



## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Lalin Bonheur**

Margaret O. Howard, Wild Child/Freya's Bower Publishing: Culver City, California. 2016.

A supernatural tale set in antebellum Louisiana, Margaret O. Howard's debut novel, *Lalin Bonheur*, offers readers a delectable literary gumbo in the Southern Gothic tradition of what can only be called New Orleans Romantic Suspense.

Told in the lyrical voice of Lalin - a young woman "of color" bound to Etienne Legendre, a white Creole - the novel conjures up a subtle challenge to the discomfiting nature of *plaçage* (to place with), an early American system of common law marriage that defied racial barriers. *Plaçage*, in its best light, enabled upper class gentlemen to legally provide economic protection to the African American, Native American, and mixed-race women they took as mistresses, without affording the women the social status of marriage into high society.

As a shape-shifting "octoroon," Lalin is on track to inherit her grandmother's prestige in the voodoo community. When she is brought out at the city's annual Quadroon Ball, Lalin's beauty and power win Etienne's heart, and she is selected for his "pleasure." In her alternate world among her neighbors and family, Lalin's power to heal wins the hearts of the people.

Though Etienne becomes Lalin's lover and "protector," he is eventually forced by his parents into an arranged marriage with Minette, a woman of his own class and race. Lalin is willing to accept her fate as Etienne's mistress honorably until Minette mysteriously dies of apparent poisoning.

Etienne and Lalin are accused of the crime. Etienne goes on the run, while Lalin uses her impressive and complex array of spells, potions, and prayers to protect her protector from the hangman's noose.

Margaret O. Howard's fluid, stream-of-consciousness style carries the reader flawlessly through Lalin's travails and triumphs. The author's rich visualizations (think Dickens), bring the city of New Orleans, the Mississippi River, the bayous, and the clumsy elitism of upriver plantations to life.

The magical undertone of the narrative is enhanced by Lalin's dream-like shape-shifting and physical movement from one scenario to the next as she and Etienne evade, then turn back to face their accusers.

Howard's sub-textual commentary on the social inequities of *plaçage*, slavery, and racial divisiveness threads the story throughout, yet successfully eludes dogma. Her reconstruction of French New Orleans, and the Creole and voodoo culture, is vivid and original, playing out familiar myths within the context of ordinary events that we all experience - love, familial and social relationships, and the everyday struggle we face between choosing good over evil.

Most successfully, Howard unpretentiously captures the essence of New Orleans' patchwork of neighborhoods and cultures, from the French Quarter to the shores of Lake Pontchartrain.

Howard offsets the good-natured neighborliness and camaraderie that characterizes the city with an overlying "veil" of evil, a rank cloud of jealousy, deceit, and revenge that plagues Lalin and Etienne, and their families, until the righteous end. When Lalin leads us through her mystical world to a dramatic confrontation with the real villains, at last, their motives and reactions prove to be as pitiable as those of any ordinary street criminal, a twist that gives the novel a level of believability that secures the story, firmly, within the true realm and strictures of classic Southern Gothicism.

--Laura Mauney

### **Two Men Fighting in a Landscape**

Bill Christophersen, Kelsay Books/Aldrich Press: Hemet, California. 2015.

The first thing to notice is this book's cover: smudge of orange sun hanging in a sky banded violet, lavender, orange and white; a cobalt blue river, flecked with orange, running between stands of brown and bare trees, their branches looking like a myriad of upraised arms. A squirrel crosses a fallen log; a wading bird stands just in the water's edge. And on the river's left bank are tiny silhouettes of two men in boxing stance. Between the book's title and its cover's slightly surreal spill of rich color, one is practically compelled to open the pages to see what follows next.

What follows is a series of raucous, rollicking rants about people, places and situations, told primarily in first and second person. Bill Christophersen's poems are highly personal accounts of adventures survived, love gone off the rails, and characters encountered in the confusion of their off-centered and ragged lives.

The book is divided into five sections. The first section, "Old Movies," is recollections of people and places. It opens with the poem "Picnic," an account of a five year-old's harrowing encounter with a low-swooping helicopter. Christophersen's lines build a world from a five year-old's perspective and make real the sudden switch from the ordinary to wonder to fear:

I had finished the drumstick, the slice of watermelon, the  
Ritz crackers, the thermos of cream soda; had left  
the island that was our picnic blanket [. . .]  
The lop-lop of a helicopter registering, I  
looked up and pinpointed it, a brilliant

silver in the afternoon sky. I raced its gleam, my  
ankles wreaking havoc with the milkweed [. . .]  
It dawned on me that the copter,

whose pilot would not see me, was preparing  
to land. Panicking, I tripped . . .

