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Jennie Berner

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More Memoir

Different Guises

Jennie Berner

**GIRAFFES IN HIDING:
THE MYTHICAL MEMOIRS OF
CAROL NOVACK**

Carol Novack
Spuyten Duyvil
<http://www.spuytenduyvil.net>
234 pages; paper, \$37.50

It is with a good measure of irony that Carol Novack’s first full-length collection, *Giraffes in Hiding*, is subtitled *The Mythical Memoirs of Carol Novack*. The collection consists of over forty genre-bending pieces that hardly amount to the kind of inspirational narratives with which we often associate memoir. Indeed, Novack is more interested in wrestling with language and form than in charting a path of personal growth. She takes the miscellany of our lives and audaciously reshapes it into unexpected forms like play-poems, emails, conceptual games, pseudo-reviews, and dreams.

Of course, as the ironic nod to memoir suggests, *Giraffes in Hiding* does entertain a significant autobiographical impulse. In particular, a number of pieces explore the cultivation of bold artistic sensibilities that happen to look a lot like Novack’s. The opening story, “Minnows,” for instance, pits an imaginative young girl against her more practical twin sister. The protagonist uses “a crazy rainbow of Crayolas” to color a set of paper minnows, but her sister insists on coloring a set of giraffes yellow and brown. Whereas the protagonist proceeds to swim with her minnows “where no one could find us,” her sister scoffs at the idea of hiding. “*Why would giraffes want to hide?*” the sister asks. Novack clearly appreciates the minnows’ evasiveness, their slippery beauty. At once everywhere and nowhere, the minnows embody some of the best images in Novack’s collection—that is to say, those that inconspicuously flit from one piece to another with no concern for practicalities.

Art returns as a theme throughout *Giraffes in Hiding*, albeit in different guises. A number of Novack’s characters, if not actual artists, are prolific creators in conflict with those who want to manage or destroy their creations. In “What to Do with the Babies,” for instance, the protagonist struggles to protect her unruly babies from men who want to lasso them. In other cases, characters end up compromising their creations for the sake of approval and acceptance.

It is no wonder this theme concerns Novack. *Giraffes in Hiding* demonstrates an exuberance of language, sound, and literary device that borders on out of control. Novack’s writing abounds with recklessly satisfying similes like “The heavens turned dense ash blue like hospice hair” and “I spoke gradually in a voice that felt far away, like a fish sleeping on the bottom of a deep pond.” With subject matter ranging from the mundane to the fantastic, her

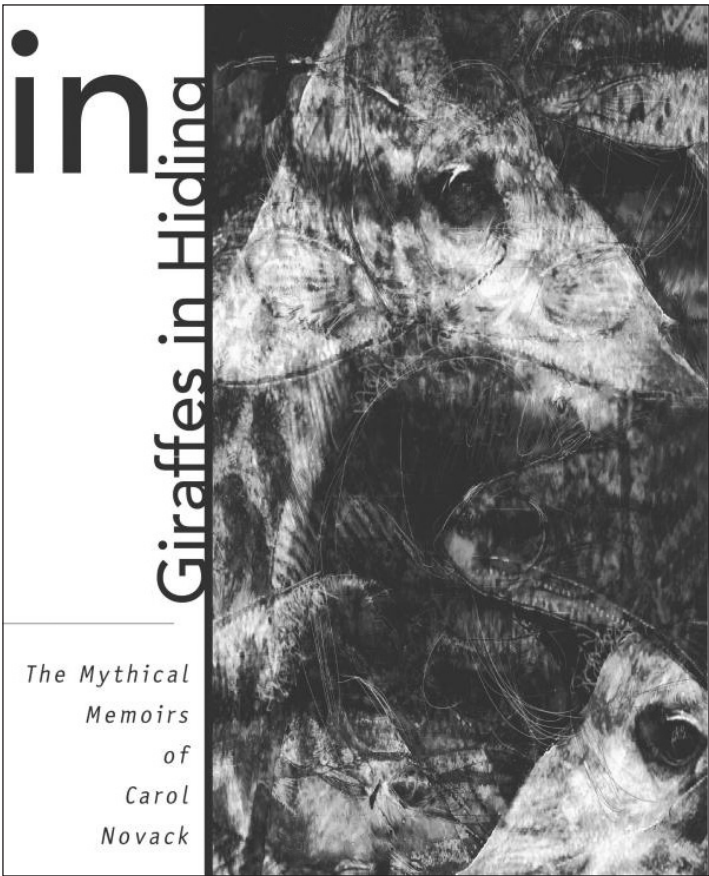
collection is full of striking juxtapositions and incongruous pairings. Indeed, Novack seems as comfortable wielding the mythology of Pandora and Oedipus as that of prom queens and football heroes. Yet while many of her juxtapositions are playful, others carry a dark undercurrent. For instance, in “I Am Not Nor Have I Ever Been,” distressing memories of girls tormenting a peer at summer camp in the Catskills serve as backstory for a post-apocalyptic interrogation scene.

