



The Babies

Sabrina Orsh Mark, Jane Miller (Selected by)

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The Babies, by Sabrina Orah Mark, is the premier winner of the Saturnalia Books Poetry Contest, judged by renowned poet Jane Miller (Memory at These Speeds: New and Selected Poetry). Of The Babies, poet Claudia Rankine writes, "Rarely do we encounter poems that are so precisely framed, though on their surface seemingly whimsical and erratic. These poems are gorgeous, intelligent, and disturbing."

The Babies Details

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From Reader Review *The Babies* for online ebook

Katie says

S. Orah Mark, along with Mark Wunderlich has also been very influential to my growth as a poet. Her otherworldly views of nature have mixed with my own views of nature in literature and have have tied in that natural or supernatural spirituality with human relationships. She often works in prose, a format that I am quite fond of, but am not sure if I will ever be able to master at her infinitely proficient level.

Mackenzie says

While much contemporary experimental poetry can be daunting or uninviting to the reader, Sabrina Orah Mark's first collection, *The Babies*, preserves its experimentalism while avoiding pretension or obscurity. Much like a ride at a carnival, this book is both scary and fun at the same time while giving the illusion that at any moment, it could completely come undone. Mark manages to remain linguistically innovative while also devastating her reader with surreal imagery at every turn.

Losing a limb seems within the realm of possibility as we enter the surreal landscape of *The Babies*; we are quickly immersed in a grotesquely cartoon-like world of dismembered bodies and disembodied corpses. For Mark, the body is something immediately inhabitable by the outside world, and much like the history created in these poems, it is a malleable and impressionable entity. In the first poem of Section 1, "Amen," the body is present as a gamble and a form: "'Heads or tails,' they'd ask. 'As a friend, I'd recommend the head.'" As if the speaker is not in on the "joke," she takes the question of the body quite literally and seriously. Likewise, nothing in this book is to be taken at face value, especially in the context of history: "One day, they kneeled inside me and called me a Jew. At first I rejected their offer, but they were right and offered me a lady's hat. I did not fear them until I wanted to be afraid. The lake was guarded and the road to the town was closed." Mark gives us a historical context which frames the rest of the book. With this gesture, we are also given a clue to the identity of the speaker, who floats between worlds like a shade. She is marked, both literally and figuratively (labeled by the invasion and occupation of her own body) as the Other. This gesture opens the complexity of the poems to another level; most images (the red dress, the mustache, the wig) take on a new importance within this frame. This book would not be nearly as devastating or accomplished without this naming as a foreground to the rest of the book.

Mark has chosen the perfect form for her content in the prose poem. Following poets like Cole Swensen, Abigail Child, Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian in writing a complete collection of prose poems which ultimately link together, Mark's narrative presents itself as narrative and is vested in its ability to tell a story, albeit a fragmented and incomplete account. Though the narrative is non-linear, the prose form gives the illusion that what appears on the page is a "story." Narrative elements like time markers ("Tonight I unwrap the accordion. . ." or "Late one night I enter the laboratory's.") and identified characters (Mrs. Greenaway, Bewilder, Walter B., Mama, Eugene, Old Gerta, Asa, the babies) sprinkled throughout seem to bring us along on the speaker's journey, though because the journey is so bizarre and grotesque, we soon realize that we are not being told the "truth." Often echoing the tone of Theresa Cha's *Dictee*, the poem becomes the speaker's exercise or experiment in understanding. The rhythm of the prose is infectious, the way it turns and tumbles from nonsense to lyric moments of awareness, and is difficult to clear from our minds once we finish reading it. "A Kaddish," for example, does this well.

Narrative elements like character and time stamps draw us in, and though images like the sawdust girl being lifted may not completely make sense, Mark has achieved a moment of devastation and gravity. Everywhere are hints of death, even in their most bizarre form. We cannot escape the gravity of the “shiver, shiva, shhh...” which alludes to a Jewish period of mourning for the dead. The speaker and the reader hear this among the bustle.

Anastasia Dotzauer says

The Babies changed my life. Sabrina Orah Mark is an incredible inspiration and I wouldn't be the writer I am today without having read her work.

