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"Oh baby baby it's a wild world"
(Cat Stevens) collagraph/collage

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Ishmael in Love: Anne Finger and the Reclamation of Disability

by Josh Lukin

If the cultural world for which one is fighting is a living and necessary fact, its expansiveness will be irresistible and it will find its artists.

—Antonio Gramsci

In August 2011, the American Repertory Theatre announced a Broadway-bound revival of *Porgy and Bess*, for which director Diane Paulus and playwright Suzan-Lori Parks had “created scenes, invented biographical details and, in their most radical move, added a more hopeful ending” in the interest of “excavating and shaping and modernizing the story” (Healy 2011). Eschewing any mention of the old controversies about the opera’s treatment of race, class, and sexual relations, the revisionists spoke of fleshing out characters, of adding realism, of implementing changes that George Gershwin surely would have made had he lived longer. The most drastic of the alterations in a character seems to be inflicted on Porgy, who, no longer dependent on his goat cart for mobility, now walks with a cane and, in a line of dialogue, explains the origin of his disability.

In a scathing critique of the revisions, Stephen Sondheim has written of how offering back stories to the characters deprives them of archetypal stature and, in particular, of how by decripping Porgy, the revision has

taken one of the most moving moments in musical theater history—Porgy’s demand, “Bring my goat!”—and thrown it out. Ms. Parks (or Ms. Paulus) has taken away Porgy’s goat cart in favor of a cane. So now he can demand, “Bring my cane!” Perhaps someone will bring him a straw hat too, so he can buck-and-wing his way to New York.

But more than a dramatic moment, or even a tone-deaf bit of euhemerization,¹ is at stake in minimizing and explaining the disability of one of theatre’s great disabled characters. Imposed on a black character, the change recalls an age when disability was regarded as a shameful impediment to the achievement of racial equality—an

era when the pressure to convey the public message that “The Negro is just like you,” with “you” being an imagined able-bodied, empowered, white audience who could aid in the liberation struggle, led to strange silences and distortions on the subject of black disability in the middle decades of the last century.² Done in the name of realism, the healing of Porgy smacks of the old tendency to use “it lacks verisimilitude” to mean “it’s unpalatable to the elites and their perspective on the world.”³ Finally, it partakes of an old tradition that regards disability as an inappropriate subject for depiction in literature.

Dicta against presenting disability in drama and fiction seem to have flourished in Europe in the eighteenth century, when the rise of bourgeois propriety promoted the spread of new standards and prescriptions of taste. The Scottish philosophers were particularly interested in prescribing aversion and disgust toward illness, pain, and dysmorphism: Adam Smith faulted Sophocles for giving us a Philoctetes who cries out in pain,⁴ while Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote that

the misfortunes which excite pity must not be too horrid and overwhelming... Deformity is always disgusting, and the imagination cannot reconcile it with the idea of a favourite character; therefore the poet and romance-writer are fully justified in giving a larger share of beauty to their principal figures than is usually met with in common life. (201)

The nineteenth-century novel saw a profusion of disabled characters, but they frequently met with protests from reviewers. A review of Wilkie Collins’s *Poor Miss Finch* condemned the accuracy with which it presented the heroine’s blindness: “Fidelity is, after all, not the foundation of all fiction...we prefer the work of art that suggests to us bright impressions and graceful fancies” (Stoddard Holmes 91).⁵ And John Ruskin appended a lengthy footnote to his 1881 essay, “Fiction Fair

“Done in the name of realism, the healing of Porgy smacks of the old tendency to use ‘it lacks verisimilitude’ to mean ‘it’s unpalatable to the elites and their perspective on the world.’ Finally, it partakes of an old tradition that regards disability as an inappropriate subject for depiction in literature.”



Ishmael in Love (cont. from p. 3)

“The idea that disability does not belong in fiction can even support the counter-factual belief that disability does not exist in fiction...”

and Foul,” in which he attributed the presence of disability in Dickens and Walter Scott to “brain disease” on the part of those authors.

A look at some recent editions of Victorian novels reveals continued unease with the presence of disability in literature. Suzanne Lewis, introducing Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Moorland Cottage and Other Stories*, endorses Dickens’s complaint that Gaskell treated her characters unfairly by giving them disabilities. J.I.M. Stewart criticized the “procession of grievously maimed or afflicted figures” in Collins’s novels (22), and David Skilton includes as evidence of a Collins character’s madness his belief that it is a personal intrusion for strangers to touch his wheelchair. The idea that disability does not belong in fiction can even support the counterfactual belief that disability does not *exist* in fiction: in my experience as a scholar/educator, I have heard of a job interviewee being told, “There is no disability in 19th century French literature” and of a student being asked, “There’s disability in Melville?” A world view that fails to notice disability in *Notre Dame de Paris* and *The Confidence-Man*, or a view that accuses Collins of having a pathological interest in the grotesque, is a view that has not yet admitted disability is a category of *thought*, much less a category of identity. This view inevitably extends beyond criticisms of fiction: I have in recent years seen a psychoanalytic critic base a theory on the false claim that “everybody has an anus” and have discussed various universities that tried very hard to deal equitably with disabled students but could not conceive of the possibility that there might be disabled faculty needing accommodation, as if “disability” was not something that could affect one’s peers. All of these erasures contribute to the hidden curriculum in which disabled people are told, “The world does not have to consider your needs because you do not exist for us.”⁶ They are, at best, versions of the manager who says, “We don’t have to put in a ramp: handicapped never come here anyway.”

Nearly forty years into the second wave of the U.S. disability movement, nearly twenty years since G.H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, per-

spectives on disability in fiction are gradually changing, such that Gaskell, for example, is more often acknowledged to be depicting life among impoverished British peasants as it was rather than being mean to her characters. But disability consciousness has had the misfortune of spreading at a time when the publishing industry is less diverse and open to novelty than it was forty years ago; hence, although a few authors continue to show sensitivity to disability issues, we have not seen an upswell of disability movement fiction analogous to that of the feminist and gay movements of times past.⁷ In 2009, however, the University of Nebraska Press published *Call Me Ahab*, a slim volume by movement veteran Anne Finger that collects eighteen years’ worth of short stories in which she has mobilized her vast literary armamentarium—historical figures and hip allusions, varying tones and shifting tenses, feminism and socialist theory—in the service of disability movement goals and perspectives. Finger has created witty, explicitly political fiction that gives the lie to the claim (still made even in academic circles) that agenda-driven fiction tends to lack artistic sophistication. The book is practically a whole disability fiction canon on its own.

The nine stories in *Call Me Ahab* all riff on iconic disabled figures in literature and history, defamiliarizing them so as to demolish the ableist clichés that surround them and the erasures that have obscured them. Theo Van Gogh is cured by his therapist of the “neurotic need to support his manipulative artist brother” Vincent, who ends up left to the mercies of the Reagan-era Social Security Administration. Frida Kahlo, finding that she gets an erotic charge out of tracing z’s and j’s into Helen Keller’s palm, tells her a story of jackals, jaguars, Zagreb, zinfandel, and a Jew with a zither. The fate of a cabaret performer in Auschwitz resonates across four centuries with the life of Mari Barbola, the Renaissance court dwarf immortalized in Velasquez’s painting *Las Meninas*. On the eve of their fateful battle with the Hebrews, the Philistines recall having been attacked by laser-guided missiles, Kalashnikovs, F-16s, and feminists. And a two-century-old Captain Ahab, complaining that a short story is hardly an adequate genre in which

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to refute an encyclopedic novel, tries to expose the prejudices that led Ishmael to write so many slanders against him.

Most of Finger's previous books have had a strong autobiographical element: one is straight memoir (*Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth*); one is a novel with autobiographical features (*Bone Truth*, whose heroine shares with Finger a life of peace activism, polio, depression, an abusive Leftist father, and a difficult pregnancy). Her most recent, *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio*, is a *tour de force* synthesizing history of medicine, disability theory, and consciousness-raising autobiography (and like many great recent books, seems to have remained in print for about two years after its publication). *Call Me Ahab* only resembles those works in its lyrical prose and incisive socialist critique. The fictional forms Finger has chosen here allow her a variety of narrative voices and historical settings, all of which she handles expertly. Their imaginative energy and wit recalls some of the great historical SF stories, such as those of Avram Davidson and Karen Joy Fowler; their erudition—quotes from *The Shining*, The Fugs, Goethe, Mussolini, Tom Paxton, and Johnny Cash, among others, play significant roles, as do Nikola Tesla, *The Prisoner*, and George Richmond's drawing of Charlotte Brontë—suggests a postmodern novelist's delight in traversing high- and low-culture boundaries. But in a time when such boundaries are on the wane, Finger reinvigorates the pastiche by adding disability culture to the mix.

