

PROFILE

Carol Hebard was an actress for twelve years on the New York stage before enrolling as an English Major at the City College of CUNY, from where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa, magna cum laude in 1969. Subsequently awarded a Teaching and Writing Fellowship in fiction at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she received her MFA in 1971. Having taught creative writing at the university level for the next thirteen years, she resigned a tenured associate professorship in English at University of Kansas in 1984 to write full time.

She is the author of the memoir, *The Heart Too Long Suppressed* (Northeastern University Press, 2001); the novella collection, *Three Blind Mice* (Unicorn Press 1989), for which she received the 1988 McGraw-Hill Pushcart Prize nomination; and more recently, two poetry collections from March Street Press: *Spinster by the Sea* (57 pages, 2005) and *Little Monologs* (28 pages, 2004).

Her poems have been anthologized in Little Brown's *Woman, An Issue*, Bantam Books *Intro II*, and *Poems From The Hawkeye State* (Iowa State University Press). They have appeared also in *Pen International*, *International Poetry Review*, *Commonweal*, *Massachusetts Review*, *The Humanist*, *North American Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Free Inquiry*, *Ararat*, *New Letters and Confrontation*.

Her short fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *New Letters*, *Cottonwood Review*, and *Texas Quarterly*.

Links to excerpts from and reviews of her books are on her Web site: www.CarolHebard.com.

The Heart Too Long Suppressed: A Chronicle of Mental Illness by Carol Hebard. Intro. By Thomas S. Szasz, M.D. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001. 244pp. With photos. Cloth, \$24.95.

Brilliant: that is the word I want to use to describe Carol Hebard's memoir of mental pain and healing, by far the best such memoir I have ever read. There are other accurate adjectives, such as intelligent, insightful, generous, brave, shocking, witty, but these are the attributes of an essential brilliance in the style, the ordering of material, pacing, characterization, and, of course, narrative voice.

Hebald's precocious and traumatized childhood led her to a career as an actress on the New York stage, including Broadway. Talented and beautiful, accumulating excellent credits and reviews, she nevertheless found herself trapped in the web of psychiatry and psychological analysis that is the world of the mental ward. Like a web, it is a world in which one can become increasingly entangled as one seeks to escape. Worse, her youth and young adulthood coincided with the heyday of Freudian theory in America, with its unacknowledged contempt for women.

Her progress through the system to a new career as a serious writer and a freer, happier life is recounted with startling immediacy. The competitive, narcissistic, often downright mean mother; the controlling, clinging husband; the terrifying maid who, daily, locked her in the closet; the sister, the shrinks, and the nurses, actors and inmates come to instant, vivid life. I couldn't put this book down.

There is, moreover, a dimension to it that is of particular interest to anyone who is or wants to be a writer. Hebald's struggle for sanity and meaning is intimately bound up with the search for a voice, for *her* voice, and for a vision, *her* vision, which will encompass all that she has observed and felt and learned. "The need to speak, to communicate, became so exquisitely painful I felt it stop up by the force of the impulse itself. . . And the realization washed over me that I'd been crippled by an excess of need...I *had* needed a place to scream *before* I could reason out that need with a doctor."

Disentangling truth from fiction, fiction from fantasy, fantasy from dream, and dream from discipline, Hebald, who gave up tenure to devote herself to her writing, has published not only this memoir but two novellas and a play; she is working on a novel.

And perhaps after all we do need another word, because at its close this memoir becomes something besides brilliant: it becomes transcendent. Proposing the possibility that "our American fascination with madness is a defense against our fear of it," Hebald acknowledges her acceptance of her own mental experience, judging it neither right nor wrong but real. In the final five sentences, which are like a bouquet to the reader, her memoir inscribes itself on the heart. I would like to quote them but won't, because they should be discovered by those who have arrived there page by page (an easy task, given a book that is a page-turner). I hope many will come to them. Of memoirs of madness, *The Heart Too Long Suppressed* is the one exhaustively truthful one.

The Hollins Critic, February, 2004

INTERNATIONAL POETRY REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW

Spinster by the Sea, by Carol Hebald (March Street Press, 2005.)

