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Bold Mélange: Review of *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* by Martina Reisz Newberry

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, July 29th, 2020

There is no sun. The sun left long ago
when times got tough and people got
greedy and ate the sun. Now there's only gray light.

("Precognition")

"May you live in interesting times."
(expression incorrectly attributed to an ancient Chinese curse)

Nothing tastes and smells better than French coffee. The flavor of French roast with chicory tends to be strong and dark, yet mellow, with an almost undefinable aftertaste of enjoyable bitterness. The poems in *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* by Martina Reisz Newberry (Deerbrook Editions, 2020) (her sixth book of poetry) are similarly strong and dark, but mellow, with generous dollops of bitter truth. *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* is a 50-poem blues riff, a meditation, a wakeup call, and a satisfying brew of visionary poems about post-modern life—with all its complexities such as love affairs, friendships, old age, the impending Apocalypse, and more.

Newberry makes no bones about her purpose in writing these poems. In a recent interview, the poet said her motivation for writing can be summed up as *ad liberabo linguae atque cordius*, "to free the tongue and the text." The speaker in "Upon Finding a Sinkhole Opening Up in My Back Yard," the 17th poem in the collection and one of the best, reveals that when she was younger, she wanted to pray the world into a better place. "I [don't] want to be a cushion, / I [want] to be a stiletto," she explains in "Hunger." I think Newberry got her wish.

Newberry's speaker in *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* is a stiletto-like Cassandra, giving us the bad news of today while hinting about the bad news of tomorrow. For example, the speaker predicts:

The "end times" will buckle
and rail in our memories. Hoping for further mercies, we'll walk

naked to the sea; we'll stand
and watch it disappear.

("Rome")

And what holds all these poems of widely different topics together is the speaker's Cassandra-voice. That voice sweeps the reader along the book's trajectory.

The horrible, hopeless status of our world is an issue that the speaker in *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* wrestles with throughout the book. Perhaps the present U. S. political situation (not to mention the worldwide public health emergency) cannot help but bring up memories, ideas, and imagery appropriate to "the end days." The speaker spares no words in condemning our present U.S. situation ("Me and Amy Lowell"). Elsewhere, she says:

These are wretched times;
times that poems can not fix
and we are living them.

("White Road")

In these poems, I hear not only echoes of the fall of the Roman Empire (an idea explored in "Rome"), but I'm reminded of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens, parts of which take place during the French Revolution. Dickens starts his description with: "Along the Paris streets, the death-carts rumble, hollow and harsh."

I'm also reminded of poet-artist-religious visionary William Blake who wrote and painted the end times so poignantly.

I hasten to add, Martina Reisz Newberry's speaker never advocates religion, violence, or revolution. Or any solution, for that matter. But that's all for the best since, in my opinion, it's up to poets to ask the tough questions, not necessarily answer them.

Newberry's imagery matches her powerful pronouncements. Her best poems allow her skilled descriptions to take the lead. For example, this picture stays with me: "The sky broke into puzzle pieces and / fell on me..." ("The Spilsbury Curse") And because of the imagery, the reader can feel the speaker's emotions, for example, her fear when she senses a "prowling mist" approach, and "[t]he weed with the white-tufted feather top shivers, is blown free of its slender anchor" ("Nushu").

However—and this seems important—throughout the book, the poet asserts that post-modern life can still be beautiful, despite horrific circumstances. For example, in "White Road" the speaker affirms: "they may be bruised / but there are still apples, tart and cool from the tree." Similar to Ann Sexton's speaker in the poem "Live" who urges us, "I say Live, Live because of the sun, / the dream, the excitable gift," Martina Reisz Newberry's speaker commands us: "I say live, precariously, even sadly, Live, you who are left to listen" ("White Road").

Sometimes all you need is yourself, alive in the moment. Just surviving to begin another day can be life-affirming. Newberry's speaker says, "[A]ny morning you wake up // is glorious....." ("Morning Glories").

“The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls / tenement halls /and whispered in the sound of silence” (Simon & Garfunkel). Perhaps the “words of the prophets” may even be found among the words of the poems in *Blues for French Roast with Chicory*, although these poems are the opposite of silent.

Gentle readers, wake up and smell the (French roast with chicory) coffee! I highly recommend the bold mélange *Blues for French Roast with Chicory* to anyone who loves this country and this planet. Martina Reisz Newberry is the real deal, a poet-visionary. When she speaks her truths—we all should listen.



Connections:

To buy *Blues for French Roast with Chicory*: [Amazon](#)

To check out the poet’s website: <http://www.martinanewberry.com/>

For the interview of Martina Reisz Newberry referred to in the review, see Sonia Iris Lozada’s interview at <http://poeticresurrection.com/index.php/martina-reisz-newberry/>

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