This poem exemplifies one of Christophersen's most prominent and effective techniques: lists of particular and striking details. A rush of attention-grabbing detail conveys a reader to other places and times and ordinary—and not-so-ordinary people made rounded and real by that specificity: the Bronx in the 1950s where

“Ten p.m. Young guys  
church-key cans of Schlitz, bum smokes,  
sing shoo-doo, doo-wah,”

to Mr. Gottleib, the science teacher and “the fetal pig you dissect with celebrity-/chef panache.”  
And there is Vinnie

Gimlet-eyed; sardonic; often shit-faced;  
affectless, sometimes; sometimes downright stupid  
(the 40-odd parking tickets, many torn up,  
all right there on the floor of your car the night  
you ran the red light at 120<sup>th</sup> and Morningside

but who plays

the electric  
bottleneck blues—Muddy Waters, Elmore James;  
Merle Travis’s syncopated pattern-picking [. . .]  
rockabilly volleys  
of notes that rose and swelled, your right hand going  
wherever the crabbed or splayed left told it to.  
Plugged in and lit. . .

Most of us know of a Vinnie—or even have a Vinnie in our lives.

Section Two, “Walks of Life,” are vignettes of working people. “Ironworkers,” eleven couplet stanzas, opens with the lines

A murder of crows, they’d have looked like from below  
this clutch of riveters sitting on a girder  
  
eating lunch, 69 floors up. . .

Of a veteran, Christophersen cautions

Don’t accost him:  
What he’s seen is  
what he sees, and  
you don’t want  
to be seen there.

Christophersen excoriates copy editors, acknowledges the nuisance value of greenhorns and nepotism on a job, damns with faint praise treasurers, and has a snicker at a poet whose expedition to commune with nature is brought up short by the possibility of feral dogs. Most of these poems are great fun.

Section Three, “Flight Patterns,” and Section Four, “Two Men Fighting in a Landscape,” leap agilely from subject to subject: other poets, critics, literary influences, a Chihuahua “whose raucous yap attested (maintained the/first gent, the other not so sure) to canine/terror masquerading

as pugnacity,” the last illness and death of the poet’s father, and even a malediction on early risers. Of the rather enigmatic title poem, “Two Men Fighting in a Landscape,” the author himself claims that that image “speaks to the push-pull relationship a writer (or anyone else, for that matter) has with those who have influenced him/her, as well as to the conjunction of beauty and violence that defines our world.”

The last section, titled “The Wanderer,” is a translation of an Anglo-Saxon poem. How does it fit with the rest of these oh-so-modern poems with their charged but casual diction? Like so much of the rest of the book, there is the poem’s persona absorbing us into his world with his observant eye and rhythmic, well-turned phrases.

Christophersen switches between loquacity and brevity, but no matter how short or long the poem, there is always some telling detail that focuses and clarifies an image or an observation. In particular, the sense of place, the evocation of mood and setting is very well done and is the strand that holds these poems together. Christophersen occasionally breaks into a structured form—haiku and sonnet, for example. Internal rhyme raises awareness of the flow of words, the connectedness of sound and image. There are shafts of humor, much of it barbed, some of it broad, some of it self-deprecating.

The book, as a whole, is something of a wild ride. In the turn of a few pages, Christophersen can go from the most entertaining blather (for example, an account of a relationship as recalled by a feckless youth who hasn’t a clue but who is amusingly self-aware) to a mordant account of the aftermath of war. But he never falters; his craft is sure. Bill Christophersen’s landscape is one worth traversing.

--Melanie Abrams

## **Hermit Thrush**

Amy Minato. Inkwater Press: Portland, Oregon. 2016.

In her second poetry collection, *Hermit Thrush*, Amy Minato delivers clear-eyed meditations on the natural world that seek to illuminate the inner lives of birds, beasts, trees, and the occasional human interloper. Reminiscent of poems by Mary Oliver, the pieces in this collection unwind slowly, laying out one detailed image after another in a lyric cascade that asks us to take our time, listen, be mindful. For the most part, we see nature unvarnished, which seems to be part of Minato’s project: to step out of the way and let the world shine for what it is.

Where human concern does enter these poems, it is inextricably linked to the forests and streambeds that the poet constantly reminds us are a part of who we are. In the book’s title poem, “Hermit Thrush,” the speaker tells us about a young man’s suicide:

We had decided not  
to hike Hurricane Creek  
the same day a friend’s son  
knotted a rope around his neck  
along that wilderness trail.

In the lines that follow, she describes grief as “settling/its furred body across our town.” Even in moments of tension, when the needs and desires of people clash with the greater natural

world, this collection remains quiet. Events like suicide and miscarriage slip into the larger rhythm of things. Grief becomes a tired animal, its largesse overwhelming. *Hermit Thrush* is most interesting and original when Minato confronts ideas about human loss. The voice within those particular poems feels more emotionally honest and less constructed around well-worn poetic tropes.