In a climate where disability is so often ignored, punished, erased, and stigmatized, reclaiming disabled people and characters from history and literature is a radical move, one that not only enriches disability culture and encourages disability pride but might also render disability newly intelligible. Finger's stories are adamant about the existence of a disability culture, casually using such terms as "crips," "ABs" [able-bodied], and "CIL" [Center for Independent Living], analyzing where inclusive communities might have been possible even in the absence of disability consciousness, and living up to the principle of James Baldwin's "We who have been described so often are now describing you." Helen Keller and Frida Kahlo's

imagined relationship is announced by a disavowal of the great disability clichés of the silver screen:

Let's get one thing straight right away. This isn't going to be one of those movies where they put their words into our mouths. This isn't *Magnificent Obsession* [at the end of which Jane Wyman] lingers on the border between death and cure (the only two acceptable states) [until] Rock saves her life and her sight and they live happily ever after... It's not going to be *A Patch of Blue*: when the sterling young Negro hands us the dark glasses...we're not going to grab them, hide our stone Medusa gaze, grateful for the magic that's made us a pretty girl. This isn't *Johnny Belinda*: we're not sweetly mute, surrounded by an aura of silence. (4–5)

In a tale of an imagined meeting between Rosa Luxemburg and Antonio Gramsci, Finger seeks to capture the great Italian Marxist before history has erased his corporeality, envisioning him "on his way to becoming the great mind, the Gramsci who floats, a head without a body, on fading posters once thumbtacked to apartment walls in Madison, Wisconsin, and Berkeley, California, now matted and framed" (65–66). Finger gives the most direct articulation of the anti-ableist message to Ahab, in the final story: a section entitled "The Self-Advocate" includes the declaration that "I am all anxiety to convince ye, ye ABs, of the injustice done to us crips" (168); Ahab later apostrophizes Shakespeare with a lesson in human diversity: "Hath not a Jew arms, legs? Asks Will. Well, frankly sweet William, some do not" (182).

Finger has been a creative writing teacher and a disability movement activist since the Eighties, and has long been immersed in the world of disability studies, which, as she has written, has a symbiotic relationship with the movement. Hence she comes well-equipped to fight the war on ableism on many fronts. Inasmuch as the campaign in that war for which writers and teachers are best suited is the battle to make disability visible, we have had some successes in recent decades at getting our existence acknowledged; but there remains a very persistent form of erasure that keeps

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"[T]here remains a very persistent form of erasure that keeps returning in discussions of disability: the reduction of lived experience to metaphor."





My Muse

by Mary Meriam

"My muse is a fairy godmother with a magic touch."

Lillian Faderman is my muse.

What is a muse? There's a lot wrapped up in this one word, and there's also nothing. Nothing tangible. My muse and I have never met or talked on the phone or even been in the same room. In 2005, I emailed her a poem, and she emailed back to say that she would write an afterword for my chapbook, *The Countess of Flatbroke*. A year later, I emailed her another poem, and now, innumerable poems and emails have flown through space, and I've read a few of her books, and she's read the four collections of poems I've written (still in manuscript), and my second chapbook was published, and I started an e-zine of lesbian poetry and art, *Lavender Review*, and my poems have been published all over, including *The New York Times*. My muse is a fairy godmother with a magic touch.

What does she do? She faithfully reads my poems and responds in emails to me, and that is all, and that is enough, and that is everything.

Who is Lillian Faderman? When I first emailed her, I was only dimly aware that she is an internationally known scholar of lesbian history and literature, as well as ethnic history and literature, the author of acclaimed works that have been translated into at least seven languages, and a professor of literature and creative writing at California State University at Fresno, with many prestigious honors and awards for exemplary scholarship in lesbian and gay studies. I'm still trying to absorb the scope of my muse. I soaked up her feminist classic, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*, which was praised by the philosopher Michel Foucault as being "remarkable for its rediscovering of texts and also for its study of feelings that we no longer find in society."

Yes, I can relate to the notion of rediscovered texts, having been "rediscovered" by my muse. What are those feelings that we no longer find in society? Faderman calls it "romantic friendship," and it is a feeling like having Lillian Faderman for a muse. Society should have more of such feelings. There are some feelings from the past that should never have been lost, that deserve to be part of society, and that have been brought to light and revitalized by Faderman. There is perhaps no other writer who is able to so completely embody a healthy acceptance of love for other women and for oneself.

But the first book I read by Lillian Faderman was her memoir, *Naked in the Promised Land*. It took a couple of years for Faderman's many sides to filter through me; I believe I first understood her as my muse in 2008, when I wrote the following poem (which was subsequently published in the *Windy City Times Pride Literary Supplement* [2008] and is now part of a manuscript of 52 muse-inspired poems):

Lesbian Studies

O my muse, promiscuous muse, my bunny,
hop off paper, hop in my arms, my darling
muse not mine, my everyone muse, please let me
touch and amuse you.

Now the past is sliding away, past harm's way,
past the nightmare hidden in sex's dream, when
you, in need, decided to strip and show your
body to die for.

Naked, word hot, here are your breasts, *I'm breathless
writing this, yes throbbing and flushed*, your memoir's
pictures move me far from a text perusal,
write me, I'm lovesick.

"I can relate to the notion of rediscovered texts... There are some feelings from the past that should never have been lost, that deserve to be part of society, and that have been brought to light and revitalized by Faderman."



The hardcover edition of *Naked in the Promised Land* published by Houghton Mifflin provides a pulp-fiction-style synopsis:

Born in 1940, Lillian Faderman was the only child of an uneducated and unmarried immigrant Jewish woman. Her mother, whose family perished in the Holocaust, was racked by guilt at having come to America and left them behind; she suffered recurrent psychotic episodes. Her only escape from the brutal labor of her sweatshop job was her fiercely loved daughter, Lilly, whose poignant dream throughout an impoverished childhood was to become a movie star and “rescue” her mother. Lilly grew up to become Lil, outwardly tough, inwardly innocent, hungry for love and success. A beautiful young woman who was learning that her deepest erotic and emotional connections were to other women, she found herself in a dangerous but seductive lesbian underworld of addicts, pimps, and prostitutes. Desperately seeking to make her life meaningful and to redeem her mother’s suffering, she entered the University of California at Berkeley and worked her way through college as a burlesque stripper. A brilliant student, she ultimately achieved a PhD. At last she became Lillian, the woman who in time would be a loving partner, a devoted mother, an acclaimed writer, and a charismatic, groundbreaking scholar of gay and lesbian studies.

Sometimes it seems fate deliberately throws us into the worst possible trouble, just to see if we can wrestle our way out. Those who escape are often those who never forget, who return to others in trouble like they were, to help in any way they can. Lillian Faderman traveled an enormous distance; and once on solid ground, she turned around and reached out to others. When so many of us fall by the wayside, how did she do it? She writes:

In 1957 poor girls like us could seldom traverse the enormous distance to college. Even to dare the expedition you needed an owl to guide you, a tiger to protect you, and a faithful creature whispering, “No matter what, I love you.” If you had all that you

might make it, because it could give you power—maybe more than a chest of gold doubloons could. Without all that, how could even gold doubloons get a girl across the scary terrain?

My guess is that Faderman’s “owl” was Maury, a counselor who helped her to understand herself, who encouraged and inspired her to return to high school, study hard, and apply to college. Her “tiger” was her nurturing, ferocious aunt, who stood ready to rip to shreds anyone who might hurt her Lilly. And perhaps her “faithful creature” was her beloved, distraught mother, described later as a “weeping, clinging creature crying in my wilderness.” But Faderman had even more than an owl, tiger, or faithful creature in her life—she had herself—brave, persistent, and determined to find justice and meaning for herself and her loved ones. This passage shows Faderman at work, using every inch of her heart and mind to extricate herself from the hellish situations that life kept throwing at her:

I recited the lessons of the past three years as the bus lumbered south in the night, through Tracy, Stockton, Merced, Bakersfield, and the teenage girl in a baseball cap sitting next to me cracked her gum and puffed on methylated cigarettes and stared into space. *Here’s what I know that I didn’t know before I went to San Francisco: (1) I can’t rescue women like D’Or (any more than I could rescue my mother), and I’ve got to give up that Mary Marvel fantasy. Point to think about: If love with a woman is so full of wrenching extremes—such unreal ecstatic highs, such too-real murderous lows—do I really want to be a lesbian? Do I have a choice? (2) There’s a bogeyman lurking in wait for me out there (I’d smelled his breath on Mara and Sergio), and if I don’t stop placing my naked self in full view, one of these days he’ll surely pounce and drag me off to the fate prepared for girls like me. Point to think about: How will I get money for graduate school if I don’t work as a nude model or a stripper? How will I even get through the summer? (3) I’m in love with poetry and fiction. Point to think about: What*

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Ishmael in Love (cont. from p. 5)

"[I]t is still rare for critics to acknowledge that disabled characters might appear in realist stories because disabled people inhabit the real world."

returning in discussions of disability: the reduction of lived experience to metaphor. This elision was common in discussions of characters drawn from oppressed groups fifty years ago; but at this stage in history, few critics ask what Easy Rawlins's blackness, for example, *stands for*: it is widely taken for granted that he's black because Walter Mosley wanted to tell stories of an African American man's experience. But it is still rare for critics to acknowledge that disabled characters might appear in realist stories because disabled people inhabit the real world. Even "disability" gets diluted to metaphor in reviews, classrooms, and conversations,⁸ which can quickly abandon discussion of how physical, intellectual, and sensory impairments affect people: "Aren't we all disabled?" "Isn't homosexuality disabling too?" "Is the very act of assuming an identity choosing to be disabled?" Finger begins "The Blind Marksman," a tale of struggles under Communism and capitalism in a city that is almost Tirana, in a country that is not quite Albania, with "The blindness in this story isn't a metaphor...the blindness in this story is a solid, meaningless thing, like the sofa or the subway strap" (117). And, characteristically, Ahab confronts the problem head-on: his speculations on what, exactly, is *wrong* with this Ishmael chap who's so obsessed with his disability culminate in "Ish could not cease his fearsome meaning-making" (192).⁹

Finger does not shy away from mentioning the ultimate erasure of disabled people, systematic extermination; indeed, if the book has a theory of disability imagery, it involves her sense that "Mussolini, Hitler, Koch will understand: the worship of the healthy body, the fear of us, is the taproot of fascism" (68). The drive for purification through destruction of the polluting other—an other who's generally portrayed as corrupting by virtue of her/his resemblance to a disabled person—is a central topic of these stories, from Saul's wars against the Philistines to the Spanish Inquisition to the Vietnam War. The idealized bodies and perfect regimentation that fascism promises appear everywhere: Van Gogh finds himself seeking assistance in "the Welfare Building, the building with the marble façade and the white marble figures with perfectly muscled bodies that

embody justice, civic duty, freedom..." (27); an eighteenth-century factory owner fires Ned Ludd, styling the presence of a disabled worker, however competent, as "most irregular."

