French-Canadian species. Beyond the so-predictable denial of women's voices in the national discourse, the narratives of paternity marginalize the role of women in the market economy. Thus, the movie clearly avoids engaging with the active role that women played in the commodification of their femininity within national and colonial space. *Million Dollar Babies*, and most of the romanticized accounts of their tragedy, stick with a representation of national territory that disavows the body as central to its constituency.

Indeed, the quintos position as a national treasure rests on the marketing of their collective body through a unified label: *the quintos*. As the deaths of Emilie and Marie will show many years later, the disappearance of the quintos as national commodities has less to do with the claim that people got tired of them, and more with the fact that, as they grew up, the quintos started to reclaim more and more of their individual identities. By doing so, the quintos produced a new version of the family from which the father and the mother were purposely excluded. Suddenly, the quintos were no longer the darling freaks, but abnormal, even maladjusted girls, incapable of functioning within the proper family structure. Rumors of their dysfunctional development had accompanied the quintos during their stay at the nursery, rumors fueled by the nurses, the journalists, the experts and even the visitors.⁹ Later, that vision would be reinforced in the media: the quintos failed marriages were largely attributed to psychological troubles stemming from their attempts to live apart from each other.



Family-rama: a legitimate freak show

Targeting their critiques towards children's rights and the regulation of the family by the state, most of the analysis of the quint's history has totally ignored the commodified aspect of the family structure, what I call the family-rama. Looking at the destiny of the quint as a tragedy should not erase the role of their status as miracles. By defining them as miracles, the doctors, the Ontario government — as well as the Catholic Church and the parents — provided the most solid rationale to legitimate the circus around the quintuplets. Miracles have to be protected, controlled and confined to a very specific area: the shrine. For the quint, the shrine was Quintland, the first theme park constructed in Canada. Raised and displayed in a controlled and contained environment, the only notion of the family that was available to the Dionne quint was that of a national family-rama: an army of experts, care-givers, fans and tourists for whom the freaks were not only the quint themselves but also Daddy Dafoe, Oliva and Elzire Dionne.

In this sense, *Million Dollar Babies* allows questions about the way that the quint's guardianship has been contextualised in terms of class, race and gender. By insisting on the discrepancies between the natural French Canadian family and the sanitized anglophone nursery, the movie suggests that the freak show was also happening beyond the limits of Quintland and was rooted in the representation of the Dionne family as procreative beasts — through their commodified location on the market. Pictured as a natural resource to be nationalized, the babies came to embody the only marketable dimension of the family (leaving aside that femininity is also embodied in the national economy).

My way to understand reproduction as both a natural resource and a commodity is to associate it with the development of the nation-state in Canada. The Liberal government of Ontario Premier Mitch Hepburn that passed the Guardianship Act in 1934 merely actualized the ideology of a state eager to intervene in multiple dimensions of social life. Canada has been built on the liberal philosophy that the state had justifiable power to enact bills to protect national property. This notion of national property is a largely colonial inheritance: the womb is juridically appropriated and then monitored in order to insure the future of the colony. This aspect of the politics of the nation-state ideology is never really addressed as one of the fundamental elements for understanding the history of the quint's. Valverde, in her work on the Dionne quintuplets, accounts for the state regulation that informed the politics around the quint's when she addresses the different strategies put forward by the Ontario government to interfere directly with family policy. However, I want to pick up where Valverde left off by emphasizing that the quint's history is not only informed by state regulation, but also by a discourse of the nation that subordinated women's bodies to the survival of the country.

The quint's were not then the object of a simple battle between the anglophones and the franco-phones, between the Protestants and the Catholics. They were also one of the very first and most successful examples of state intervention in terms of social welfare and the regulation of economy. This could not have happened anywhere other than a country where the state was struggling to bolster its position in domains traditionally controlled by the Church, such as education and family welfare.¹⁰ Moreover, in the philosophy of the nation-state, any kind of natural resource becomes common property. This is exactly how the quint's were considered: a national treasure, as opposed to national waste.

It is interesting to ask why the Key Quadruplets, born in Texas in the 1930s, did not receive as much media exposure and did not become a national tourist attraction like the French-Canadian little girls. Cynthia Wright suggests that the Key sisters, unlike the Dionne quintuplets, downplayed the all-for-one, one-for-all trade-mark. More significantly, I argue that the notion of collective property associated with the nation-state was the main motivation to market the quint's differently from the Key sisters. Born in a state — Texas — that aggressively prohibited government intervention in the economy, the Key sisters could not become national treasures, while the unfortunate Canuck quint's, as wards of the Crown, were displayed in the public eye on the basis of collective property and national pride.