At various points in this book, the poems rely too heavily on overly-familiar conceits that don't provide much of a fresh take on their subject matter. In one such poem, "Horses," the last stanza asks:

What might I become  
as the reins of youth loosened—  
wild or tame?

This simplified approach to using the natural world as a conceit for understanding human behavior doesn't go very far toward exploring unproven ground in poetry. The metaphor is too easy. The question behind the metaphor might, for the speaker, be a valid one, but the image itself is unoriginal. Minato also has a habit in this book of overreaching for meaning by framing her subject matter with unnecessary abstractions. While most of her poems leave these abstractions out, the weakest among them don't. One poem, "Ode to Joy," begins four of its stanzas with these lines:

Delight strums  
...  
Happiness vibrates  
...  
Joy harmonizes  
...  
Ecstasy entwines

Reading *Hermit Thrush* is like taking a walk through familiar woods. The scenery is nice, and while it offers a few surprises along the way, it mostly doesn't. Minato's attention to detail is impeccable, her lyricism fluid, but the collection lacks in formal variation and originality. It is difficult to fully enjoy or take seriously any collection of poems that uses the word "Epiphany" as a sub-heading of one of its sections. That being said, the book seems to deliver on what it promises in its construction: an easy stroll through poems populated by birds, beasts, trees, and the occasional human trying to make sense of it all.

--Christopher Hayes

### **Self-Portrait, With Ghost**

Sarah Kennedy. Knox Robinson Publishing: London & Atlanta. 2016.

In a novel centered around the art world, Sarah Kennedy's leading character, Zadie Williams, is a novice, a young woman aspiring to make her mark in that world. Zadie struggles

with the competition, and her main rival is her artist stepmother, Chloe. Just shy of being the traditional wicked stepmother, this Chloe character borders on unbelievable.

We learn that Chloe has stolen Zadie's idea for a title of her own art work. The transgressions don't stop there. Collages are her medium. These digital pieces consist of bits of photos, fabrics and chunks of clay mixed together. The shock comes when we learn that these works all consist of pictures of Zadie's dead mother, Leslie, who was also an artist. The fabrics used in the collages are pieces of Leslie's quilts. Chloe and Leslie had been friends and were connected in the art world. It isn't totally clear in the novel what the actual relationship was or why Zadie's father, Conrad, married Chloe so soon after his wife's death.

Chloe is described as self-centered and small-minded. Not surprisingly, Zadie hates and resents her stepmother. All this is disturbing enough, but to top it off we learn that Chloe is dying of cancer. Zadie's mother, Leslie, died of the same type of cancer only two years earlier. Needless to say there's a lot happening in this story. Oddly, the blurb on the book cover describes the novel as a ghost story. It's also labeled as Southern Gothic. It is in fact neither one. I kept waiting for the ghost to appear, but there's really nothing spooky here. Instead of a ghost, we're haunted by constant references to social media.

Zadie competes with Chloe on Facebook. There are constant mentions of artsy postings. Competition for "likes" on these postings becomes central. Chloe attracts her fans with a series of selfies, and the warring walls of these characters do offer some humor. Chloe is obsessed with marketing. Smart phones and laptops accompany the characters in most scenes, and yet the author's knowledge of technology appears to be limited or at least behind the times.

On a much more serious note, the narrative is filled with the strain of illness and grief, along with some distressing details about Chloe's cancer surgeries and treatments. As the novel progresses, secrets from the past turn up. Some surprises about Zadie's deceased mother, Leslie, are revealed. It's indeed a strange tale. Oddly disturbing, but lacking in ghostly spirits. Art and social media as a marketing technique carry the central theme.

Kennedy's use of imagery fills the story with some striking metaphors and descriptions. I believe that this ability to put her artistic vision into language provides the story with its greatest strength. In describing a piece of art she writes:

"She always kept her mother's face showing, her mother's unsmiling face. Where Chloe slept, Leslie lay on top of her, like the lightest of blankets. Where Chloe gazed in the lens, her face became half Leslie's pulling a frown against Chloe's smile. Where Chloe gazed meditatively into the distance, it was Leslie's transparent face she saw in the heavens."

We see unusual art created in phrases like "A wind-burned man stood outside the door, belly swinging free beneath his short t-shirt..." or "her knee began to sting, a knot of small bees under the flesh."

And, when Zadie plans a website:

"She pricked her finger with a safety pin and let the blood drop onto a tissue ...let people comment on what sort of shape it formed. A rose. Or an overblown peony, the deep ones that dropped their head into the mulch at the edge of the spring garden."