Critiques of regimentation and discipline, informed by Foucault and Weber, always run the risk of collapsing into simplistic, conservative (or anarcho-primitivist) denunciations of modernity: some scholars seem to have drawn from their reading of those theorists an idea of "pre-Enlightenment times" as a harmonious and idyllic place, where disability was not an issue. Finger thoroughly understands how the industrial revolution and the will-to-knowledge have created new technologies of oppression, but she never turns against science or toward nostalgia—her stories dramatize the iniquities of feudal rule and the Inquisition, the suffering of pre-industrial peasants and technology-deprived inhabitants of almost-Albania, as often as they indict the horrors of Western bureaucracies. Finger's theories of oppression and social control owe much to her beloved Gramsci (whose name graces the license plate of her Volkswagen). Hence science, technology, and changes in social organization are not things she stands "for" or "against" but loci of the class struggle, forces that are lamentable only when they become the means by which oppressive systems exploit people's creative energies and turn them into zealous agents of the dominant order.

Like the black, gay, and women's movements of recent generations,¹⁰ the disability movement reinvigorates history with its reclamation of formerly ignored or erased figures and identities. *Call Me Ahab* is a perfectly-structured collection; but the wit, the anger, the passion, and the originality of Finger's stories made me wish that she had assembled, say, twelve or fourteen of them rather than just nine. What would she have done with Jane Austen's uncle Thomas and brother George, both of whom were "sent away" for mental or neurological disabilities? Or maybe Blind Willie Johnson, given that the settings Finger chose in *Call Me Ahab* did not offer her opportunities for sustained attention to race? Riffing on *King Lear*, she has given us a latter-day Gloucester; would a latter-day Philoctetes have been possible? Or a

"Like the black, gay, and women's movements of recent generations, the disability movement reinvigorates history with its reclamation of formerly ignored or erased figures and identities."



revisionist Little Nell?¹¹ These questions arise thanks to Finger's deep engagement with what Gramsci styled

a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeking reality and, therefore, a work ultimately ingrained in "possible artists" and "possible works of art." (98)

In a time when the ableist impulse to "Make them go away" is powerful enough to deprive as iconic a figure as Porgy of his disability, we urgently need great protest fiction like Finger's not only to inform and raise consciousness, but also to open up new ways for our encounters with disability narratives to stimulate our creative imagination.

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Endnotes

- 1 A word I was introduced to by Nisi Shawl, who also observes that the demand that disability must be explained—that disabled people have to answer "What happened to you?"—is a form of domination, like having to explain why you're queer, Asian-American, or fat, that privileges the unmarked identity.

"In a time when the ableist impulse to 'Make them go away' is powerful enough to deprive as iconic a figure as Porgy of his disability, we urgently need great protest fiction like Finger's..."



Ishmael in Love (cont. from p. 9)

- 2 For example, John O. Killens censured Ralph Ellison for depicting disabled black veterans in his fiction. See Lukin 2006 and James 2007.
- 3 See Nancy K. Miller's 1981 explanation of how, as far back as the 17th century, criticism equated "plausibility" with propriety. Delany (1991) speaks of the discursive forces militating for the view that "art should not imitate life but *reinscribe* received ideas about the representation of life in art" (Miller 36).
- 4 But not every philosopher in that era was a prude—see Gotthold Lessing's defense of Sophocles.
- 5 The alternative to the conflation of plausibility and propriety is something like what Claire Light has articulated as part of her duty as a writer: "I'm obliged to dig past the overlay of existing narrative, find some element of unrecorded truth from life, and then shape a narrative to contain that" (in Shawl, 2011, 86).
- 6 I am indebted to a conversation with Professor Andrea Hairston on May 28, 2011, for this characterization of the ableist perspective.
- 7 Poetry, music, and the performing arts have fared better: see for example the poetic *oeuvre* of Laura Hershey and the work of Petra Kuppers on disability performance, as well as the many artists discussed in Walker (2005).
- 8 Novelists are as guilty as anyone of reducing disability and dysmorphism to metaphor: in particular, conjoined twins are often used to Stand For Something.
- 9 Jeremy Schipper's case study of the critical response to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 indicates the ubiquity of the problem: "Biblical scholarship has a venerable tradition of divorcing the image of disability in Isaiah 53 from the experience of disability...many interpreters use the disability imagery to focus on the suffering of almost any person or group except those with disabilities. The servant with disabilities fades from our memory while the suffering servant remains" (106).
- 10 Many such liberatory movements have vindicated Gramsci's assertion, made in discussing the accomplishments of the movement associated with the journal

La Voce around 1908, that "by fighting for a new culture, for a new way of life, it also indirectly promoted the formation of original artistic temperaments, since in life there is also art" (97).

- 11 I have managed via interdimensional Skype to contact the Porgy of the Fingerverse: he said upon hearing of the revisions to his story, "That really gets my goat."

My Muse

(cont. from p. 7)

do poetry and fiction have to do with the noble causes that stir me, with what Maury once called justice? Should I live in a high tower? Can I?

The owl, the tiger, and the faithful creature are busy inside Faderman, doing their good work, expressing themselves through her. Though she had to suffer through the anguish of many tests and trials, she was able to gain the mental and emotional distance necessary to study where she was, where she was going, and how to get there safely on her own. Not all of us are as gifted as Lillian Faderman, but we should never stop trying to find a way to solve our own impossible dilemmas. Nurture yourself. Think things through. Reach out to someone who might help you. Care about those less fortunate than you. Email a star, and you might find a muse, and all the inspiration you need for your life.

Mary Meriam's essays have appeared in *Rattle*, *Poets' Quarterly*, *Gently Read Literature*, and *Street Spirit*. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *The Countess of Flatbroke* and *The Poet's Zodiac*, and the editor of *Lavender Review*.



History Lesson

Anne Sheldon

The phone rang during dinner
(Kraft Dinner, iceberg lettuce, and fruit cocktail,
bread and butter, salt and pepper,
cream and sugar).

A big black plastic phone with a dial.
In the fall of 1952, my brother
was eight, and me, just five.

Inge, who had lost her right-hand
fingernails to the Nazis,
lived in the apartment upstairs.

Across the hall, Lt. Montrose
and his tiny bride, Akiko.

My parents called her over
and left for a few hours.

We were not bothered, that I remember.
We had a television by then.

Ten years later, in a house
with woods and dog and cat,
we heard the story:
how a man who worked with my father
at the U. S. Census Bureau
had been called before HUAC
(do you know what that means?
Should I tell you?)
and had slit his wrists instead.

My parents drove him to the hospital.
He lived. He went back to work.
No one said if he still had to testify
but in the year of the Bicentennial,
when my father died on Labor Day,
this man came to the funeral. My mother
hadn't seen him since that other time.
On a hot day in early September
he wore his white long-sleeved shirt
securely buttoned.



We are the reason our ancestors existed
(unknown) linocut/collage

Anne Sheldon lives in Silver Spring, MD, with her black cat, Charles, and four generations of books. A retired children's librarian, she has worked as a poet-in-the-schools through the Maryland State Arts Council and a freelance storyteller. Her work has appeared in *The Dark Horse*, *Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Antietam Review*, and other small magazines. Her latest book, *The Bone Spindle* (Aqueduct Press), celebrates the mythic heroes and villains of the fiber arts.





Proto-SF: The Blazing World of Margaret Cavendish

by Kij Johnson

“Margaret Cavendish (née Lucas) was born in 1623 to a rich Essex family. She developed strength and skills not typically associated with women.”

The Blazing World & Other Writings, by Margaret Cavendish, Penguin Classics, 1992, 292 pages, \$16.00, eBook \$8.23.

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–1673), was what we might today call an interdisciplinary talent, or perhaps even a Renaissance woman, knowledgeable about a broad range of subjects: a brilliant, creative mind with the liberty to explore self-definition and the topics and arts that interested her. She is an outstanding example of women writers of the 17th century—diverse and prolific, a contemporary to Anne Bradstreet and slightly predating Aphra Behn.

