Argumentation and Persuasion:

1. Review the list of persuasive devices on pp. 313-314 of this chapter’s introduction. Which ones does Brand use here? Give an example for each of your answers.

2. Does “Job” also have an argumentative dimension? If so, is it deductive or inductive? Tell how.

Ideas for Discussion and Writing:

1. Dionne Brand had recently arrived in Canada when she lived the event she writes of here. How much have things changed since 1970, when she was 18? Would this scene be possible in Toronto today? In your own town or city? If it did happen, what legal recourse is now available?

2. Brand and her sister “waited out the ebb and flow of favour and need in this white place,” working in kitchen hospitals, till things changed. Why, in our time, does she still remember the racist who refused her an interview some 30 years ago? Should she try to forget? Or will remembering serve her better in the present and future? How?

3. Our author calls the man who refused her interview a “pig.” Do you consider this name-calling justified? Or, in labelling her enemy, does she begin to share his attitudes? What would you do?

4. Every group in Canadian society is now a minority. Has yours suffered unfairness? Illustrate, as Brand has done, with an incident.

5. PROCESS IN WRITING: Use persuasion in the act of writing, as Brand has done, to expose an unfairness that happened to you. Close your eyes and recall the incident, then freewrite on it for several minutes. Look over what you have produced, then work the best of it into a fast discovery draft, adding images and details (remember Brand “showing” us her high heels and lipstick, the man’s smile fading, the difficult walk back to the subway). Later look over the nine devices of persuasion listed on pp. 313-314 of our chapter introduction; what do you see that will strengthen your message? Use it. Now edit for style and mechanics, then read the piece aloud, with feeling, to the class. Finally, ask for reactions. Which passages communicated most strongly, and why?

Note: See also the Topics for Writing at the end of this chapter.

Translated from the French by Ronald Conrad

Nathalie Petrowski, columnist for La Presse and formerly for Le Devoir, is one of Quebec’s favourite print journalists — quirky, personal and satirical. She has also published a novel, Il Restera toujour le Nebraska (1990), and a book on having children in middle age (Maman, last call, 1995). In her Devoir column of December 16, 1989, Petrowski had a special challenge: ten days before, a 25-year-old man had walked into an engineering class at the University of Montreal’s École Polytechnique, shouted at the women students “You’re all a bunch of feminists, and I hate feminists,” ordered the men to leave — then lifted his rifle and shot the women. Six died. During the next minutes of terror (seven according to Petrowski, twenty according to later reports) he roamed the building, shooting as he went. Altogether he gunned down 27 students, killing 14, all women. Then Marc Lépine turned the weapon on himself and died too. The nation felt a shock wave of anger and remorse, for not only was this the worst one-day mass murder in the country’s history, but its selectivity seemed to express a general sexism in society. In the next days, as the flag over Parliament flew at half-mast, citizens learned that Lépine’s father had beat him and mistreated the mother, that the parents had divorced, and that the boy, though intelligent, had problems in school both academically and socially. He loved war movies, and from a paratrooper uncle learned to handle firearms. Now on December 6 of every year, ceremonies across the nation honour the 14 young women, training for a profession still dominated by men, who were killed by a man whose suicide note blamed feminists for ruining his life. The essay that follows (originally entitled “Pitié pour les salauds”) has a special poignancy, for Nathalie Petrowski wrote it in shock, as she and the nation first struggled to see meaning in the event. (Note: See also “Our Daughters, Ourselves,” by Stevie Cameron, on the same subject.)

Pardon if I insist, pardon if I don’t just mourn and forget, but it’s stronger than I am, for a week I can’t stop thinking about Marc Lépine. A psychoanalyst would say I’m identifying with the aggressor.

* Editor’s title.
But I'd say that inside every aggressor, every villain, there hides a victim.

I think of Marc Lépine to block out all the talk that just confuses things: Rambo, television, violence towards women, pornography, abortion, and firearms in display windows.

Still, journalists have told us everything; where he lived, the schools he went to, the names of teachers and students he knew. We know how much he paid for his rifle and how he loved war movies. But once all this has been said, nothing has been said.

We know nothing of the ache that consumed him, of the torture inside him. We know nothing of the evil path he slipped into, smiling the cruel smile of the angel of destruction, no longer himself, knowing only that he was put on earth to destroy.

I think of Marc Lépine but equally of Nadia, his sister who was beaten, too, for singing out loud in the morning, Nadia who came from the same family but didn’t fall prey to the same madness. Why Marc and not Nadia, why Marc and not another? That’s what I ask myself when facts only deepen the mystery, when social criticism only confuses things.

No one remembers him from grade school, or from Sainte-Justine Hospital where he spent a year in therapy with his mother and sister. Until last week Marc Lépine did not exist. He was an unknown quantity, a number, an anonymous face in the crowd, a nobody who no one would ever look at or give the least warmth, the slightest affection. In a few moments he went from a nothing to one of a kind, a pathological case who the experts claim in no way represents the society where he was born and grew up.

For a week I’ve been talking with these experts, hoping to understand. For a week all I’ve seen is that there is no one answer, there are a thousand. For a week I’ve dealt with the official and professional voices who keep their files under key, who keep repeating that there’s no use wanting to know more, that Marc Lépine is dead, that he can no longer be healed or saved, that it’s too late to do anything at all. Sometimes their excuses and justifications sound like lies.

But I refuse to hear the silence of death that falls like snow, the shameful silence that freezes my blood. Somewhere deep in the ruins of our private space we hide the truth, we try to protect ourselves saying that families — ours, his, the victims — have been traumatized.

Forget about the past, say the authorities, let’s move on and not let Marc Lépine’s act dictate our choices. Yet the surest way to let this act dictate our choices is to hide it, to let it become a medical, psychological and criminal secret, to push it into the smallest hollow of our collective memory till it’s erased and we can say it never existed at all.

In this province where memory is reduced to a slogan on a licence plate*, we want to forget Marc Lépine like we forget all events that can disturb us and make us think. Though I know nothing of Marc Lépine’s story, I’ve met enough young people in the high schools and colleges to know that chance as well as reasons, randomness as well as all the wrong conditions in one person’s life, caused this act. His tragic destiny looks more and more like a tangle of shattered hopes, of frustated dreams, of hopeless waits on a long and cold road without a single hand extended to help, and no guardrail.

Marc Lépine died the evening of December 6, but unlike his victims, he had died long before. In the end his life lasted just seven minutes. Before and after, he was forgotten.

So pardon my pessimism, but I cannot help believing that somewhere, at this moment, there are other Marc Lépines who won’t ask for anything because they don’t even know what to ask for — other children turned into monsters by abusive fathers and impersonal school systems, by a society so intent on excellence that every day it hammers the nail of Defeat further in, and plants seeds of frustration and violence in the fragile spirits of its children.

Though nothing can be done now for Marc Lépine, something can still be done for the others, whose inner clock has already begun the terrible countdown. It would be a mistake to forget them.

△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△△

**Explorations:**

Nathalie Petrowski, *Il Restera toujours le Nebraska* (novel; available only in French)
Louise Malette and Marie Chalouh, eds., *Polytechnique, 6 décembre* (writings on the Montreal Massacre; available only in French)
Elliott Leyton, *Hunting Humans* (book on multiple murders)
Camilo José Cela, *Pascal Duarte’s Family* (novel, Spain)
Gabriel García Márquez, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (novella, Colombia)
Anne Hébert, *The Torrent* (novella)

* Quebec licence plates bear the motto "Je me souviens" ("I remember"); Quebeckers consider this a reference to their history, and especially the Conquest.