And when the minister comes to visit her "...his voice carried, as though on wings, over the dead grass and down the long drive, beckoning, forgiveness built into its very tones."

No ghosts appear in this novel. It is instead a glimpse into some unique approaches to art bound together by family relationships and some of the character's darkest secrets.

--Margaret Howard Trammell

### **Annie Laura's Triumph**

Milinda Jay. Mercer University Press: Macon, GA. 2016.

Certain stories in Florida history carry archetypal power, and the sometimes dark-with-feminist-twist is a fresh version of this in historical novel by an eighth generation Floridian.

In the very warm seasons of 1915 Grassy Glade, located in Northwest Florida near Panama City, almost becomes a character in this saga of a 38-year-old wonder woman, Annie Laura.

"Annie Laura walked with purpose down the road surrounded by a gator-infested swamp, her black lace-up shoes sinking and taking on sand," opens the novel.

The main character fights weather, swollen feet, the hissing and rumbling of gators, numerous bugs to get to her birth daughter Viola Lee. Annie Laura has also had to temporarily leave a family behind to meet up with her adopted daughter.

It's not that Viola Lee needs rescuing--her adoptive mother had the business savvy to run a dry goods store, and her adoptive father supports her.

She's about to marry, except that her fiancée, James, who works in a lumber camp deep in the woods, has not returned for the wedding a week away.

A dangerous-seeming man collides with Viola Lee's reunion with her mother, and the strange man reveals a secret that could destroy Viola Lee's hope for happiness.

Annie Laura struggles with farming, money woes, children and a husband with an alcohol problem herself. But the love of her daughter sends her to search the lumber campus and beyond to find out about James.

This fast-paced story takes turns that shock, and the strange man that appeared earlier returns, a frightening anti-hero who is almost as interesting as the heroine.

Fiction lovers will keep turning the pages. History buffs and lovers of non-fiction, may find the story compelling, as author Milinda Jay has used the story of her great-grandmother and fictionalized it for the novel. These stories have clearly existed in for generations in Northwest Florida, and the right writer came along to add it to the state's canon of literature.

--Mary Jane Ryals

### **On Line with God: (G-Mail) The Ultimate Icon**

Bronco Cucina. Amazon Digital Press: Middletown, Delaware. 2017.

This book wonderfully tackles the subject of professional writing and turns it on its head. This is a hilarious send-up of how folks-at-top-of-the-corporate-hierarchy communicate with subordinates (and vice-versa), all through the sly point-of-view of the big man upstairs (i.e., God!).

Cucina uses the classic memo format to allow the Heavenly Father to give advice, apologize, and fire off an ironic quip or two. The intended readers (in the TO: line) include everyone from Steven Spielberg to Barry Manilow, from Henry the VIII to Pope Francis, to Foghorn Leghorn to Huey, Dewey, and Lewey, from Satan to B. Gates. Other pieces address political issues in various ways, such as memos to “Bumper Stickers, Save the . . .” and “30% of You.” No matter the subject, the writing takes a humorous tack.

Many of the concept-based “documents” pack the funniest passages. In “Memo To: Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s and Fitch Group,” readers’ get a glimpse of “a new admission system [to Hell] for all Wall Street Bankers . . . who benefited from the collapse.” Cucina cleverly creates a letter system similar to New York financial ratings agencies’ guides: “AAAA You get a year before you transition down there . . . AA Thirty days . . . B Twenty-four hours . . . B- Thirty seconds.” Another work cracks academia’s bureaucratic landscape. In “Memo To: Academic Administrators,” the narrator asserts that “Moses, Jesus, Sister Theresa, Einstein, Newton . . . have ever heard of Learning Outcomes or Critical Thinking.” He advises administrators that “When you get here, if you do, let’s play Heavenly Outcomes and Critical Spirituality, OK?” and he gives strict guidelines: “Make sure you limit the verbs to six, eliminate adjectives and oh, yeah, continue to leave out creativity as a measurable outcome. After all, who needs it?” Who knew sarcasm was one of the Heavenly Father’s strongest suits?

Tongue-in-check one-liners also pack Cucina’s pages, giving each piece a wide array of humorous approaches to various topics. Within “Memo To: Editorial Department” which has the subject line “Rib Rumor,” the “big guy” asserts “Please post this memo in your department and ensure all future references to the Old Testament regarding women and their one-less-rib are eliminated.” In “Memo To: Physicians,” this sly line sneaks in: “Just remember, when you—no—check that—if you get here, we have a big waiting room.”

This book should be a must-read for every professional writer in the business world and every reader who loves big laughs.

--Michael Trammell