She is also the creator of one of the best pieces of proto-science fiction, *The Blazing World*, which in 1666 prefigured elements that would become central to the developed sf genre, including far traveling, Utopia, alien planets, speculative science, and scientific explanation—all in a book entirely dominated by two women: the Empress of another world, and the Duchess of Newcastle herself.

Margaret Cavendish (née Lucas) was born in 1623 to a rich Essex family. She developed strength and skills not typically associated with women: first because of her widowed mother, who from the death of Margaret’s father in 1625 managed the family, its large estates, and its political future; later, because of her husband, the much older William Cavendish, Duke of Newcastle, who encouraged her studies and her writing, and supported her as she strove for public recognition, even when it made her, as Samuel Pepys said, a “Spectacle.”

She studied everything—literature, philosophy, politics, science—and her writing reflected her wide interests in more than a dozen major and many minor works, including plays, poetry, fiction, serious and popular science writing, orations, letters, autobiography, and biography. She experimented with hybrid formats, and certain of her works contain within them the seeds of later genres: “The Contract” and “Assaulted and Pursued Charity” contain

most of the elements of what becomes the romance genre. And there is *The Blazing World*, itself a combination of allegory, adventure tale, philosophical and scientific writing, and apology.

The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World follows a young woman, abducted by a suitor (who soon dies), who slips from her planet’s North Pole to another planet, the Blazing World. Aided by several of the planet’s hybrid beast-man races, she journeys to the planet’s Emperor. He marries her—and immediately moves into the story’s background.

The lion’s share of the book is dedicated to the time immediately after the Empress’s accession, when she summons representatives of the sciences to explain the workings of the world to her. The Q-and-A sessions between the Empress and her beast-men go on for page after engaging page. Already somewhat knowledgeable about science, she learns about the world’s physical and natural sciences, philosophy, religion, social structure, and politics from the beast-men associated with each. It is a nearly Utopian system, and it is essentially static: if things are perfect, why should they change? And yet she does change them, feeling they can be better. She reorganizes the interactions between the scientific groups and threatens to shut down altogether certain pursuits such as the bear-men’s use of telescopes and microscopes (which she says lead to false knowledge), and the follies of her logicians and orators, the parrot-, jackdaw-, and magpie-men.

She also extensively questions immaterial spirits, but when she decides to create a Cabbalah, she finds she needs extra assistance, and so the immaterial spirits bring her a scribe: the Duchess of Newcastle herself, a 17th-century “Mary Sue” (writing-workshop-speak for a character nakedly embodying the author’s wish-fulfillment). The real-life Duchess uses their subsequent conversation to explain herself to her readership, especially her personal ambition: “I would fain be as you are, an Empress of a world,” and later, “I had rather die in the adventure of noble



achievements than live in sluggish and obscure security.”

There follows an interesting discussion of the author as world-builder: why bother ruling a real kingdom when you can invent your own and suit it exactly to your tastes? There’s productive tension here, for real-life Margaret is doing precisely this when she creates the Blazing World, even as fictional Margaret is saying, in effect, that the world created by real-life Margaret is not perfect, after all.

The book shifts to an allegory for a time, as the Duchess (and her husband, who finally shows up) lay suit against Fortune for her unfairness to him, though there is no resolution. And then, three-quarters of the way through *The Blazing World*, the story changes direction again: the Empress returns to her home-planet with a vast army and navy of beast-men, to repel invaders of her former homeland and claim the planet for its king. The book then recounts discussions between the Empress’s and the Duchess’s souls, about play-making and the Duke’s poverty since the Civil War. The story ends as each woman returns to her own milieu, the Empress to rule the Blazing World, and the Duchess to her husband.

The Blazing World is part of the tradition of extraterrestrial tales that includes Lucian of Samosata and Cyrano de Bergerac, both of whom Margaret Cavendish mentions in her address to the reader, though she immediately differentiates her story from theirs: they only describe the moon, whereas she offers “a description of a new world.” [emphasis hers]

Before Cavendish, Thomas More (in *Utopia*, 1516) and Tomas de Campesino (in *The City of the Sun*, 1623) describe utopian social and political systems in some detail, but unlike Cavendish, they are not interested in the natural science of their imaginary lands. Though he is himself a scientist, Sir Francis Bacon (in *The New Atlantis*, 1626) does no more than list the sciences of his utopian world. The allegorical section of *The Blazing World* is incontestably part of the pervasive Medieval tradition, and the beast-men and their clear associations with professions or studies also have precursors in Medieval beast and bird poems; there is nothing in the

least science fictional about these elements of the book.

What is unique to it, and to Cavendish’s vision, is the combination of science—natural science—and adventure. She combines an action story with detailed inquiries into the physical and natural worlds—and she is highly qualified to do so; she wrote extensively about science, serious treatises and more popular works such as the charming *Atomic Poems*. Unlike many other proto-science fiction writers, she is a scientist, a natural philosopher who engages in detail in fiction with questions about physics, biology, mineralogy, astronomy. She is perhaps the first. Fascinatingly, *The Blazing World* was first published as half of a larger book; the other half was nonfiction science writing.

A large portion of the book is devoted to the Empress’s inquiries about the Blazing World’s natural sciences: What are sunspots? Do worms have blood? What makes the sea salty? What can a microscope do? The beast-men’s explanations are not as systematic as Lucretius’s *On the Nature of Things*, but they are nearly as comprehensive. While there are many works before Cavendish’s time that attempt to explain the natural world, they are not proto-science fiction. They are not adventure, and they do not extrapolate. Cavendish does all these things: mixing fantasy, far-traveling, utopias, scientific discourse, and scientific extrapolation: intimations of submarines, water-jets; and even zombie armies.

Yet more astonishing is the role of the women in the story. The women are the actors, the questioners, and the achievers. The men do little of importance apart from marrying and being loved by these strong-minded, dominant women, who are clearly the more powerful halves of their marriages.

The Empress begins her story as a kidnapped bride-to-be and ends the ruler of one world and conqueror of another. Once he has wed her, the Emperor nearly vanishes from the story. He gives her no direction or even advice, leaving her to arrange the planet and wage war as she will. He barely appears again until the very end, when he shows off his new stables, an inconsequential achievement compared to those of the Empress, who has by then

“What is unique... is the combination of science—natural science—and adventure. She combines an action story with detailed inquiries into the physical and natural worlds—and she is highly qualified to do so”

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Myth, History, Mystery

Master of the House of Darts by Aliette De Bodard,
Angry Robot Ltd, 2011, 448 pages, \$7.99 US/
\$8.99 CAN, eBook 2011, £4.49/\$5.99.

Reviewed by Deb Taber

"This is the third book in De Bodard's Mexica series, but in many respects it works as a stand-alone novel as well."

Master of the House of Darts is part murder mystery and part historical fiction based on the Aztecs' Mexica Empire. Acatl, High Priest for the Dead, must seek the source of a deadly plague that first claims a warrior of questionable valor and then begins to spread to others, including characters on both sides of the Mexicaa Empire's political lines. In the aftermath of a coronation war staged to prove the valor of Tenochtitlan's new Revered Speaker, murders must be solved and war captives sacrificed to cement the Revered Speaker's claim to the throne. Until that happens, the Mexica Empire— where gods and goddesses still hold heavy sway over the lives of mortals— is open to both natural and supernatural attack.

This is the third book in De Bodard's Mexica series, but in many respects it works as a stand-alone novel as well. Previous books cover the circumstances that led to the current Reverend Speaker's tenuous claim to the throne, but enough of that information is included in this book to bring readers just entering the world up to speed without them feeling as if they lack necessary knowledge to follow *Master of the House of Darts*.

The world of the story is built from the word level upward, which is perhaps De-Bodard's greatest skill. Characters drop turns of phrase such as, "as real as the blank eyes of corpses" with the ease someone in our world might say "as real as you or I." This not only sets up the world of the Mexica Empire as the matter-of-factly bloody society it is, but also shows in a few short words the heart of the High Priest of the Dead, Acatl.

On the level of historical fiction, enough realism is infused into the story regarding the layout and visual surroundings of the Tenochtitlan and neighboring areas to lend solidity to a world where magic is a part of the everyday. The internal feuds of the gods and goddesses overshadow the sense of fact-based history much of the

time, making the book feel more as if it's based on the recorded mythology than on any personal history of the Aztecs. That, however, is not a criticism; it is a testament to the fully-drawn portraits of the gods and goddesses and the world-building within the book.

As a murder mystery, the story has enough red herrings, dead ends and misunderstandings to keep the reader turning pages. The addition of gods, goddesses, and ghosts to the suspect list makes for an intriguing set of possibilities. As is standard in the mystery or detective genre, the book stays tightly within Acatl's point of view, and this is where the book as a whole begins to suffer.

Acatl is a valiant and realistically flawed character, dedicated to maintaining the balance of his world despite his doubts as to the Revered Speaker's ability to lead. His main flaw is that he doesn't understand human nature very well, because he has dedicated his life to the service of Mictlantecuhtli, Lord Death. As such, he's ill-suited to investigate the murders, since the job requires some diplomacy and political maneuvering, both of which he shuns. Complicating his search further is his former student and protégé, Teomitl, who has recently become the Master of the House of Darts. This high warrior rank is well suited to Teomitl's prowess and to his status as the Revered Speaker's brother.

