

Marginalia

Peter A. Balaskas

Marginalia, Fall 2006, Volume 2, Issue 3; Alicita Rodriguez, Editor/Fiction Editor; Nate Liederback, Nonfiction Editor; David Rothman and Joseph Starr, Guest Poetry Editors; single copy \$9; 159 pgs; perfect bound; 6x9; website: www.western.edu/marginalia; Correspondence: Marginalia, 115 Taylor Hall, Western State College of Colorado, Gunnison, CO 81231

The Pieces Don't Quite Fit Within the Margins

Readers typically enjoy reading a literary journal in one of two ways: they can either savor each individual piece on its own merit, becoming absorbed by its own unique, creative power, or they can read the book from beginning to end, allowing themselves to take a ride through the literary journey the editors have conjured for them. When I read the mission statement for *Marginalia*, I was looking forward to quality fiction, poetry and reviews, but also the artistic tapestry that would be woven throughout the issue by the editors:

“At *Marginalia*, we are interested in the interplay between the contained text and its surrounding negative space. For this reason, we encourage work that demonstrates mastery of any given genre, as well as work that transgresses or blurs established forms.”

The individual selections are varied and each demonstrates their own unique sophistication. *Marginalia* has published both established authors like Chris Ransick and his succinct salute to a baseball pitch in “A Screwball Rispetto,” as well as newcomers such as Contessa Riggs and her heartbreaking, exquisite publishing debut “Lost Fish.” Their talent shines within this issue. Sadly, the overall structure of the book has a confined, unorganized feel to it in terms of the order of the pieces and especially the huge quantity of works *Marginalia* tries to literally jam within the confines of the book.

The fiction selections are quite diverse and well crafted, such as Andrea Jonahs’s slice of medical laboratory life “Waking Us All” and Ginger Knowlton’s picturesque point of view of polytheism in her playful, yet profound, “A whole swimming pool full of god.” But without a doubt, my favorite is George Singleton’s “A Crater Might Echo Last Words,” a poignant and humorous account of a couple’s investigative journey of a supposed UFO sighting and its effects on the local rural South Carolina community. A talented writer whose publication credits include *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Playboy*, and *Harper’s*, Singleton’s story shines with his sophisticated narrative voice, his incredible ability to depict three-dimensional characters, as well as maintaining a smooth pace. Even after the very first two lines of the story, Singleton captures the reader’s attention:

“My near-wife Abby insists that her speech impediment emanated from two drunk parents. She says that she never heard her mother or father correctly enunciate an ess word without it ending up ‘ish’ or ‘shh,’ as in ‘Show, I guesssh you’ll be shatarting you shecond grade clash shoon.’”

As their investigation comes to an ambiguous end, both reader and protagonists realize it is the overall journey, not the destination, where wisdom comes into clarity.

The poems in *Marginalia* contain a considerable emotional punch, including Alex Lemon’s abrupt and vibrant “From *Hallelujah Blackout*,” R.T. Castlebury’s subdued and serene “Garden Park, Michigan, 1897,” and especially the renowned Moroccan poet Abdelkrim Tabal’s slice of life poems “Beside the River,” “Dusk,” and “A Lover.” With regard to this triplet, the editors successfully maintain a nice flow

from one piece to the next. The standout, though, is Carol Bell's "Away," a picturesque homage to how the beauty of a snowstorm can temporarily mask the ugliness and decay of an inner-city ghetto:

"Now, the storm teases me

by covering the world and dancing around me.
Rags transform into lace, the house
And chair huddle into perfect white, dazzling my eyes.
I notice the heat inside my car and wonder, *Should I drive?*
But I ache to touch every part of the projects,
To abandon my car and run through the street,
To devour the night-bright street,
And revel in the ivory corners surrounding me."

Not only are Bell's descriptions vivid, they demonstrate a balance of genuine tranquility, as well as a solemn realization that no matter how beautiful this mask of nature is, the real face of the city will always be present, especially in her dreams.