Carol Hebald's first full-length book of poetry is a journey through the dreams and symbols of a lively and unconventional mind. Her previous books include *Three Blind Mice/Two Short Novels* (Unicorn Press, 1989), *The Heart Too*

Long Suppressed: A Chronicle of Mental Illness (Northeastern University Press, 2001), and a chapbook entitled *Little Monologs, Poems* (March Street Press, 2004). It is lucky for us that a more extensive collection of Hebdal's poetry is now being published, for reading *Spinster by the Sea* is a very gratifying experience.

The poems in this book are skillfully arranged and add up to a cohesive whole despite having been written over a long period of time. I was surprised to read in the opening notes that "Letter to an Artist" and "Fantasy in a Floating Cafe" won *Kansas Quarterly's* 1986 Seaton Award, because otherwise one would not suspect that they were written nearly twenty years before some others in the collection. The book is divided into four sections: Descent, the Dream Kingdom, Remembrances of the World, and Ascent. Therefore, the reader quickly recognizes that the movement of the collection is cyclical.

The first section, Descent, introduces us to Hebdal's typical style—characterized by short-line, one stanza poems in language that recalls another time. Her description is rich, but she rarely lingers on a single image for more than a couple of lines. Rather, she constantly introduces new thoughts and linguistic tensions. Here is her short poem "Song," a beautiful example of Hebdal's lyric voice:

He shall ravish me in the wineshed
casting grapes about my head
and sweetly I'll mottle—
an unblithe bird—
until he is sprung.
Give me bread, my lord,
for I am drunk on wormwood
and the elders have ceased their music.
I dream of dragons in pleasant places;
my belly is mingled with lilies.

There is something unmistakably biblical in Hebdal's narrative tactics, and this poem has a strong undercurrent of the "Song of Solomon." The poems' biblical influence becomes even more overt in the second section, "the Dream Kingdom," which uses figures such as Lilith, Eve, Mary, and Christ throughout. The third section, "Remembrances of the World" is the first to contain more modern-day imagery. These poems could be actual memories, especially pieces like "The Actress," and "In Memoriam," both of which explore coming-of-age themes. "Ascent," the final section, has less of a cohesive feel than the previous three, but this is presumably because the speaker of the poems has emerged having absorbed the images and themes of those earlier sections.

One of the tensions in *Spinster by the Sea* that I found particularly delightful is the combination of wild, dream-like imagery with sharp attention to form. "Nightmare" is one poem that follows form closely. The two-beat lines and regular

rhyme scheme coupled with the themes of death and God immediately bring both Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson to mind.

Another reason that reading this collection is so pleasurable is that Heald has a knack for using common archetypes and symbols in spontaneous yet familiar ways—much as a dream does. She frequently uses words that are very difficult to get away with in poetry—words that the jaded reader might label as "cliché." I was willing to go along with the poet's frequent repetition of words like heart, soul, mind, moon, flower, and song, and for the most part, I was not disappointed. I think Heald achieves the difficult feat of infusing new life into these words because of the semi-archaic language and tone peppered throughout the poems, and because of their timeless, otherworldly setting. In addition to the biblical references, these poems also contain many other literary allusions. "The Moon Leaks Red" contains a skillfully used reference to Nobodaddy, Blake's comical name for the authoritative, patriarchal God. Likewise, "Mary and the Son" keenly echoes Yeats's apocalyptic description of the new Messiah's arrival in his poem "The Second Coming."

Spinster by the Sea is a wonderfully dynamic book. The loveliness of the language and imagery never bores her readers or lulls them too far into dreaminess, for Heald adds just the right amount of sharpness and tension to her language. Poems such as "Catatonia in the Vestibule," "Lilith's Cry," and "The Actress" unapologetically reveal anger or meanness in the voice of the speaker. The reader is able to revel in these various voices that carry us rhythmically (and sometimes violently) through the collection, so that Carol Heald could certainly be describing her own artistry in the poem "Prayer for the Little Mad Rag-Girl":

her whip, the word
that pleases
with the precise cruelty
necessary to her music.

Sarah Rose Exoo
University of North Carolina at Greensboro