The problem with *Darts* is that Teomitl, the title character and a crucial part of the evolving plot, steps offstage a short way into the plague investigation and returns as a much-changed man. While some of this secrecy is necessary to the plot, it leaves the story feeling incomplete, as if the reader has missed some of the most important scenes. Enough is explained that understanding the sequence of events is not difficult, but it is disappointing, as we are given the before and after of an important character without joining him on the journey.

This leads me to say that while the story that lies within the book was done well, the story that is outside the book, only hinted at in its pages, leaves the reader with a vague sense of "Is that all?" when the climax scene arrives. Perhaps this is in part because the book's title sets the reader up to believe that the Master of the House of Darts will play a larger role, but I think



there is more to it than that. As much as I enjoyed Acatl's character and his journey, he is, in his very nature, something of an incomplete human being, leaving the story with a void that Teomitl could have filled, but did not.

"As a murder mystery, the story has enough red herrings, dead ends and misunderstandings to keep the reader turning pages."

Deb Taber writes, edits, and performs slave duties for two and a half Siamese cats. Sometimes she haunts the Pacific Northwest; other times, she does not. She is the senior book editor for Apex Publishing, an award-winning small press specializing in dark speculative fiction. Her stories have appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and various anthologies. Visit her online at www.inkfuscate.com.

A Trickster Grows Up

The Kingdom of Gods by N.K. Jemisin, Orbit Books, 2011, 584 pages, \$13.99, eBook \$9.99.

Reviewed by Mikki Kendall

As a conclusion to the widely acclaimed Inheritance Trilogy by N.K. Jemisin, *The Kingdom of Gods* has a lot to live up to. After all, when a new genre series debuts there is always the perilous possibility that a strong beginning will lead to a disappointing conclusion. Thus it is always rewarding when authors complete a series just as strongly as they began it. Rarely, they do so in such a way that you want them to immediately start another one. In the case of *Kingdom of Gods*, N.K. Jemisin delivers a solid finale that manages to satisfy while leaving the reader wanting to see more. Set 100 years after the conclusion of *Broken Kingdoms*, this installment is told from the viewpoint of Sieh: the trickster child. The oldest of the godlings, he is restless, angry, and incredibly lonely. He can never be as close to the gods as they are to each other. Unfortunately he wants a relationship with them that he knows he cannot have, and he is left with no idea of how to truly connect with the gods, other godlings, or with humanity. With such a large gap in time between this book and the last one, you would hope that there is a reason for the leap forward and for Sieh's discontent.

Jemisin does provide reasons for both these things, and they're tied together. Against his will, Sieh is starting to mature, and it affects his view of the world, the gods and godlings, and of himself. Though he is at his most powerful when he does childish things, it is clearly no longer possible for him to stay locked into the role of an eternal child. But his nature as a godling prevents him from truly being anything else, and that is the crux of his dilemma. He cannot be content as he was, and like all children on the verge of adulthood, he

doesn't know exactly what he wants to be when he grows up. While he is struggling with these changes he meets Shahar, the new Arameri heir, and her twin brother Dekarta. Over the course of Sieh's interactions with Shahar and Dekarta, he develops a curious bond with both of them that mirrors the tenuous relationship between the siblings. Their connection is often hostile, but it is also something that he values deeply and strives to preserve with both of them. The relationship between the twins is fraught with the weight of Arameri inheritance and racial dynamics in a way that disgusts Sieh. But when someone attacks the Arameri with a new lethal magic that cuts through every defense, Sieh cannot ignore the danger this represents to his friends. Although his new maturity weakens him, it is soon clear that it will take more than even his strongest magic to avoid global catastrophe.

Because of the changes he is undergoing, in *Kingdom* Sieh is forced to deal with humans more as his equals than he did in previous volumes. As a result, this book allows readers to really see how some of the denizens of this world are adapting to the new political/social structure of a society that has experienced so much upheaval.

The instability of everything from Sieh's power to the waning Arameri dominance is shown to the readers in a way that may give the impression of a tale muddled with too many plot threads. As the complicated and often uncomfortable story develops, it is apparent that every subplot is intended to buttress the novel's main arc. The complex nature of

"[I]t is always rewarding when authors complete a series just as strongly as they began it. Rarely, they do so in such a way that you want them to immediately start another one. In the case of Kingdom of Gods, N.K. Jemisin delivers a solid finale that manages to satisfy while leaving the reader wanting to see more."

"Jemisin has carefully woven Sieh's shifting perspective into a larger tale, a lyrical one that gives readers insight into what it means to be created in the image of the gods."

Cont. on p. 16



Trickster (cont. from p. 15)

“As an examination of a society that is both fantastical and a realistic mirror of human nature, Kingdom of Gods is a deeply satisfying read.”

As a child, Mikki Kendall told herself her own bedtime stories and escaped to live in faraway lands regularly. If she could manage it she would spend the rest of her life visiting the worlds created in stories. Since she cannot, she settles for writing fiction and creative nonfiction. She also enjoys reading.

this story and the focus on Sieh’s viewpoint do mean that readers have less of an opportunity to really invest in the antagonists. This is unfortunate, but also perhaps necessary as *Kingdom* is really about the internal journeys of the protagonists. Ultimately it is a story in which the antagonist’s role is small, and frankly not as important as the work that characters must do within themselves.

The pacing of *Kingdom of Gods* felt uneven on my first read, but by the end of the book I realized that it mirrors the fits and spurts of the changes through which Sieh is making his way. This emotional evolution is painful to watch at times, occasionally frustrating, and also clearly necessary if the world these characters inhabit is going to flourish. With an introspective approach that at times feels like navel-gazing, *Kingdom* delves into the suspense of life lived in the linear fashion. No longer steeped in the ease he grew used to as a god, when he had the ability to treat time as a fluid, controllable substance, Sieh finds he must engage with mortality just as the humans around him do. Like any human, Sieh must learn to be patient. As the trickster child he never had to consider consequences, and now he must learn to think of them before he acts. At times the

urge to skip ahead in the story, to break the suspense, and know how it all turns out is almost unbearable. Much like adolescence, *Kingdom’s* story can be frustrating to go through, but that frustration is a part of the experience that should not be missed.

As the characters’ lives change, you come to understand that Jemisin has carefully woven Sieh’s shifting perspective into a larger tale, a lyrical one that gives readers insight into what it means to be created in the image of the gods. The gods and godlings are powerful and powerless at the same time. Their innate aspects limit them, hindering their ability to adapt and survive as humans do. Just as in the other books in the series, Jemisin drives home the point that there is more to the divine than mere power. Humans can be just as loving, cruel, petty, honorable, or kind as the gods. Thus you see that in some ways humanity has more power than it realizes, and perhaps it is time for humanity to grow and mature just as Sieh is doing. As an examination of a society that is both fantastical and a realistic mirror of human nature, *Kingdom of Gods* is a deeply satisfying read. Jemisin ties together elements of humanity and divinity into a cohesive whole that speaks to the power we all have over ourselves, each other, and the world we inhabit.



This Is What a Mathematician Looks Like

Distances by Vandana Singh. Conversation Pieces, Volume 23, Aqueduct Press, 2009, 97 pages, \$12.00, eBook 2011, \$5.95

Reviewed by Ama Patterson

“The chemical and intellectual space in which Anasuya is immersed is mathematics made sensorial.”

On a far-future world, a green-skinned, amphibious young woman fearlessly investigates uncharted territory: “She dived into one opening and found herself falling toward a vast plain of negative curvature. As she came closer she found that again hints of locally complex structure were making themselves apparent: leaf-like tessellations and lacy mosaics, and more vortices. She couldn’t tell if the vortex she had dived into had spat her back to her starting point or whether she was seeing structure at a different scale. She wandered like a tourist, gazing, exulting” (p. 26).

The swimmer, Anasuya, conducts her explorations in an amnion, a chemical

bath that interacts with her unique physiology to simulate landscapes she can mentally explore.

But wait. Isn’t this story supposed to be about mathematics?

It is. The chemical and intellectual space in which Anasuya is immersed is mathematics made sensorial. “Each mathematical poem had its secret inner space, its universe nestled within its equations the way meaning was enclosed by words. That inner space or solution space—the sthanas—was the poem’s regime of validity, the place where the poem came true.” This is the region Anasuya, the best “rider” at the Temple of Mathematical Arts, explores.



The inaccurate, antiquated, and primarily Western notion that “hard science,” in both fact and fiction, is the province of Euro-descended males has been debated, discussed, debunked, and reasserted ad infinitum; it persists in infecting readers of all genders. Vandana Singh’s novella, *Distances*, is a much needed course of anti-viral therapy. Winner of the 2008 Carl Brandon Parallax Award and named to the James Tiptree Jr. Award 2009 Honor List, *Distances* was recently released as an e-book by Aqueduct Press.

