



Mysteries of Small Houses

Alice Notley

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Alice Notley vividly reconstructs the mysteries, longings, and emotions of her past in this brilliant new collection of poems that charts her growth from young girl to young woman to accomplished artist. In this volume, memories of her childhood in the California desert spring to life through evocative renderings of the American landscape, circa 1950. Likewise, her coming of age as a poet in the turbulent sixties is evoked through the era's angry, creative energy. As she looks backward with the perspective that time and age allows, Notley ably captures the immediacy of youth's passion while offering her own dry-eyed interpretations of the events of a life lived close to the bone. Like the colorful collages she assembles from paper and other found materials, Notley erects structures of image and feeling to house the memories that swirl around her in the present. In their feverish, intelligent renderings of moments both precise and ephemeral, Notley's poems manage to mirror and transcend the times they evoke. Her profound tributes to the stages of her life and to the identities she has assumed—child, youth, lover, poet, wife, mother, friend, and widow—are remarkable for their insight and wisdom, and for the courage of their unblinking gaze.

Mysteries of Small Houses Details

Date : Published June 1st 1998 by Penguin Books (first published May 1st 1998)

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Author : Alice Notley

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From Reader Review **Mysteries of Small Houses** for online ebook

e says

A good sampling of her work. Combining sophistication and childhood awkwardness with stark, haunting imagery, these poems are as mysterious as they are beautiful. You feel different after reading each one, like you know a secret only you and the pages share.

Milo says

(3.5)

"Bad I've been bad in this house
I've allowed burning inside me; I
remember my ancient dream,
in which a woman tells me,
'Your house only burns *inside*; it's
still standing...'"

- from "Not Child"

*

"this isn't nice of you I'm never
nice now
can't figure out how to be that if
I must
kill this man over and over in
order to
exist"
- from "The Tyrant"

Isabella Aidar says

Alice Notley's *Mysteries of Small Houses* reads to me as a poetic and self-reflective diary of Notley's life from childhood to moving around the USA to her marriage to Ted and his death. The book moves chronologically (although on a very surreally-conveyed journey) all the way to her current life in Paris. Her poetry can be hard to follow at times, a challenge which I don't mind, as it is highly personal, uniquely philosophical, and abstract. However, to me it is abstract in a way that a well-crafted piece of visual art can be successfully abstract, and not in a way that implies lazy crafting or vagueness.

A lot of her poems defy conventional form by avoiding the use of punctuation such as commas and periods. This causes sentences to read chaotic, run-on, and builds momentum and energy, especially when there is no line break and the only indicator of a new sentence is a capitalized letter or sometimes nothing at all. It also reminds me of stream-of-consciousness and how often when we think in our heads, there is no proper punctuation happening. It's often fleeting thought after another either linked together in one long sentence, or merged fragments. The most unique way I thought she defied form was through broken sentences:

"I came here so that the

I came to be equal in surprise to

I came empty-handed before being dried.” (Remember What I Came Here to Do to This World Very Little Actually, 133).

This is a poem conveyed in fragments, once again paralleling a very overactive, thought-processing mind which I think we all get some times. Even the title of the poem is chaotic.

Another way in which Notley feeds stream-of-consciousness, surreal journal-entry writing is through the recollection of her dreams:

“...a huge gray owl rises up
masses of feathers and intricacy, yellow eyes; behind him
a cartoon woman falls from a lodge.” (Owls, 104)

I love this because it captures the disjointed, obscure nature of dreams and odd series of events. Why try to convey dreams in any other way than exactly how they happen? Very interesting, real, and effective writing technique.

I feel like Notley could coin a lot of these forms as ‘official’ under some experimental sub-genre of stream-of-consciousness writing. I love the idea of transcribing the mind and our thoughts in their raw form, in a way that harmonizes with thoughtful editing and craft techniques.