Furthermore, the Dionne quint's were legitimately exploited as national miracles because the commodification of female bodies is intrinsically associated with the colonial landscape and the economy of the colony. No matter how 'modern' and innovative were the educational and health techniques used in the nursery, the means of marketing the nation through the femaleness of the "quintuplicity" belonged to the tradition of the colonial mind. The quint's were not only babies, but more importantly 'baby girls' as Dr. Dafoe (Beau Bridges) constantly refers to them in *Million Dollar Babies*. The consecration of the miracle girls involved much more than the traditional belief that God's hand will provide salvation from the throes of the Depression; the nation as a whole would also be saved by the extraordinary display of feminine capital.

Hence, the nationalization of the quint's reached its full cultural dimension only in a context in

which the womb was nationalized. In this sense, the discourse of the nation elicited the separation of the cultural (the feminine) from the natural (the reproductivity of women's bodies). *Million Dollar Babies* privileges a story which endorses this political position. At the same time that the quintes did not exist outside of their multiple figures, Ma Dionne was in fact the vector of French-Canadian fertility. Thus, the femininity of Elzire Dionne's body disappeared totally in the quintes' repetitive display, leaving Ma Dionne as a disembodied subject.

"We don't know where Ma is, but we have 'Pop' on ice."¹³

In this last section, I would like to look at how the historical relationships between femininity and national economy are informed by two antagonistic representations of women's roles in the development of the nation-state. The first one tends to provide a *passive* definition of women as breeders of the nation; the second frames women as active participants in the state economy. The made-for-TV movie asserts an idyllic vision of Elzire Dionne that makes her the perfect invisible breeder for the nation. As Wright puts it: "Her house is spotless, her devotion is total and, above all, she is untainted by any hint of 'the commercial'."¹⁴ She has no other ambition than to serve her beloved husband and their eleven children. If the quintes are described as miracles in the movie, Elzire-the-French-Canadian mother is a saint and a goddess of fertility. In that context, the movie positions Elzire Dionne, who in reality did not speak English, as the true mother of the French-Canadian nation and as the guardian of the species.

Consequently, by representing Ma Dionne as the martyr mother suffering alone and in silence in her shack, the movie fails to acknowledge the tremendous political involvement of women's groups in the battle over the quintes' custody. *Au contraire*, to raise support against the Guardianship Act that made the quintes "Wards of the Crown," Elzire Dionne actually gave many speeches as early as one year after she gave birth to the darling freaks. She was welcomed by various women's organizations that promoted family values and natural motherhood in Ontario and in Québec. *Million Dollar Babies* erases Ma Dionne's forceful character traits and instead all the political activity is seen to belong to men. The only woman who gets some public exposure in the film is Helena Reid — and she is portrayed as the asexual, unmotherly American from New York City.

At the same time, the Guardianship Act was also an industry in which women and mothers took parts. Scores of women actively supported the Guardianship of the quintes by participating in a national program initiated by the Ontario government to collect breast milk to feed the miraculous girls.¹⁵ On the same level that the quintes were proclaimed 'national treasures', breast milk reached the status of a natural resource provided by an army of Canadian mothers. By encouraging and rewarding women for increasing the national treasury, the Ontario government made clear that what comes out of women's bodies had value for the nation.¹⁶

Million Dollar Babies is quick, though, to condemn those women from Ontario farm villages around Corbeil who benefited from the gold mine brought by this nationalization of the quintes. The made-for-TV movie depicts most of the women as greedy witches eager to capitalize on the oddities around the Dionne Family including the two French-Canadian midwives, Mmes Legros et Labelle who wrote *Administering Angels*, a true account of their involvement in the miracle birth; the nurses assigned to Dafoe's hospital; and Helena Reid, the famous New York radio host who for years made stories out of the quintes' adventure. The women's sin is their intrusion into commercial activity that is not linked to their "nature." It is acceptable to make money out of giving breast milk, but it is not OK to run a business or mold stories out of an historical moment.

By promoting a representation of Ma Dionne's maternal feelings as 'natural' and not mercantile, *Million Dollar Babies* avoids the fact that Quintland and the quintes represented a fascinating



instance of both a nationalization of family practices and of a colonial family-rama. It is the co-existence of the rustic French-Canadian family and the commodification of feminine attributes that makes the Dionne quints a truthful national experience. My view is that the movie maintains a vision of French-Quebec femininity within which the womb is the stock exchange of the nation. This is why I argue that the narratives of femininity and national economy are what make the movie *Million Dollar Babies* a first-class 'tour' of the Canadian national market. And why I argue that this 'tour' moves through two commodified and gendered landscapes: Quintland and Elzire Dionne's formidable womb.

