Clara Sereni. *Keeping House. A Novel in Recipes*. Trans. Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005. Pp. xii + 150. ISBN 0-7914-6479-2

Keeping House is not about keeping at all. Rather, it is a book about change and about the subtle movements and mutations that appear so imperceptible until we realize how irreversible they have become. Such is the stuff of everyday life, the waxing and waning of our daily routines, collected for us in a charming and poignant novel, now translated from the Italian by Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli. Written by Clara Sereni, the book was originally published in 1987. With its neologistic title *Casalinghitudine* (a combination of *casalinga* housewife, and the connotative traces of *abitudine*, *solitudine*, *negritudine* (habit, solitude, negritude), it represented an innovative Italian foray into a diverse genre of contemporary literature that was a cook book (and not only), a novel (and not only), as well as a memoir (and not only). The new genre made of *Casalinghitudine* an engaging read, and its title gave the Italian lexicon a fresh entry. Its clear gynocentric attitude celebrated life through the kitchen. American critic Nina Baym has wondered in her work why it is that, in the past, works worth remembering for their impact on the community of humans have unfairly been biased toward whaling ships rather than sewing circles, towards masculine enterprises rather than feminine ones. *Keeping House* responds to Baym's concern; we have here universal human themes whose initial motivation comes from an area traditionally assigned to women: the kitchen. Each chapter begins with a recipe. Each recipe, along with the thoughtful reflections it engenders of memories, events, people, opinions, presents the desires, hopes and fears of all of us. The book is not a feminist or feminine enterprise. Rather, it presents life, from birth to death, through the metaphor of a meal, from baby food to appetizer to dessert to preserving foodstuffs. In her writing, Sereni claims that she intends to sink "...into the jars, into the liqueurs, into the potted plants on the terrace, into the sweaters and blankets with which I would like to ensnare the world, into the freezer. Because in...the mosaic of my life (as in everyone's, but more so women's) keeping house can also mean a little warm place. A small corner that is constantly changing, for its stillness would mean death, and recipes are only a base, one on which to build new flavours, new combinations every time" (142). We often take our life changes for granted, even as we take the various courses of a meal for granted. And only once a life cycle is over, when we arrive at the powerful ontological shifts demanded by its ending, can we reflect on how much we really have changed. Sereni emphasizes this by closing her work with a metaphoric *in memoriam* of her tyrannical father Emilio, known as "The Adversary". It is a recipe for a digestive "Bitter", ironically made with half a kilo of sugar.

Writing in the foreword prepared for this sensitively executed English translation, Sereni reiterates her approval of 'new flavors, new combinations', signalling in this way how much the novel is about change, even how much it has changed since she first wrote it. "How could food remain the same?" she asks. "The number of people around the table changes, the availability of money and time

changes, our physical and creative needs change. If I had kept my cooking more rigid, my life would have stopped as well, frozen, blocked.” (vii) The translators have understood particularly well the demands that a novel in this kind of constant semiosis will require. It is not just a matter of language: it is a matter of culture, of attitude, even of math. As Miceli Jeffries notes: “A “handful” (pugno) or a “bit” (po) are subjective measures” (xi). Translating Sereni’s prose required not only linguistic flexibility and expertise to render as faithfully as possible what the translators label a “striking and unusual prose style” (xi) but a test kitchen as well. The introductory essay offers us a glimpse into this unusual literary exercise; besides detailed information on Sereni herself, it elucidates the process of translating a work that remains a novel, yet also faithfully reveals Sereni, her socio-political environment, and her own self-development. In addition, the translation invites the reader to a gustatorial exploration of Sereni’s world. The juxtaposition of character and recipe adds an unusual dimension to the novel. For example, Sereni’s aunt, Ermelinda Pontecorvo-Sereni (the author’s beloved Zia Mela) lives on, elegant and severe, intelligent and frivolous, each time her recipe for *Semolina gnocchi* is prepared. One cannot help but evoke Proust here. His *madeleines* help us to understand how memory functions for him, and to analogize with our own recollections. In Sereni, we have a similar enterprise, with the delicious addition of a reproducible recipe to create our own personal sensory experiences. The translators have worked diligently to ensure that the recipes will work for a North American reader (and they do). If they didn’t, *Keeping House* would be a laudable journey into cookery nostalgia somewhat akin to Janet Ross’s *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen* (1899). *Leaves...* has been repropose for a contemporary readership (2006), with the addition of new recipes. But the formidable Janet Ross herself has faded into the background and the affective attachment between her and her recipes has diminished. This fate will not likely befall Zia Mela, so similar to Ross in personality. Her gnocchi will engage readers, allowing them to remember her while making their own new “gnocchi” memories.

Keeping House is indubitably about transformation: through time, of culture, language, customs, politics, self. The novel works because it engages us thoroughly; it is food for thought and food for nourishment. Congratulations to the translators, Giovanna Miceli Jeffries and Susan Briziarelli, who have managed so effectively to capture the unique essence of this work without perverting its metaphorical purpose and without distorting or undermining its culinary framework. Readers will not regret accepting their invitation “to meditate on the various courses and to savour them as well” (p.19).

ANNE URBANCIC
University of Toronto