At times Notley dissects the ironies, culture, and craft elements in the art of poetry itself, which I find interesting. It especially caught my attention when Notley would then parallel, mirror, or contrast the art of poetry to herself. I find this powerful because in my perspective if one is deeply entwined with their poetry as most devoted artists are with their craft, the process of creating their art is also a journey of self-discovery and truly slipping into their own skin. Here’s an example:

“So glad I don’t have to write
in the styles of the poetries I was taught
they were beautiful and unlike me
positing a formal, stylized woman.” (Experiences, p.20)

She also parallels the effects of poetry to the relationships in her life. In the poem April Not an Inventory but a Blizzard, Notley writes about when she first met Ted. She says “I liked the way his poems looked on a page open but delicately arranged.” (30).

The language in her poetry is raw and real; it doesn’t try to lie, fit in, or be pretty therefore it winds up naturally beautiful, honest and impactful:

“I must leave the lot of flowers
to find a purple female cunt-lipped tree” (Flowers, 81)

She mentions “cunt” quite a lot throughout this book, which ties beautifully with the theme of unconventional femininity that she subtly addresses throughout the unfolding of her life story.

I could go on forever about this book. The subtle motifs of different-coloured sequins, articles of clothing, and crystals appearing throughout the work. The Egyptian theme and her use of recurring colours such as gold. It is honestly such a rich piece of work conveyed in mostly simple, honest language. The writing may appear random and chaotic but it is actually quite deep, calculated and laden with symbolism. Such an inspiring technique. How clever Notley is. It almost seems as if she effortlessly wrote this (and maybe she did!).

I try to avoid writing about dreams because of their surreal, fragmented nature and being unaware of how to weave them into a grounded narrative. After seeing Notley’s craft I’m quite inspired and humbled that sometimes the best way to convey something is the simple “tell-it-like-it-is” method, as opposed to trying to look for some craft technique that will likely shift the tone of the dream and it’s abstract nature into something far too real and tangible. I’m also inspired to play with creative and thoughtful stream-of-consciousness writing techniques at some point in my life when I’m more established, but at this stage where I’m trying to get published in literary journals, I might dodge trying to do anything too crazy.

Renee says

This is the first book that I read by Alice Notley. My poetry teacher introduced it to my class when I was a sophomore in the Residential College at UofM. Less than a year after I read it I went to study abroad in Munich, which wasn't completely because of the book (my German teachers also had a lot to do with it), but I think the book helped to influence my decision. There is a poem in the book called "1979 A Dream" in which she writes:

We saints have a score of music

and as we sing some are "translated," that is

disappear, a girl evaporates, into a plane of

some spiritual existence, of which I'm almost

terrified because the lack of self there must be total

Those lines stuck with me and made me feel as though I had to take more control of my life, assert myself more, so that I wouldn't get "translated," so that I would have more of a self, be more of an individual. There are poems in the book written from Paris, where Alice moved in the 90's, and the fact that she, an American woman poet, moved to a whole different country, inspired me and made me curious about alternate ways of living, alternate trajectories for me as a young woman.

I knew that I didn't want to live the life that was prescribed for me by tradition or the media so I thought if I went to study abroad it would put me on a new path, my own path. It just occurred to me that being on a new path is probably why I've had to struggle so much, but I don't regret my struggles; they've led me to lots of things that I never would have encountered otherwise: friends, teachers, ideas, experiences...

Mysteries of Small Houses has traveled with me almost everywhere I've gone since 1998. It went with me to Munich and back to Ann Arbor, to Boulder, to Lake Huron, to Detroit, to New York, to the Poconos, to Maine, to Mexico, to Stratford, Ontario and back to PA. Alice Notley was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize because of this book. The forms of the poems are mostly traditional, unbroken left-aligned columns down the page, but there is a lot of prosody; the poems sound like prose that has rhythm, music. I'm about to begin a critical thesis on the poetry of Alice Notley for my MFA and I could say a lot more, but I think I'll stop here for now.