Patricia Murphy says

This is fun--it's one of those times when I read a poem in a lit mag and immediately log on to buy the poet's books. There I was: innocently reading *Black Warrior Review*, when a poem by Sabrina Orah Mark knocked my socks off. I really enjoyed this collection. It's inventive, surprising, yet also deeply felt. That's a difficult combination with surrealism.

Some of my favorite moments:

“I did not fear them until I wanted to be afraid.”

“It is lonely in a place that can burn so fast.”

“he left me for a more beautiful robot.”

“Wheat the rubble collector out of old rage and oranges.”

“I am as among the cat's red tongue as I'll ever be.”

“Too much architecture, not enough rain..”

“In those days, I often felt in advance of feeling.”

Willow Redd says

This was required reading for one of my poetry classes in college. Not sure we ever actually used it in the class.

I find it hard to accurately review poetry. It is a visceral, emotional experience that is unique to the reader, so how can one properly put into words those emotional responses in any proper context to others?

One of the key components of good poetry is to spur the imagination, to inspire. And I can definitely say that

Sabrina Orah Mark inspires and spurs the imagination with this collection.

Etan says

I've never read a book and not been biased. Have you? Of course I'm biased.

Sabrina Orah Mark's marvelous -- and I mean marvelous in both sense of the word -- collection of prose poems in a masterful assimilation of historical specifics into the childlike consciousness of an infinite presence. Rarely do we encounter poems that are so precisely framed, though on their surface seemingly whimsical and erratic. These poems are gorgeous, intelligent, and disturbing. They are owned by the imagination that created them and the history that created her.

Ok, I didn't write that, but it's good, right?

There's a reason that a particularly well-constructed piece of writing is referred to as "poetry." So, this is the greatest book of poetry of all time.

Twila Newey says

I read a piece off Ms. Mark's blog that floored me. Here's the link. <https://www.sabrinaorahmark.com/news/> I highly recommend this. So I immediately ordered both of her books of poetry, sight unseen. Sadly, I found her poems less satisfying, more dizzying. Interesting and skilled, certainly, but not my cup of tea as poetry goes. However, it looks like she writes broadly and I will be picking up more of her work because of that initial reaction to her blog post.

Todd says

A perfect example of someone who "makes" instead of "describes," Sabrina Mark's first collection (published by Saturnalia... it's a damn purty-lookin' book too) is probably my favorite book of prose poems EVAH. Weird, intriguing, mysteriously and lovely, seemingly able to work against itself and with itself, the mythology in Mark's book churns and rediscovers... a house with many doors.

Richard says

A wonderful book of prose poems. This is what I wrote on one of the pages in the book. I will make no claims that it is accurate, but it records part of my experience of the work: "Each perception contains every other possible perception and it's a matter of choosing what to connect to what, and all the implications of those choices are contained in each choice, and orchestrating all these choices is a consciousness that has been through a disorienting trauma...." That trauma is very much connected to the Shoah, though the Shoah is not mentioned specifically by name, as far as I remember, which makes the book that much more powerful.

Richard says

this book is fascinating. A brilliant imagination, brilliant music. I haven't read anything like it before.

Gary McDowell says

Getting ready to teach this.

Katelin Rice says

Beautiful collection of prose poems!

Pete says

"The experiments lasted through the winter" forever. Two separate people told me to read this inside of a week which doesn't happen that often so I took it as a sign from the universe. These poems operate in their own logic -- book is decidedly experimental, not concerned with the traditional kind of sense, yet still manages to be about something. I confess I didn't get the holocaust subtext for a while (the babies are all the babies never born to the six million dead) and there were places where that conceit wanders off for stretches of time. Definitely one of those books that sticks w you even if you wondered if you liked it while reading.

Juliet says

Odd, evocative, unsettling and strangely sensual.

Lauren says

I started this book last year, and for whatever reason, just couldn't get into it. i wasn't in the right mindset or mood to receive the poetry. but this time around, something clicked and i feel it's one of the most exciting books of poetry i've read in awhile. you might be thinking, jesus lauren, you say that for every book of poetry you read. but this one is worth your time, i swear. it's creepy, delicate, surprising, full of terror and tenderness. I have a feeling that if i had been in workshop with the author i would have resented her for how weird and random her poetry seems on the surface. but i would have been wrong.
