

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Unravelling by Elizabeth Graver

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Source: *Ploughshares*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Winter, 1997/1998), pp. 215-217

Published by: Ploughshares

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40352367>

Accessed: 16-06-2022 15:05 UTC

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often clip themselves, just as they gain speed and begin to spread out. They leave us slightly stunned each time by their impact and exactitude—daring to ask the very largest of questions: “Why indelible hunger? Why insatiable need?” (“No Talking”).

There is melancholia here but not mourning. Bang’s unfettered “I” is not interested in self-indulgence—instead the view is more encompassing. At turns the poems are surreal and elliptical: “Once on a back yard swing / I became the sky I meant to be” (“In St. John’s Hospital”). But there is also a constant assessment taking place—a vigilant addition and subtraction of our secrets and failures of the heart. Bang tries to pin desire into corners, naming and renaming it as “the shrouded want to cheek and shoulder / that arms can’t reach, throat refuses to ask...” (“In This Business of Touch and Be Touched”).

The voice is resilient: “... Survival lies in resisting, / in the undersides of the leafed and delicate” (“Apology for Want”). Near the end of the book, Bang points to a plausible if compromised way to endure: “... where house, where dog / where a thin layer of glitter / covers years of shamed wear / and loss is now what you live with” (“Like Spiders, Step by Step”). The poems largely succeed on the strength of their anti-romanticism and in their confidence in probing the unknowable. They reveal themselves as dire warnings, which we receive thankful Bang dared put them to language.

**UNRAVELLING** A novel by Elizabeth Graver. Hyperion, \$22.95 cloth. Reviewed by Caroline Langston.

In Elizabeth Graver’s quietly enchanting first novel, *Unravelling*, the longings of the young narrator, Aimee Slater, are strikingly vivid and contemporary, yet the story is set in nineteenth-century New England, at the juncture between the region’s rural, puritanical past and all the glittering possibilities of its burgeoning industrialization.

Beginning with her exotic name—picked by her mother from a magazine called *The Ladies’ Pearl*—Aimee Slater is different from her other siblings on the farm and the other young girls of her little New Hampshire town. Born in 1829, she is headstrong and intelligent, and as she enters puberty, she is bored with the narrow opportunities offered her of housewifery and teaching; at the same time, she is pulled by a sexual desire that her mother tries by

example and ominous admonition to repress. After a sexual encounter with her younger brother, an experience for which she has no language beside guilt to help her understand it, Aimee feels even further alienated from her mother and family, and from the brother who will no longer even speak to her.

Soon, however, the possibility of escape presents itself when Aimee learns of "Lowell, Massachusetts, the City of Spindles—brick building after brick building, the flowers in their window boxes, the girls coming home after work by the canal, arm in arm." Aimee is seduced by Lowell's bright utopian promises of "education in a trade" and "sewing circles and learning circles," but most of all by the prospect of independence. When an agent who recruits girls for one of the mills takes a liking to Aimee, she's not so much attracted by the future as by wanting "to see that agent watching me again," and after a struggle with her parents, she heads off for her new life.

But of course, Aimee finds life in Lowell less than utopian, with its regimented hours and slave-like mechanical labor, of which the novel is a careful document. In Lowell as well, Aimee's desires for love and physical affection culminate in her involvement with a young man, William, who at first appears ideal. Graver contrasts perfectly Aimee's characteristic need for the security he provides—"I wanted to lie down inside his coat on the floor and sleep"—to the nuances of her youthful passion, which Graver masterfully captures in lyrical language and specific detailing: "I looked down to see his hands covered with powdered sugar and pictured myself leaning over his hand, tasting the crannies between his fingers."

Ultimately, though, Aimee's awakening proves a disaster when she becomes pregnant and William refuses to marry her. She loses her baby twins to an adoption that her mother has arranged, and after returning to New Hampshire, she becomes a hermit in a hunting cabin, struggling to understand the circumstances that have brought her there. In time, she learns to recover through her own resources, and the love that has eluded her finally arrives in the person of the "town cripple" Amos; she literally stumbles over him in the forest and, significantly, helps him to clean his wounds. Through Amos, Aimee is able to resolve both the conflicts in herself and with her family. In Graver's gentle hands,

these timeless, familiar themes sparkle with authenticity and poignancy.

*Caroline Langston's stories have appeared in The Gettysburg Review, Ploughshares, The Pushcart Prize, New Stories from the South, and elsewhere. She teaches literature at Rose Hill College.*

**OTHER PEOPLE'S TROUBLES** *Poems by Jason Sommer. Univ. of Chicago Press, \$12.95 paper. Reviewed by H. L. Hix.*

Although the jacket copy on Jason Sommer's *Other People's Troubles* calls attention to the poems' focus on the Holocaust, the poems themselves wisely do not. If the jacket *shouts* Holocaust, the poems *breathe* it with the same combination of urgency and patience that must have been audible on still nights in the bunks of Buchenwald and Birkenau.

Princess Di's recent death testifies to how quickly quantity of discourse anesthetizes us to tragedy. By the third day, who wouldn't flip to *Frasier* rather than endure another news special in praise of the Princess? A similar circumstance haunts Holocaust literature. Certainly our Cynthia Ozicks and Elie Wiesels are important, but after half a dozen, who needs another? So much speech has dulled the Holocaust into a counter, a stimulus to which the response is a satisfying sorrow soothed by safe distance and a layer of dust.

Against this background, a body of poems that begins in the Holocaust can be saved from self-indulgence only by becoming essential as breath. The experiences of Holocaust victims were horrific, as were the consequences for their kin, but to explain those experiences or communicate those consequences calls for an edifice tightly masoned as *Oedipus*, language as lush as *Lear*. If even the camp guards who created and daily observed those experiences could not *see* them, we who were not there but who have heard the stories before will understand them only as other people's troubles unless finely whetted language grafts others' lives into our own.

Just such fruitful surgery does Jason Sommer perform in his evocative, funny, sad, and damn near perfect new book. "Some distance in," he begins, "a life fills / with people, / despite the early departures," like childhood friends and "the very old / who were at the gatherings once / or twice, tenderly served and seated / to the