Most of the essays and book reviews are an insightful read, especially Mark Irwin's "Hyperbole as Glimpsed in Poetry and the Visual Arts." Irwin is no pushover when he shows how hyperbole ("a throwing beyond") can augment the creative power of a poem or a piece of artwork---serving as a Creative Writing Professor at USC and winning the Pushcart Prize four times is proof of his thoroughness on the subject matter. He uses examples to illustrate how hyperbole plays an important part of that enhancement, such as Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, David St. John's "Iris," Donald Revell's "Short Fantasia," and Kafka's "The Wish to Be a Red Indian," utilizing passage quotes to drive the point home for the reader. His essay can be best summed up when he indicates "Illustration is the equivalent of the depiction of poetry. Depicted scenes are *static*; exaggerated ones become *ecstatic*."

There are a considerable number of fine literary examples---poetry, short fiction, essays and reviews---that, on their own, are a pleasure to read. But now we come to the most frustrating quality of the book: its overall structure is compressed and the fluidity of the pieces when read in order is haphazard.

It is understandable that not everyone reads literary collections from beginning to end. People simply like to pick up a journal or any type of anthology (fiction, poetry, essays, etc) and read a piece randomly. But there are those, like this reviewer, who like to read a book from beginning to end and see what the editors can do with the work they have chosen. My first complaint is the extremely small size of the font, making the act of reading itself a chore. This discomfort is compounded by the fact that there are over forty works in the issue, making the 159-page book seem physically jammed. Esteemed literary journals like *The Mid-Atlantic Review* and *Harpur Palate* print the same amount of works, yet they utilize a normal 10 to 12 pt. font, resulting in a thicker volume (*MAR*, with a slightly increased fifty works, clocks in at three hundred pages. *HP* contains an average of thirty-four works, resulting in a 170-page book). Therefore, the best solution to *Marginalia*'s difficulty regarding this matter is to either increase the size of the font and the overall volume or to trim the number of works down to the low twenties, if not lesser than that.

And as far as the order of the works is concerned, the editors have chosen to alphabetize by the authors last names. A very fair task to do, but it fails to be cohesive in its overall narrative as a journal. The book opens to Danielle Alexander's review of Wendy Walker's out of print short story collection *The Sea-Rabbit, Or, the Artist of Life*. Although Alexander gives a nice, descriptive overview in terms of the complexity of Walker's language and strong narrative form, her one and a half page review needs more solid examples of Walker's work, including reviewing more stories within the volume (Alexander lists only three of them). And it is this sense of incompleteness which hampers itself as an eye-catching opener for the journal. Other examples concerning this lack of fluidity include Edward Dougherty's blunt and crude poem "Hungry for Marginalia" with Danielle Dutton's descriptive and lyrical "Mary Carmichael." This pairing may illustrate the power utilizing different forms of discourse, but the result is harsh and distracting. This similar contrast of pairing a weaker work to a far superior one occurs again soon after with Robert Fagan's incomplete and vague "Inhuman Remedies" with Fred Ferraris's beautifully visual salute to metaphors in

his prose poetry piece, "Disappearance." However, *Marginalia* does compensate for this inconsistency with Christopher Mulrooney's poetic couplets, "the fararceur" and "fixed." In both cases, Mulrooney's demonstrates an exquisite ability to bring out the whimsical aspects of the mundane. And when paired together, a nice rhythm is expertly created. But this smooth movement is thrown ajar by Gina Ochsner's long satire, "Necessary Journeys Or What Lies Beyond the Edges of Known Borders." Although a clever, well-written story whose footnotes and endnotes are considerably, and purposely, longer than the piece itself, "Borders" should have either been moved to another section of the book or reserved for a future issue. The story demands a lot from the reader in terms of the length and structure and deserves a better segue than Mulrooney's poems. However, the editors wisely chose an appropriate ending to the book: the quiet "After the Marathon," where Ellen Wright exquisitely captures the still-life of a post-marathon street, especially when the persona in the poem channels that stillness as a tool to take the next step in her life, both figuratively and literally.

With the exception of these structural inconsistencies, *Marginalia* does offer a lot in terms of the variety it offers: the potent and smooth narratives of the fiction contributions, the lyrical soul-embracing poetry, and the thought provoking interviews that help expand the reader's literary palate to lost works. If the editors take the opportunity to expand beyond the physical "margins" of their text---by either increasing the book's size or setting aside half of their work for another issue---then *Marginalia* will truly live up to its name.