

Waiting For Bluebeard

Helen Ivory

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Reviewed by Michael Gillan Maxwell

Helen Ivory's fourth collection of poems *Waiting For Bluebeard* is an important book from a poet and visual artist from the East Anglia region of the United Kingdom. The collection consists of 95 short poems and may be the most thematically unified of the three books. The language is colored by syntax and idioms that are distinctly British. Phrases that ring magically to my Midwestern-American ear include: "*the chunter of her sewing machine,*" "*clitter-clat,*" "*the church jumble sale,*" and "*gipsy land.*"

Waiting For Bluebeard derives its title and general context from a French folktale *Bluebeard (La Barbe Bleue)* that tells the story of a violent nobleman who murders his wives and the attempts of his last to avoid the same fate. In this book, Helen Ivory plumbs the depths of interior landscapes through dream imagery and metaphor. She invokes some of the darkest and most disturbing classic fairytales by the Brothers Grimm. Ivory anthropomorphizes inanimate objects and animals, imbuing them with human characteristics, emotions, motives and behavior in ways that remind me of nursery rhymes and Lewis Carroll's characters in *Alice in Wonderland*. (*What the Cat Said, What the Dark Said, What the Bed Said, The Paper Bag Man.*)

Helen Ivory writes in a narrative voice which is distinctly and uniquely her own, drawing the reader in with glimpses of human experience that reflect back something that is recognizable and eerily familiar. Her poetry is rendered with a visual artist's sensibility and she utilizes bold imagery and unexpected juxtapositions to create short, powerful poems that demand to be read aloud.

Part One of the book consists of sketches and reflections of a childhood partly remembered, partly reimagined. There are poems about her grandmother, mother, father, neighbors, pets and séances. Ivory's father creeps in as a shadowy and vaguely menacing figure who hovers in the fringes of her childhood memories. (*My Two Fathers, Oil, My Father's Accident.*)

Part Two opens with the book's titular poem *Waiting For Bluebeard*, where Bluebeard first makes his first appearance. A seductive and often deeply disturbing journey through a dark and sinister psychological landscape, this section is, for me, the heart of the book.

(from) *Waiting For Bluebeard*

*We are waiting for Bluebeard
and when he happens here
in his grey-silver car
he will unleash wolves
like rain.*

The Bluebeard poems depict the domination of one person over another in an abusive relationship and their crippling co-dependency. “*Disappearing*,” another series of poems in *Part Two*, is woven in an alternating fashion with the *Bluebeard* poems. The *Disappearing* poems are a devastating depiction of the gradual disintegration and annihilation of the personality and identity of both the protagonist-narrator and the antagonist Bluebeard. The book closes with a poem called *Hide* in which the antagonist is not Bluebeard, but Father. And so it comes full circle in a mysterious, disturbing and haunting way.

(from) *Hide*

*My father offered me
the pelt of his dog-
how quickly his knife
freed that beast from its skin.
I climbed inside while it was still warm
zipped it up tight
then walked into the fire
so he could not give me his love.*

Poetry is what happens when all else fails. Like a shaman’s incantations, *Waiting For Bluebeard* is not only an excavation of the poet’s childhood and an abusive relationship, but an exorcism of the demons associated with those parts of the poet’s life and psyche. This book is surely a result of coming to terms with those experiences. *Waiting For Bluebeard* harkens back to the age-old tradition of oral storytelling and myth and the beastly bridegroom Bluebeard is not unlike the fearsome monster Grendel in the epic *Beowulf*.

The brevity of the poems belies their true depth and power. The language could be variously described as minimalist, surrealist, magic realist, symbolist, ethereal, lyrical, and atmospheric. This collection is made from whole cloth and as a body of work, it creates a synergy where the integrated whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Helen Ivory is also a visual artist. She created the cover art for *Waiting For Bluebeard*, a tableau of 8 sealed mason jars on shelves and a white lab rat on its hind legs appearing to

be examining the label tag on one of the jars. Each jar contains a different collection of objects which include old black and white photographs, bird feathers, a vial of spilt pills and severed doll parts. A cardboard tag with a descriptive label dangles from a length of twine wrapped around the lid of each sealed jar. The poems in this collection are representative of the objects in each jar, each separate unto itself, yet somehow interconnected. The visual effect also triggers a connection to *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath. As in the work of Joseph Cornell, her visual art invokes the magnetic power of found objects grouped together in unexpected ways.

Although her visual art and her poetry each exist on their own terms, I feel a symbiotic relationship between them; each one wrought with the same artist's sensibilities, discerning eye, careful hand and human heart.

<http://www.helenivory.co.uk>

<http://www.bloodaxebooks.com>

Bio:

Michael Gillan Maxwell is a writer and visual artist in the Finger Lakes Region of New York state. Maxwell writes short fiction, poetry, songs, essays, recipes and irate letters to his legislators and his work has been featured in a number of journals and anthologies. He serves as associate flash fiction editor for *JMWW* quarterly. A teller of tales and singer of songs, he's prone to random outbursts, may spontaneously combust or break into song at any moment and might be occasionally found ranting and raving on his website: [Your Own Backyard](#).