In her essay “Divides, Boundaries, and *Distances*” (*The WisCon Chronicles*, Vol. 5, 81-83), Singh, a physicist, describes her field as presumptively masculine, stating “...that in the sciences, and particularly in my field, the approach itself is remote, reductionist, and impersonal in its delivery.” Small wonder, then, that a male reader told Singh that Anasuya “didn’t come across to him as a mathematician.” Anasuya is the wrong gender, wrong color (green!), and certainly using the wrong methodology. Anasuya is the opposite of remote, reductionist, and impersonal; her research is immersive, sensual, and experiential. For Anasuya, mathematics is not a “hard” science but quite literally fluid.

In Anasuya, Singh has created a marvelously complex character. Far from her seaside home, Anasuya feels estranged among the brown-skinned people in the desert climate of the City. Insular by nature and upbringing, Anasuya is also an explorer, a risk-taker, and a bit impulsive. Despite an enviable home life with people who care for her, her true passion is her work. Her mathematical acumen is both a skill and a gift. Her people have a word for this gift: *athmis*. Anasuya’s *athmis* is an innate perception and comprehension of the mathematics in everything, requiring neither measurement nor proof. The skill she acquired through disciplined study culminating in her esteemed position in the Temple of Anyutip. Anasuya’s devotion to and absorption (literally and figuratively!) in her research make her the ultimate scientist. She brings both rigor and ardor to her mathematical explorations. She is willing and able to go the distance alone.

Distances also challenges the idea that “art” and “science” are different, even oppositional disciplines. As she explores the

patterns of the sthanas in search of answers to mathematical puzzles, Anasuya also sees the visage of a woman, whom she names Vara (meaning “wave” in Anasuya’s native tongue). Vara grows more distinct with each appearance and bears a message for Anasuya: “Art. Make art.” Anasuya takes this message to heart and begins to create visual art based on what she sees in the sthanas, while seeking to simultaneously solve her assigned puzzle and a new riddle: who or what is Vara?

None of this is to say that *Distances* is merely polemical. The novella is set on Sura, where mathematics is the foundation of all culture, art, and religion. Off-world scholars from Tirania journeyed 18 years through space to seek the aid of the Temple mathematicians in solving certain complex equations. The Tiranians are not without their own agenda, and their perfidy spawns distrust. There is friction, intrigue, and romance within and between the two groups, and unfolding mysteries within the equations themselves. Answers are revealed, but with disastrous consequences. *Distances* is at once an interstellar mystery and a heroine’s journey. Singh also accomplishes rich world-building despite writing in the short form. The planet Sura is varied in landscape and species, and its societal and cultural intricacies are gracefully depicted.

Anasuya’s tale is told somewhat outside of linear time. It shifts between events in the Temple and the City, and her childhood experiences in Sugura, interlaced with the mythic tales of Sura’s deities. Singh’s language flows, echoing Anasuya’s explorations in the amnion as the story’s mysteries are gradually revealed. Readers with or without a mathematical background will find much to delight in within this tale. Take the plunge.

“Singh, a physicist, describes her field as presumptively masculine, stating ‘that in the sciences, and particularly in my field, the approach itself is remote, reductionist, and impersonal in its delivery.’ Small wonder, then, that a male reader told Singh that Anasuya ‘didn’t come across to him as a mathematician.’”

“Distances...challenges the idea that ‘art’ and ‘science’ are different”

Ama Patterson’s short fiction is included in *80! Memories and Reflections on Ursula K. Le Guin* (Karen Joy Fowler and Debbie Notkin, eds; Aqueduct Press) and *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (Sheree Renee Thomas, ed.; Warner Books). She is a graduate of Clarion West 1999 and a member of the Beyon’Dusa Artists’ Collective.





Love's Labors

With Fate Conspire by Marie Brennan, Tom Doherty Associates, 2011, 528 pages, \$27.99, eBook \$14.99.

Reviewed by Ebony Thomas

"For love we do what some would consider foolish things.... because we can become so obsessed with one another; we convince ourselves that our actions are of the utmost rationality."

What would you do for love? Would you travel distant lands? Or even between worlds? What about something as precious as a lost or stolen memory? For love we do what some would consider foolish things. We change our appearance, our morals, and our values. Sometimes we even find ourselves doing things that seem very much out of character. We do such things because we can become so obsessed with one another; we convince ourselves that our actions are of the utmost rationality.

These are the sorts of acts the main character in Marie Brennan's *With Fate Conspire* commits. Eliza sets out on the streets of London to look for a longtime love, Owen, who Eliza is certain has been taken by the faerie. It seems rational to her to brave the bitter cold of the harsh London streets, peddling hot buns and oysters as a costerwoman, in search of a love who has been missing for several years. Armed with her wits and mindful of the promise to Owen's mother and sister to bring him home, to her failure is not an option. Eliza, an Irish woman born to a family that society would deem unrespectable, immigrates to London's Whitechapel neighborhood. Her plan is to capture a faerie and make this captive give her the location of her lost love.

Beneath the streets of London beats the heart of a very different world. A world that is cruel, spirit-breaking, and soul crushing. A world full of goblins, shape-shifters, sprites, magically bound strikers, and supernatural market bosses. A world where human goods are sold and traded—and even humans themselves—for bread; a world where humans are snatched in the night by black dogs and imprisoned for entertainment purposes; where their dreams and memories are stolen and then used to force them into servitude.

The faeries desire things from the lands above, even as theirs crumbles. Nardett, the faerie who controls this survival-of-the-fittest world, is vicious and desperate. He uses Dead Rick, a striker, as enforcer,

hunter, and killer. Dead Rick's memories, stolen by Nardett, keep the leash tight around Dead Rick's neck. Risking real death, Dead Rick teams up with a mysterious voice and hatches a plot to overtake Nardett and regain his memories.

Eliza must somehow infiltrate this same underworld to continue her search. To do so she calls upon favors from friends in Whitechapel. Lying and giving a fake name, she gains employment as a maid in the upper-class London neighborhood of Kensington, enabling her to attend a meeting of the Fairy Society. The Fairy Society is a group of persons from respectable families who believe in the existence of the underground fairy world and are determined to prove its veracity.

Still, there are skeptics among them, such as Mr. Graff, a recently returned African missionary: "Take the legends—very common in the north of England, but found elsewhere as well—of supernatural black dogs. We know that the dog was an object of veneration for ancient Celtic peoples; think of Cu Chulainn, the Hound of Culann. Might there not have been a dog cult in northern England? Perhaps a funerary cult, given the association of such phantasms with death; or perhaps they are warriors, garbing themselves as dogs before going into battle." He goes on to state, "What have they seen? Supernatural creatures? Or merely some neighbor's black-furred mongrel, that startled them along a lonely road at night?" Despite the skeptics and their many unproven theories, Eliza does find an ally.

My dissatisfaction with this book stems mainly from what reads to me as the author's judgments regarding her protagonists. I found myself arguing with Brennan's slant on them time and again. Is it foolish that Eliza has chosen to bypass living her own life in favor of searching for her love Owen? Should we consider her weak? Eliza is defined by her obsession with her search for Owen, as Dead Rick is defined by his obsession to no longer be

"Beneath the streets of London beats the heart of...[a] world full of goblins, shape-shifters, sprites, magically bound strikers, and supernatural market bosses."



under Nardett's heel. Yet Dead Rick seems held up as the epitome of a hero for his efforts. Instead of viewing Eliza—or any woman—as weak, obsessed, or foolish for the lengths that we go to for love, we can focus on her and our will, strength, and determination that we seem to have in abundance in relating to the people we love.

Writing under the pseudonym Marie Brennan, Bryn Neuenschwander is a former academic with a background in archaeology, anthropology, and folklore, which she has put to rather good use in writing fantasy. She has released the *Warrior* and *Witch* duology, numerous short stories, and three previous volumes in the same series as *Fate*. Reading this fourth book in the series I felt I was missing out on some of the main characters' backstory; however, I didn't let this stop me from investing in the characters or their worlds. Brennan's amazing description of London in the middle of the Industrial Revolution helps the story come alive. And as a reader who enjoys dialog more than visual description, I would say the author does a wonderful job of blending both. This made *With Fate Conspire* an overall great read.

"Brennan's amazing description of London in the middle of the Industrial Revolution helps the story come alive. "

Ebony Thomas is a graduate of Antioch University in Seattle. This is her first published appearance as a reviewer.

"Instead of viewing Eliza—or any woman—as weak, obsessed, or foolish for the lengths that we go to for love, we can focus on her and our will, strength, and determination that we seem to have in abundance in relating to the people we love."



Detail from *That Some Lives Matter Less is the Root of All that is Wrong in the World*.





Bluebeard's Muse

Mr. Fox by Helen Oyeyemi, Riverhead, 2011, 336 pages,
\$25.95, eBook \$12.99.

Reviewed by Nic Clarke

"Helen Oyeyemi's... novel... is a beautiful, disturbing, and at times mordantly amusing exploration of relationships, fictionality, and the roles that men and women write for themselves and each other."