Rachel says

This was a library book and I did not have time to finish it all. Will return to it later at some point.

Caitlin says

notley is obviously gifted and this book is occasionally beautiful, but I couldn't finish it. too much navel gazing, too much speculation about the identity and construction of the self blah blah blah. very 1990's. even

the teacher who assigned this said that such questions are beginning to seem dated and trivial in a world where people are more likely to be wondering how they are going to afford feeding themselves.

Tracy says

I do not want to return this to the library. I am risking fines.

As usual, Notley made me gasp and grab my heart. This book is full of grief and humanity.

"The night's full of people who are like us, but not
in their words for what happens: I feel closer to them than
to most poets but I can't live without our words."

(58)

C.A. says

There is a recording of Notley reading THE AMAZING poem "C-81" from this book here:

<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/> It's hard to choose a FAVORITE Notley book, but this is without a doubt one of my favorites by her! You may also want to read an interview I did with her where I ask her a series of questions about writing these poems: http://phillysound.blogspot.com/2007_01_01_archive.html EVERYONE should own this book!

Timothy Green says

Molly Peacock recommended this, and I just couldn't get into it. Stylistically interesting, but why am I supposed to care about your stereotypical adolescent experiences? It's like reading *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* without a main character. So many people love it, though. I must be missing something...

Kim says

Notley's a poet who's unwilling to honor parameters, be they stylistic or social, so her work is, in many ways, a testament to the difficulty of this refusal.

This collection, in particular, addresses the problem: how to construct a notion of self (cohesive or otherwise, on paper or otherwise). In Mysteries, Notley examines moments/phenomena/time from her childhood up to the present in an attempt to understand (the thing referred to as) her life. It would be overly simplistic to refer to this collection as an autobiography in verse (as it refuses to presume that anything is known, has occurred, or is factual), but anyone interested in her marriage to Ted Berrigan will gain a good deal of insight into the nature of their relationship. Notley uses this relationship as a means of asserting her position as a valid (feminist) poet in her own right, albeit one who is constantly frustrated by her unwillingness to write the way people want or to be the woman people think she ought to be.

The result then, is something that's not for everyone, and rightly so. This is poetry that carries a thinly veiled "fuck you" every turn it takes. It refuses to be either perfect or congenial. It moves through the space it could inhabit and beyond to something else, a space that isn't ignorant of aesthetics yet rejects them.

The sections about Ted's death are especially beautiful. Even if this isn't your usual thing, she should be read as an example of a dissenting voice in the poetic canon with high ambition and great brilliance. If nothing else, she's brave as hell.

Helen says

Sometimes being well read is a curse. You begin to see certain tropes repeated over and over again. Women poets write about family. Parents, husbands, children and lovers. Gaining them. Losing them. Feeling ambivalent about them.

Had I read this book ten years ago, I'd probably have given it four or maybe even five stars. As it is I'm beginning to wonder what is wrong with we women poets, we band of sisters, that we can't escape our relationships and write something new.

These are good poems. They're just not great.

Abby says

These poems hold the reader at bay, but not simply for the sake of doing so. As she struggles to render memories and self in words, Notley also struggles against language imposing order on experience. When describes the poems as collages, what is most interesting about the comparison (to me) is the idea of words as found material, refitted to a creative use. Somehow through her poetry Notley is able to remind us that experience is not fundamentally linguistic, but that we construct meaning using words and experience after the fact.

Frank says

I know there is an audience for this book, but I am not part of it. It was too rambling, shallow—Ted" accuses her of "having no philosophy" in *The Trouble With You Girls*, and rightly so—and self-centered to hold any depth of emotion or reveal something of the human condition. When you're ranting constantly about wanting to BE a poet, you stop introspecting and revealing all that is poetic about you.

Sean says

"Disobedience especially to my audience..."

Alexandra Naughton says

I really liked Alice Notley's poetry until I heard her read in San Francisco. She kinda killed it for me.