* * *

Cécile Dionne is smiling at the camera. She is sitting with Julie Snyder for an exclusive *solo* interview on Radio-Canada. Cécile, responding to the media headlines, does not hide that the three sisters are broke and that the revenues from the broadcast of *Million Dollar Babies* will straighten things up.¹⁷ The selling of their dramatic story — which one? — to the prize of tabloid papers in United States, *The National Enquirer*, should also increase their income. Then an article taken from *The Globe and Mail* catches my attention.¹⁸ It is about two other Canadian families that have quintuplets, the Colliers and the Forgies. God didn't have to lend a hand in these events, the fertility drug Clomid and the testube eggs did the work for him. Who knows, maybe someone on the medical teams found one of the fertility stones that used to be sold at Quintland? The media made much of these two marvels of medical intervention, but nothing compared to the miracle of a true act of nature. Then, an epiphany: both families of quintuplets were born in Ontario. No wonder Ontario is now the most populous province in Canada. But fans of the Dionne sisters can sleep in peace. Neither of the most recent quints are a perfect five: there are boys in the picture. And the Québec government can proudly rule the arena of nostalgic nationalism ... both of the 1980s versions of Elzire bear anglophone first-names.

I would like to thank Josephine Mills for her feedback and assistance with different versions of this paper. And a very special thank you to Joy Van Fuqua, who, from Pennsylvania to Texas, keeps contributing to my Dionne quint's archives and fandom.

Notes

- 1 The films are: *The Country Doctor*, *Reunion* and *Five of a Kind*.
- 2 *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Winter 1994–95).
- 3 John Nihmey and Stuart Foxman, *Time of Their Lives: The Dionne Tragedy* (Ottawa: NIVA Publishing, 1986), 222.
- 4 Jean-Yves Soucy, avec Annette, Cécile et Yvonne Dionne, *Secrets de Famille*, Montréal: Libre Expression, 1995, 317.
- 5 Barry Came, "A Family Tragedy", *Maclean's*, vol. 107, no. 47 (21 Nov, 1994): 40–43 and Tom Fennell, "The Forgotten Dionnes," *Maclean's*, vol. 107, no. 47 (21 Nov, 1994): 44–45.
- 6 Furthermore, the surviving sisters present the on-going fight with the Ontario government as a matter of economical disagreement over the trustees.
- 7 The pun on quint-essential has been played over and over by the media. Again recently, see the article by Barry Came "The Dionne quint-essence," in *Maclean's*, vol. 107, no. 23 (6 June, 1994): 92–94, or John Tellefsrud (from the *North Bay Nugget*—the paper that broke the news about the birth of the Dionne quintuplets back in 1934), "Still a quintessential experience for close friend of the Dionnes," *Vancouver Sun*, May 28, 1994, A12.
- 8 See "Representing Childhood: The multiple fathers of the Dionne quintuplets," in, *Regulating Womanhood*, Carol Smart, ed. (London: Routledge, 1992), 119–146.
- 9 Emilie died in 1954 at age 20 during an epileptic seizure. Marie, died 16 years later, alone in her apartment, of a cause never determined. Rumors of suicide, drug abuse and history of depression had circulated in the tabloids.
- 10 The quint's were an example among others. When addressing the terrible destiny of the quint's, nobody ever mentioned the horrible plight of the "Duplessis' children" (les enfants de Duplessis), in Québec society of the 1950s. The Duplessis' children were those orphans who under a Québec law named after the Premier of Québec, Maurice Duplessis, were relocated from supposed Church orphanages to mental institutions. If the quint's suffered from their media and public overexposure, the orphans were relegated in the backseat, having to wait almost thirty years before the media paid attention to their struggle.
- 11 See Cynthia Wright, "They Were Five: The Dionne Quintuplets Revisited," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 9.
- 12 The heading's pun "We don't know where Ma is, but we have 'Pop' on ice," was a slogan displayed by one of the shops in Quintland. I happened to notice this sign in the background of a shot from Donald Brittain's documentary *The Dionne Quintuplets* (NFB, 1978, 87 min.), based on Pierre Berton's book: *The Dionne Years: A Thirties Melodrama* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977). It is amazingly appropriate to the spirit of *Million Dollar Babies*' prime narrative.
- 13 "They were five: The Dionne Quintuplets Revisited," 7.
- 14 Katherine Arnup reports in "Raising the Dionne Quintuplets: Lessons for Modern Mother," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 65–85, that: "From their fourth day of life until they reached the age of five months, the Quintuplets were fed breast milk donated by nursing mothers. (...) By five months of age, together the girls were consuming a gallon of breast milk a day, an amount too large for even the two major Canadian hospitals to supply.
- 15 Women were paid ten cents an ounce for their contribution to the national effort.
- 16 Some of the headlines are quite revealing. To name a few: "Surviving quint's set to cash in: Dionne sisters take control after decades of exploitation," *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 24 Sept., 1994, B8; "5 is too many: The Dionne quintuplets are back in the spotlight. They need the money. After six decades, it's too late for everything else they needed," *Saturday Night*, vol. 109, no. 9, (November 1994): 78–82; "Surviving Dionne siblings to cash in on fame," *The Gazette*, 26 Sept., 1994, B6.
- 17 See Peggy Hill, "The quint's and me," *The Globe and Mail*, 28 May, 1994.