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Book Review: *Xanthippe and Her Friends* by Beate Sigriddaughter

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, August 1st, 2018

Beate Sigriddaughter

Xanthippe and Her Friends

FutureCycle Press

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*Lovely woman,
amber light
pouring liquids
through new filters,
love shimmers
blue in her hands,
sparks so vivid
under her touch.
It is time
for peace.*

("Alchemist")

Beate Sigriddaughter is truly an alchemist poet. In her enchanted and enchanting new poetry collection *Xanthippe and Her Friends* (FutureCycle Press 2018), she takes us on a nature walk laced with social commentary. Or is it a book of social commentary imbued with wisdom borrowed from the natural world? In any case, this feminist-inclined collection is magical.

Beate Sigriddaughter has been the poet laureate of Silver City, New Mexico, since 2017. She publishes a blog called *Writing In A Woman's Voice*, where she features other women's poetry. For her own poems, she has been nominated multiple times for a Pushcart Prize.

The title of the book refers to Xanthippe, the “not exactly beloved” wife of Socrates. In fact, for a long time, she was regarded as a shrew. But Sigriddaughter dedicates her book to Xanthippe, saying that she wants to honor Xanthippe’s memory, “together with the memory of all women, sung and unsung.” Sigriddaughter pledges her support for women whom history and/or the patriarchy have treated poorly. She is espousing a new way of looking at these women—by implication, a new attitude towards life and love.

However, there are no rants or diatribes in this collection. Sigriddaughter’s philosophy is conveyed sparingly, delicately. And many of her poems could almost be read as a series of personal/nature/love poems, but that would be missing half the glory.

Thirteen “Love Poems” and twelve “Songs of Despair”

The real *tour de force* of *Xanthippe and Her Friends* is Part IV, consisting of thirteen “Love Poems” and twelve “Songs of Despair.” The love poems are mixed in with the despairing ones every other page, creating a kind of quasi-narrative. This group of poems had me in its grip from the start.

The first poem in the sequence, a love poem, talks of two lovers parting. The speaker notes, “We all come from desire / Desire trumps wisdom.” She continues:

*...There are places
we must walk alone. It is difficult
to say goodbye between stone
walls, juniper, and primrose.*

(“Desire”)

The speaker softly waves her feminist flag in the next poem in this section, the “First Song of Despair,” entitled simply “Patriarchy.”

*It is not your fault
you were taught love is,
for a man, undignified.*

*It is not my fault
I was unable to compellingly
inspire otherwise.*

.....

*How do we get
out of here, crippled
like this?*

As Part IV unfolds, the speaker expands on the themes of desire and patriarchy. For example, she says:

*Desire means
approximately*

*“from the stars.”
 Desire is my home.
 You touch me
 like flame
 like cool water.*

(“Crystals”)

These themes are grounded by allusions to the natural world, where we see the beauty of natural phenomena through the speaker’s eyes. Skillfully blending the personal and lyrical with social commentary, gleaming with images of nature, this sequence of poems deserves to be savored.

Fairy tale motifs

The poetry in *Xanthippe and Her Friends* laid a spell on me in other ways; for example, I was entranced by the use of fairy tale motifs. In “Back in the Woods,” the speaker says:

*[T]he secret message
 Of a fairy tale: The princess does nothing
 And still love falls where it will. Or
 She departs unnoticed.*

The speaker tells us, “I dreamed, like all girls, / of my dance in white satin” (“The Wedding: Snow White”). She begs her lover-prince:

*Tell me
 the part again where you will be
 my love forever.*

(“Fairy Tales”)

The speaker also promises her lover:

*...If you follow
 me into the fairy tale, ...
 ...we will sleep together
 under the stars where we
 belong....*

(“Beyond Reason”)

This language may be broadened, I believe, to imply that the speaker is asking *the reader* to join her inside a fairy tale world, promising to lead us into an enchanted land. And in this and other poems, the speaker keeps her promise.

Lush depictions of the natural world

I have to mention how masterful and lush I found the depictions of the natural world in this collection, the world of the senses and of love. Sigriddaughter’s poetry praises and cherishes this world. For example, in one poem, the speaker views the night sky, “...the breathless stars. Surely I was meant to be / a comet...” (“Yearning to Praise”).

And she has this to say about “the laughter of grasses” (a reference to Canto 30 of Dante’s *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*):

*...leaves considerably turning
weightless, singing eerie
mantras in the wind.*

(“Angel Loop, September”)

The exquisitely written nature poems in this collection are easy to engage with, reflecting the speaker’s exuberant attitude and zest for life. In one poem, the speaker praises “all the stars outlining / your infinity and mine” (“Goddess”). In another, she explains, “Love, too, comes like a leaf / a sunrise, or a rose....” (“The Timing”). And although the nature poems are often entwined with social commentary, these poems flow seamlessly.

Recommendation

The poetry collection *Xanthippe and Her Friends* by Beate Sigriddaughter charmed me while making me think. These poems are mostly short, accessible, and upbeat. Readers of all kinds—those who enjoy nature poetry, who appreciate sensitive love poems, who like fairly gentle, but pointed social commentary, or who simply crave magical poems—will probably want to check out this collection.

Try it—you’ll like it.

Connections:

Beate Sigriddaughter’s website is: <http://www.sigriddaughter.com/>

Beate Sigriddaughter’s blog *Writing In A Woman’s Voice* is located here: <http://writinginawomansvoice.blogspot.com/>

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