Helen Oyeyemi's latest novel—her fourth, at the age of 26—is a beautiful, disturbing, and at times mordantly amusing exploration of relationships, fictionality, and the roles that men and women write for themselves and each other. It begins with a brief encounter between a self-absorbed novelist in 1930s New York—the titular Mr. Fox—and his long-absent muse, Mary Foxe. As their banter becomes increasingly barbed, Mary delivers a challenge: "You have to change," she tells him; "You kill women. You're a serial killer. Can you grasp that?" She means, of course, the stories he writes: every one of them rounded out with women meeting grisly ends.

Mr. Fox reacts with predictable incredulity ("It's ridiculous to be so sensitive about the content of fiction. It's not real. I mean, come on. It's all just a lot of games.") Mary, however, has no intention of letting him dismiss her complaint so lightly. A lively battle of wits ensues, a duel in which the pair, pulling each other into stories, play out different dynamics through a variety of characters and settings: they are neighbors, they are spouses, they are boyhood friends at boarding school uncovering a dark secret. They evoke fairytale archetypes, take part in Yoruba ancestral myth, and face each other across the gun-barrel of a tank in a 21st-century warzone.

This makes the novel, at least its first half, read like a collection of short stories and flash fiction, with Mary and Mr. Fox a simple framing device. Much of it is infectious fun; Oyeyemi has a deft way with tone and detail, creating and discarding whole physical and emotional worlds within pages. But the tales also have a cumulative effect. Certain motifs create a steady drip of disquiet: the social and economic power—and, frequently, the glamour—of the male characters, set against the subordinate, mousy, waiting around that is the lot of the women; the emphasis upon women's looks and men's industry; the infantilization imposed on the women by their patronizing paramours, and expected

of them by society at large—as Mary's governess character notes of her teenage charge, Katherine, in the second story, "Be Bold, Be Bold, But Not Too Bold":

Why doesn't she smile and bat her eyelashes, the way her mother must have practically from birth? I wanted to tell her. Don't look at people so strongly, Katherine Cole. Let your gaze swoon a little. Don't speak so firmly; falter. Lisp, even. Your failure to do these things makes me mistake you for someone like me.

Mr. Fox is, initially, oblivious. At the start of the novel, he is utterly devoid of empathy, signaled by the fact that—after an opening paragraph from his viewpoint containing as many instances of the word "I" as there are lines (twelve)—he comments without any irony whatsoever, "My wife was upstairs. Looking at magazines or painting or something, who knows what Daphne does. Hobbies." It soon becomes apparent that this indifference to the person with whom he shares his life is, to him, an accomplishment: a sign of his success as a man in a society that assumes women aren't really *people*, and they certainly don't have feelings worth bothering about.

Disquiet, then, is unlikely to make much impression upon the fantastic Mr. Fox to whom we are first introduced. What does get his attention is the burst of violence that ends a number of the early stories—each time inflicted by men upon women. He takes refuge, again, in the excuse that these are only stories; but after one particularly discomfiting episode, Mary suggests that his writing normalizes such abuse:

What you're doing is building a horrible kind of logic. People read what you write and they say, "Yes, he is talking about things that really happen," and they keep reading, and it makes sense to them. [...] It was because she kept the chain on the door, it was because he needed to let off steam after a hard day's scraping and bowing at work, it was because she was irritating and stupid, it was because she lied to him, made a fool of him, it was because she had to die, she just had to, it makes dramatic sense, it was because "noth-

"[T]he novel, at least its first half, read[s] like a collection of short stories and flash fiction... Much of it is infectious fun... But the tales also have a cumulative effect. Certain motifs create a steady drip of disquiet."



ing is more poetic than the death of a beautiful woman.”

Mr. Fox’s response is to shrug and bluster; but the stories—that is, being forced through fiction to share others’ experiences and see the world as women see it—start to work on him. He, in turn, begins to use the tales to tell his own story, and we see the emotional estrangement involved in living up to patriarchal standards of masculinity. Not only do women not have feelings worth bothering with, but men, in turn, must keep their own emotions locked away, or be unmanned: another motif in these stories is of men wearing masks—sometimes to hide malice, sometimes to deny their true selves and conceal their pain from their wives.

There is also a strong sense of culturally-ingrained, self-loathing fear of male violence. The crippling effect of these attitudes on young men is alluded to in “The Training at Madame de Silentio’s,” a narrative about a finishing school that trains teenage boys to be “world-class husbands.” This begins as a dryly satirical swipe at the model of marital relations that assumes women are both goddesses to be worshipped and half-crazed children who must under no circumstances be taken seriously:

Our Decisive Thinking examinations are conversations conducted before the entire class, and your grade depends not on the answer you give, but on the tenacity with which you cling to your choice. You earn a grade A by demonstrating, without a hint of nervousness or irritation, that you are impervious to any external logic. You earn an A+ if you manage this while affecting a mild and pleasant demeanor.

Things take an abrupt turn for the chilling, however, when “Training’s” protagonists (Charles Wolfe and Charlie Wulf, all repressed adolescent homoeroticism) discover a man chained to the bed of a lake in the school grounds, and release him, only to watch in horror as he spends the next few days cutting a bloody swathe through the local women. It is an arresting and psychologically resonant image, made all the more difficult by the fact that both boys have been trained to share nothing of their feelings with the wives they soon go to; the tale closes with them waiting out

empty, dislocated lives in loveless unions. We also explore, in turn, how the threat of male violence is used even by the avowedly non-violent as a tool of dominance. Another story centers on a young woman whose father keeps newspaper clippings about domestic violence and makes her recite their details to him, in order to teach her that “the world was sick and I should know I wasn’t safe in it.”

At length—and particularly as Daphne begins to find her own voice through interaction with Mary—the framing story comes into its own, and the duel’s short stories take on a more positive tone. The violence of the earlier stories fades, and communication and empathy between the Mary-analogue and the Mr. Fox-analogue is increasingly foregrounded. The final story, a fable about a (male) fox and a woman meeting in a forest, offers two versions of the same scenario: in the first, both fox and woman internalize the dire messages they have been given about the other by their communities (“That is your enemy”), and through her misunderstanding and his indifference he causes her death; in the second, they ignore these warnings, reach out to each other, and live happily ever after. And it is the male character who changes and becomes more human.

Ultimately, Mary speaks for more than just herself when she explains that what she wants is a life independent of—but not necessarily separate from—Mr. Fox’s: “I’d like to not disappear,” she says, “when you’re not thinking about me.”

“[W]e see the emotional estrangement involved in living up to patriarchal standards of masculinity.”

Nic Clarke lives in Oxford, UK, where she researches and teaches medieval Islamic history. A revised version of her doctoral thesis, *The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives*, will be published by Routledge in 2012. She also reviews fiction for *Strange Horizons*, *SFX*, and *Vector*, and blogs at *Eve’s Alexandria*.





Quiet Treachery

Song of the Swallow by K. L. Townsend, Hadley-Rille Books, 2011, 180 pages, \$24.95 (hardcover), \$11.95 (trade paperback).

Reviewed by Karen Szymczyk

"Life in the Rear Palace, among the rejected hordes of concubines, is a place where one must be aware of every word, gesture, and expression. Trust is a fragile thing."

The years around 1270 were a time of turmoil and debauchery in the Chinese court. Duzong was the fifteenth emperor of the Song Dynasty, but, as often happens, he lacked the drive and strategic thinking of his predecessors. Duzong was more intent on bedding women than ruling an empire. And the empire suffered as a result.

Song of the Swallow, a novel by K. L. Townsend, is set during this period of Chinese history, from the point of view of Feiyan, one of the Emperor's more recent concubines. She is young, provincial, and lost in the intricate web of politics that spans the Imperial household made up of the Rear Palace, the dreaded Cold Palace, and the servants who traverse the three. Fortunately, an older concubine, Yuxiu, mentors Feiyan, and the two women form a sometimes sympathetic, sometimes antagonistic relationship. The novel begins with them pledging sisterhood in 1269 and continues till 1274 and the putative end of the Song Dynasty.

Life in the Rear Palace, among the rejected hordes of concubines, is a place where one must be aware of every word, gesture, and expression. Trust is a fragile thing, easily broken by false promises, innuendo, and ambition. Despite these dangers, Yuxiu teaches Feiyan the secret language of *nushu* ("women's writing"), which originated in Hunan province. Through use of *nushu*, Yuxiu seeks to show Feiyan that her imprisonment in the Rear Palace is nothing more than a state of mind and that, while the prospect of a husband and child are admittedly dim, there is still a way she can communicate with women outside the palace and keep alive the threads of dialogue with the mother and other female relatives she left behind. Feiyan eagerly dives into this forbidden world, unaware that her very use of it will force a painful decision on her, with consequences far beyond her own life.

Because of the quiet nature of the setting, *Song of the Swallow* is itself a quiet novel. Actions of great import transpire as consequences of seemingly trivial oc-

currences. This is not the novel to read if you're after a gun-toting, kick-arse heroine, but it may be your cup of tea if you enjoy peering into a more contemplative milieu. It is easy to identify with Feiyan. She is young, sometimes impetuous, naive concerning the politics that surround her, yet enthusiastic and hopeful. And it's also easy to understand Yuxiu, the older concubine, and admire her for taking Feiyan under her wing, even if it's at a slow pace that Feiyan finds maddening.