While Novack’s treatment of language succeeds in opening up fresh perspectives on family, sexuality, infidelity, and mortality, it does not exactly lend itself to narrative closure. Novack is aware of the impatience with which some readers might approach it. In this light, her story “Destination” almost looks like her own personal allegory of reading: “On the hill, there is an easel holding a painting of a town. You are always traveling to the town, but wherever you think you’ve arrived, there is nothing but stones, statues and indigestible bread. You return to the painting.” Like this traveler, Novack’s reader is always in transit, but never quite arrives.

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towards memoir, but stumbles upon
quite a bit more.***

Novack’s resistance to conventional narrative arcs often involves a sociopolitical dimension. Consider “The Eating Habits of the Poor,” in which the narrator keeps vigil over an impoverished stranger (“the other”) from the nearby projects whom she has taken into her house. As everyone from her ex-husband to her sister to a band of French horns pay her visits, she awaits the other’s story, wondering what is or is not a digression. In this piece, as in others, Novack establishes an extremely unequal and loaded relationship between the storyteller and audience. Along similar lines, many pieces are told in the first person, but directed, almost antagonistically, to a “you,” a point of view that creates an alternately intimate and theatrical feel. In these ways, Novack poses metafictional questions about who or what controls our narratives, and what kinds of power is or is not available through narrative. Her background in law clearly informs these questions. In this context, it is notable that “Crazy Broad,” an account of a rape, offers what may be the most straightforward narrative in the whole collection.

Novack’s self-consciousness about narrative is perhaps most explicit, however, in several pieces that take aim at the publishing industry and the writing profession. In “A With/Out Q Without Self,” Novack conducts an interview with herself, questioning her susceptibility to the demands of Amazon, literary agents, and the market in general. In the vitriolic and funny “Missive to the Fiction Editor of the New Yorker Yeah the New Yorker,” she expresses



her frustration with realism and the MFA programs that promote it. “Cluck Cluck” weighs, among other things, the pressures of memoir. “Distillization, even on a modest scale, seemed daunting,” Novack admits. “You couldn’t take my life, take it and make something of it, like a lesson in perseverance. You wouldn’t know what to do with it. It’s much too messy, you’d say.” She describes her life, rather, as one “that holds no vision of a best seller type of overcoming, a life that merely climbs, reclines, and declines in turns, stumbles on and on.”

Giraffes in Hiding ironically gestures towards memoir, but stumbles upon quite a bit more. Even in its organization and design, the collection looks beyond itself. Novack draws her numerous epigraphs from figures like Lewis Carroll, Gaston Bachelard, Gertrude Stein, Woody Allen, and Angela Carter. She also offers many dedications to fellow writers and artists. A few of her pieces appear online as multi-media collaborations. And most remarkably, the collection is fully illustrated with artwork by over a dozen visual artists. In keeping with this commitment to openness, the collection ends with a piece called “In the Beginning Is” that resonates with “the fractious parts of the one parting departing breaking up into star bits, ego bits, id bits, alpha bit soup, genetic stew, devolving evolving revolving violently....” If only for an instant, the giraffes go into hiding, and the minnows emerge.

Jennie Berner’s fiction and poetry has appeared in Boston Review, Crazyhorse, The Journal, and The Coachella Review. She currently lives in Chicago, where she is pursuing a PhD in the Program for Writers at the University of Illinois at Chicago.