

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Interview: Poet and Memoirist Sue William Silverman

Gail Griffin · Wednesday, April 17th, 2019

Gail Griffin speaks with poet and memoirist Sue William Silverman

Gail Griffin: *In terms of the framework of your new poetry collection, If the Girl Never Learns, every poem's title begins with "If the Girl..." which makes her sound potentially generic, yet mythic. How do you see that dichotomy? Also, is the "if" about conditionality, potentiality, suspense, or what?*

Sue William Silverman: From the first poem, "If the Girl Never Learns to Cook or Sew," I hope readers understand that the Girl isn't going to be hemmed in, so to speak, by domesticity. I think her namelessness is more universal than generic—a kind of "Everygirl." Yet she's also mythic—like many female figures associated with death or danger—such as Sirens, Banshees, Valkyries. There are poems in the collection where she's out for vengeance. She's willing to turn away from the hearth in order to inhabit dark aspects of these mythic figures, thus accessing their female power. In that sense, I guess she's more "Übergirl" than "Everygirl." And while I think the "If" is a combination of all those qualities—conditionality, potentiality, suspense—"potentiality" seems pre-eminent. If the Girl is/isn't this particular thing, then what is she? If she frees herself from any given constraint, what does she gain? What does she lose?

GG: *If the Girl Never Learns is dedicated, in part, to "all women who resist," and the cover blurb calls the Girl "a badass." Yet these poems yield a sense of danger, confusion, and violence that is spiritual, emotional, and sexual. A pivotal question is whether young women's sexual self-expression is liberatory from patriarchal culture, or submissive to it. Is it the Girl's power or lack of power that compels you?*

SWS: On the whole, I think the Girl's actions lead to liberation although she must seek it within the patriarchal society in which she lives. There are several poems where sex is a kind of combat. Her courage consists in being willing to rebel rather than just fulfilling the role she's expected to play. She's a little scary, but in part that's because she's simply manifesting her natural power. Those mythic figures I mentioned either call men to their death, or announce death. If we assume those myths were created by men, then it seems natural to see these mythic figures as men's fear both of death and of women. It's that elemental entwining of Eros and Thanatos. It might seem in some of the poems that the Girl sets these urges at odds with each other, but really she's making a connection already there, and which we often don't want to recognize. Myths, like poems, "tell things slant," and in that way allow us to confront difficult realities.

GG: *In this book body parts are removable: heads fall off; backbones unzip; sex occurs “with a disembodied heart.” Do you see any possibility of these nightmarish, Boschian bodies achieving reintegration and renewal?*

SWS: The Girl of these poems is damaged. On some level, she has abandoned integration in favor of survival. In the poem “If the Girl Prepares to Feed a Cannibal in a Dark Alley,” she resists giving him her heart, that “ferocious delicacy.” Only now it occurs to me how important that phrase is to understanding the Girl. Her natural sensibility is to be delicate, but she has been forced by individual men—and society at large—to become ferocious in the protection of her core self. She realizes it’s better to be damaged than to not be at all.

GG: *The book has three sections: “The Girl and the Man,” “The Girl and the Myth,” “The Girl and the End.” What is the narrative arc? Does the world change, or only the Girl’s perspective of her situation?*

SWS: Generally, the Girl’s perspective changes. The more she struggles to achieve self-realization, the more she recognizes the world’s inequities—especially how gender roles limit her choices. She rebels against the notion that to be a woman is merely to be acted-upon, rather than being the one who acts. She sees where passivity has gotten her, and that’s one mistake she’s determined not to repeat, even if it means making many other mistakes. To me, the collection feels noir-ish, in that the Girl’s actions can seem morally ambiguous at best. So the narrative arc is a kind of quest narrative in which the goal is the quest itself—the courage the Girl shows in persevering, in not giving up. She will not be used or objectified no matter what it takes.

GG: *Throughout the book there is a recurring trope of understanding on the verge of breaking through into language: “ghostly / questions too faint to translate,” “she’d translate / her body back into its own / language, if only she could,” and my favorite, “If you knew the answer to the question, or the key to open / answers to questions not yet asked . . . but you don’t. / Except you do.” What is the knowledge hovering at the edge of the Girl’s consciousness?*

SWS: What the Girl moves toward is an understanding of just who she is. On some level that sounds trite, but for her it’s a matter of life and death. She seeks to forge a self that isn’t dependent upon men. The poem “If the Girl Knew Who She Was” ends, “opaque borders / define who she isn’t / but not who she is.” In many ways, the book is a cautionary tale about that kind of defining oneself by negation—by stripping away who you aren’t—rather than by discovering the actual qualities that coalesce to define, in a positive way, a life.

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