In this novel of women interacting with women, the Emperor and his chief minister, Jia Sida, are nothing more than catalysts, elements that drive the main characters to various actions without undergoing any change themselves. Culture is dominant, dictating the circumspect nature of most conversations and forcing the more rebellious into treason (which is how *nushu* would be regarded).

I was unaware of the existence of *nushu* before this novel, a language that is currently nearing extinction and yet an important part of feminist history and resistance. The great danger of spreading its use during the period of the novel is clearly spelt out, and I could easily identify with both women as they grappled with their feelings of loneliness, bitterness, and isolation, and the temporary escape that *nushu* gave them. The layers of courtesy and custom are also well portrayed, with only one false note, when Feiyan, the younger woman, expects Yuxiu, the older, to apologize to her. This would hardly be allowed to happen in modern Asian society; that medieval peasant-stock Feiyan would expect it is implausible. Also, I was left with the lingering question of what happened to Zhang. When we first see the most recent of the Emperor's concubines, she is graceful, beautiful, with tiny bound feet that everyone assumes will capture the Emperor's interest. And they do. When we next meet Zhang, her fortunes have been overturned in a most disastrous fashion...but how, exactly? I have no doubt there is a fascinating story behind her fall, full of innocence and betrayal, that could surely parallel much of Feiyan's journey but, unfortunately, this tale is one we're not told.

However, if there's one primary gun on the mantelpiece in every novel, in *Song of the Swallow* it's the presence of the Mongols.

"Because of the quiet nature of the setting, Song of the Swallow is itself a quiet novel. Actions of great import transpire as consequences of seemingly trivial occurrences."



By their placement in the Rear Palace, the women in the novel are divorced from firsthand experiences. The Emperor's lust, the Chief Minister's actions, the direction of the empire itself, are all carried on rumors that circulate the Rear Palace without any touchstone of veracity. It's the same with news of the Mongols. Their actions play into the novel's final tragedy, yet they receive little focus considering the magnitude of change they bring. Like wisps of cloud, they appear in the novel to agitate the women, then disappear, only to appear later on to induce the same reaction before disappearing again, and so on. What if...

What if the novel had been set even two years later, when dissolute Emperor Duzong was gone and boy-emperor Zhao Xian had ascended the throne? When the Mongols, finally led by Kublai Khan, achieved a goal that had been eluding them

for more than forty years, the complete conquest of China? How could nushu be used under such extreme circumstances? What fate befell the Rear Palace, and was there any way out for women of cunning and resource? What was assimilated, what rejected, as a result?

I'm afraid that my musings might invalidate the author's setting for *Song of the Swallow*, and I don't wish to do so. It may be more that, captured by the environment that Townsend has woven, I wish to extend my sojourn there, to push the women further, if only to see to what heights they could ascend. Or depths they could plumb. With that in mind, I certainly hope Townsend writes more such novels, as there's an eager reader here waiting for them.

"In this novel of women interacting with women, the Emperor and his chief minister are nothing more than catalysts, elements that drive the main characters to various actions without undergoing any change themselves. Culture is dominant, dictating the circumspect nature of most conversations and forcing the more rebellious into treason."

Karen Szymczyk is a writer who lives in Southeast Asia. She publishes fiction under a pseudonym.

The Blazing World (cont. from p. 13)

restructured the Blazing World's government and conquered another planet.

Cavendish's second main character is—herself: a successful woman freely claiming her accomplishments. The Duchess of Newcastle—the character, not the author—adventures without her husband, and initiates the allegorical court case she hopes will win back for her husband his lost estates. He does speak, but the main arguments come from the Duchess and from two female allegorical figures. The two women end the story happily, in the company of their loved spouses, but neither seems to have ceded an atom of her power.

Why is *The Blazing World* not better known? Suppression, conscious or otherwise, may well have been part of this; Cavendish published under her own name, at a time when a woman's writing was often ignored or marginalized. The diversity of her writing may also have contributed; many writers of her time worked in multiple genres, but few if any covered so many or combined them in ways that challenged expectations. A third reason—and perhaps

the primary one—was her passion for appearing singular at any cost. She dressed, spoke, and acted outrageously. Samuel Pepys called her, "a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman." (Would he have said this about a man? Actually, quite possibly.) John Evelyn wrote about "her extravagant humor and dress." Cavendish was fully aware of public opinion—nearly at the end of *The Blazing World*, the (fictional) Duchess of Newcastle says, "I had rather appear worse in singularity, then better in the mode." Regrettably, her singularity as a character has caused readers all the way down to Virginia Woolf to undervalue her work as a writer.

Whatever the cause, it's unfortunate that Margaret Cavendish has been so little remembered. *The Blazing World* is a pleasure to read. So is much of her other work. She was an extraordinary woman, a diverse and intriguing writer, and an important example of early speculative fiction.

"Why is The Blazing World not better known? Suppression, conscious or otherwise, may well have been part of this."

Kij Johnson is the author of three published novels, many short stories, and several essays, and a winner of the Nebula, World Fantasy, Sturgeon, and Crawford Awards. Her short-story collection, *At the Mouth of the River of Bees*, will be published in the summer of 2012 by Small Beer Press. She has also worked in New York publishing, and in comics and games publishing. She lives in Raleigh, North Carolina.



We are all Tribal People, Some are Just Closer to Their Roots

I say I've been an artist for 70 years.

I say I have been an activist for 55 years.

For a while in the 60s and 70s I couldn't make the two fit together; my painting degree from the UW was so inwardly focused and my activism so outwardly so. My art became posters and protest signs. My activism began as a UW art student in the 50s who went south to help desegregate lunch counters and theaters. Then came civil rights issues in Seattle including red-lining and school desegregation, protesting war and marching for peace, educating non-Indians on American Indian sovereignty and fishing rights, advocating on homelessness and hunger issues, anti racism/white privilege, and experiencing the big personal life changing one, HIV/AIDS. With a husband living with AIDS I too in a sense became a person living with AIDS and a Hospice trainer. As a student of printmaking in the 90s at The Evergreen State and Olympic Colleges I began to voice my concerns through my art. I became very aware that being a privileged white woman with roots in Sweden has everything to do with who I am. I have been encouraged by people of color to identify with my heritage to better appreciate the roots of others.

I choose the messages, then address them in my work. I do my hand-pulled original prints in my studio in Kingston, Washington, inspired by writings I come across, hence the titles. The words inspire the work, saying what I need to say. There are many different processes in printmaking and very different outcomes but common to all is a plate, printers ink, and a press, and in my case a message.

One Earth

(Pete Seeger) linocut

"...one earth so big and round who could ask for more? And because I love you, I'll give you one more try, to save this rainbow world, it's too soon to die." We dance around the family tree of humankind.

We are all tribal people, some are just closer to their roots

(John Trudell) serigraph

Although "race" is a conjured up term to separate us, and it is often used to do just that, we come from a common Mother. European Americans often deny their roots, and this lack of rootedness gives rise to our lack of respect and understanding, our racism, stemmed in a deep-seated envy.

Sisters

(My Makah sister, Mary Jo) serigraph

With feet firmly planted on the earth, together the sisters of the four directions and five (arbitrary) races unite with the forces of nature to bring peace.

That some lives matter less is the root of all that is wrong in the world

(Paul Farmer) collagraph/collage

While the world is buffeted by war, weather, walls, earthquakes, disease, the US seemed immune to the hurricane of suffering. Now the stars are falling from our flag as we let the 1% dominate the survival of the 99%.

Front Cover

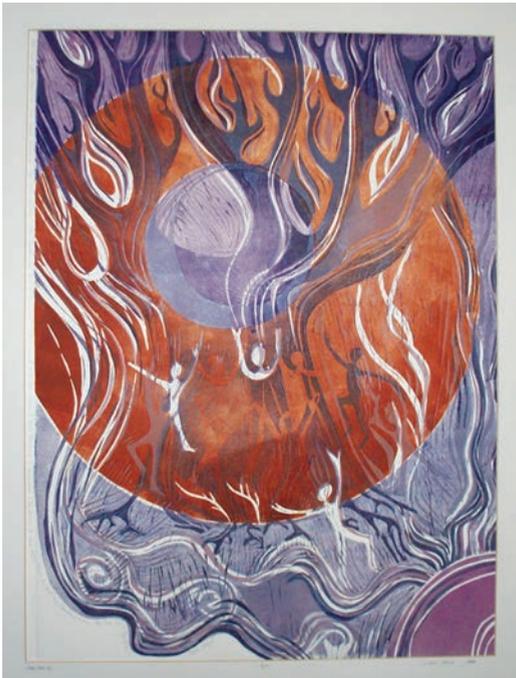
Oh baby baby it's a wild world

(Cat Stevens) collagraph/collage

Although my roots are Viking I'm allies with American Indian people who guide me. Instead of writing my life's journey I did a collage of events. On the left is the big AIDS roadblock. I have a broken heart, yet I rejoice in my choices.



One Earth



We are all Tribal People, Some are Just Closer to Their Roots



Sisters



That Some Lives Matter Less is the Root of All that is Wrong in the World.





From rocks to a hard place (dry point/monoprint)

For centuries Immigrants to America flee their homelands for various rocky reasons, but, yearning and hoping, often find an inhospitable hard place saying to them "go home."

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