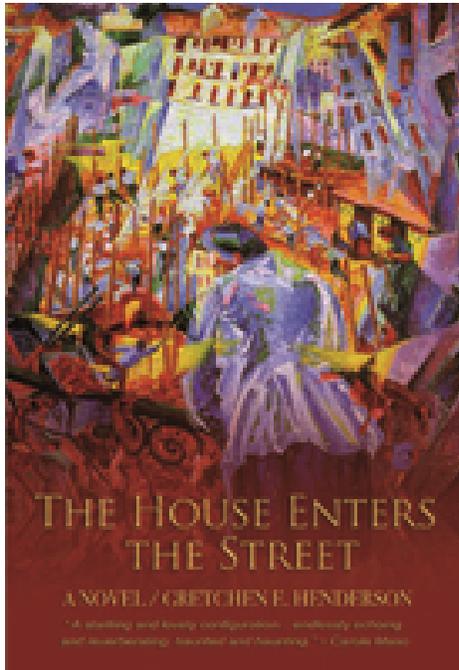


Gently Read Literature Winter 2012/2013

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The Perfect and The Imperfect: Glenda Burgess on Gretchen Henderson’s novel “The House Enters the Street”



The House Enters the Street **Gretchen E. Henderson** **Starcherone Books, 2012**

Gretchen Henderson is a scholar and writer of tremendous creative vision and assertion – her appetite for undiscovered landscapes of aural and written imaginings have led her through the novel, poetry, and her nonfiction, *On Marvellous Things Heard*. This unbounded range has given Henderson’s new work *The House Enters the Street* authority to shatter the conventions of the traditional novel, creating a riff of story entwined with allegory that fascinates and engages a reader’s appreciation and frustration with her novel. The book’s title, an homage and play on the futurist painting by Umberto Boccioni (1911), serves as metaphor of the journey of the novel’s narrator, a pianist named Avra, whose ability to play her instrument is silenced in the wake of a mysterious, debilitating inability to move her hands. *The House Enters the Street* is a novel of nested stories. “Homing: Honing: Home” Henderson writes; telling “twice the story, writer’s and reader’s,” and opening *Books Within Books* - also the name of an eccentric bookshop that figures in the novel. “Home,” Henderson writes, “was here, where things fell apart.”

Art as translation of culture, history, and self, stands a cornerstone concept of this novel. Henderson develops her narratives around the root symbol of what and where “home” is – geographic, identity, belonging – constructing interwoven points of view that move back and forth within time and four generations of a single, extended family. Home is both a reductive container, literally *the house*, to the greater cultural identity and simpler heart and story of

oneself. “Everything, Henderson writes, “could be perceived up close, not only *en vei*, from multiple points of view.” The novel darns like a needle back and forth across both time and generation, linked by objects and experiences of memento, family, geography, tragedy and love.

Henderson writes with crisp detail and insight, “The house is filled with laughter, despite ghosts (the daughter dead of cancer at 27) because your grandparents believe in grace, in mystery, and in the sacrament of black coffee.” The occasional self-consciousness of unusual adjective pairings and inside-out imagery can get in the way, but Henderson more often than not startles with sentences that are fresh, that pop from the page, full of the resonances of poetry. A sentence begins, “the rickety crackity thrum that churned motions of a notion, rain against some grain, and a taste: wet wheat...” In a later flood of imagery, “A radiator pissed steam and leaked tears on the hardwood floor, like a steel-heat accordion – plinking, sighing, hammering.”

The House Enters the Street embarks on a quest of “home as self,” and the meaning of personal “calling.” What compass calls us to our life work, our loves, our identity? Shifting narrative style from traditional to fabulist tale, one-act play to sensual riffs on music and paintings, the novel sweeps the reader through a universe of symbolism and object, suspends the senses, and requires the reader to experience Henderson’s characters’ tortured aphasia minutely and strangely. One character believes he must understand and experience the not good to define the good. Indeed, the development of “negative space” on the canvas of the novel as a whole *is* as important as the structured imagery of print. I am reminded of the modernist painter Roy Lichtenstein and his concept of the “perfect” and “imperfect” painting, as there are moments in Henderson’s novel where the line of the story breaks outside the boundaries of traditional theme and composition. The effect is disturbing and interesting. Henderson writes of “a page so short, white space dominated. She thought of a snow drift, blanketing the remaining letters.”

Henderson plays with the alphabet throughout the novel: as structure (framing the story), instruction (directive communication), vessel of meaning (levels of content), and the “I AM” of story itself (language as power). In reading Henderson’s novel on occasion I am reminded of the work of Canadian writer and poet Anne Carson and her multi-layered, scholarly constructions and deconstructions of language that embrace larger meanings beyond what any one word itself specifies, yet always curve home to the power and importance of the individual word. There is a section of Henderson’s novel deliberately printed in lighter text against one or two scattered words and phrases highlighted in bold. The reader may follow the entire text, or skimming, link the words in bold to discover a Haiku-esque skeletal structure beneath the larger text: verbs, nouns, and key adjectives without the fleshy undertones of narrative.

At times this vivisection of story overwhelms content, an immutable distortion on the page demanding to be noticed, indifferent to risks of being misunderstood, *unlike* and *unsubstitutable*. As if music were appreciated only for the shape or beauty of its notation, not its translation into sound. Frequently Gretchen Henderson’s rhapsodizing language is pegged to music - *grave*, *allegro* - or to the visual effects of sculpture and painting, “A-light! A-light!” Her heroine Avra spins in a vortex of inner vertigo, discovering that what is lost is also everything that is found. The remaking of Avra’s world described by Henderson, “She followed the fog until a figure emerged.”