



## Our Andromeda

*Brenda Shaughnessy*

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**Honored as a *New York Times Book Review* "100 Notable Books of 2013"**

**Honored by *Cosmopolitan* as the *one* poetry title on their list of "Best Books of the Year For Women, by Women"**

"A heady, infectious celebration."—*The New Yorker*

"Shaughnessy's voice is smart, sexy, self-aware, hip . . . consistently wry, and ever savvy."—*Harvard Review*

Brenda Shaughnessy's heartrending third collection explores dark subjects—trauma, childbirth, loss of faith—and stark questions: What is the use of pain and grief? Is there another dimension in which our suffering might be transformed? Can we change ourselves? Yearning for new gods, new worlds, and new rules, she imagines a parallel existence in the galaxy of Andromeda.

## Rave reviews for *Our Andromeda*

"Love is the fierce engine of this beautiful and necessary book of poems. Love is the high stakes, the whip of its power and grief and possibility for repair. Brenda Shaughnessy has brought her full self to bear in *Our Andromeda*, and the result is a book that should be read now because it is a collection whose song will endure." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"It is a monumental work, and makes a hash of those tired superlatives that will no doubt crop up in subsequent reviews. But the truth is that I have no single opinion about this collection—how could I? The book is a series of narratives that resist interpretation but not feeling—except that I am certain it further establishes Shaughnessy's particular genius, which is utterly poetic, but essayistic in scope, encompassing ideas about astronomy, illness, bodies, the family, 'normalcy,' home." —*The New Yorker*

"Another Brooklyn poet, Marianne Moore, defined poetry as 'imaginary gardens, with real toads in them.' In *Our Andromeda*, Shaughnessy has imagined a universe, and in it, real love moves, quick with life." —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Brenda Shaughnessy...laments and sometimes makes narratives about the struggle to keep her small family together in the aftermath of a difficult birth. In the title poem, she posits a galaxy far, far away where familial love might overtake all woe and turmoil of the heart and body and mind. Once there, she says to her son, 'you'll have the babyhood you deserved.' She also delivers a number of lovely lyrics in a supple, plainly stated line; some merely expressive, some with a philosophically questioning air; on fate, dreams, the present time's long gaze back at the past — you know, all the good things poets write about."— Alan Cheuse, on NPR's list "5 Books of Poems to Get You Through the Summer"

"Brenda Shaughnessy's work is a good place to start for any passionate woman feeling daunted by poetry. This book explores love and motherhood and the turbulent terrain of grief."—*Cosmopolitan*

"Shaughnessy articulates, with force and clarity, the transformation that motherhood has required of her. Her poems are full of regret and ferocity."—*Boston Review*

"Brenda Shaughnessy explores the possibilities of a second chance in life and what could come of it. Enticing and thoughtful, *Our Andromeda* is a fine addition to contemporary poetry shelves." —*The Midwest Book Review*

**Brenda Shaughnessy** was born in Okinawa, Japan and grew up in Southern California. She is the author of *Human Dark with Sugar* (Copper Canyon Press, 2008), winner of the James Laughlin Award and finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Interior with Sudden Joy* (FSG, 1999). Shaughnessy's poems have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *The Rumpus*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Paris Review*. She is an Assistant Professor of English at Rutgers University, Newark, and lives in Brooklyn with her husband, son and daughter.

## Our Andromeda Details

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## From Reader Review Our Andromeda for online ebook

### **Lily says**

I'm torn between 4 and 5 stars on this one. There were some poems, particularly closer to the beginning, that seemed damn near perfect in tone, language, sound and meaning. Those alone seem worth 5 stars. I struggled with the latter half of the book though. Some of these intensely personal poems failed to grab me in, say, the way Jack Gilbert's work does. The long poem, "Our Andromeda," I wanted to love. It's heartbreaking in its opening, but what seemed an attempt to sustain that level of intensity for pages and pages ultimately didn't work for me. I felt exhausted at the end, and it seemed the language also ran out of steam as well. Still a book that I would return to for those gorgeous poems at the beginning though.

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### **D.A. says**

This third collection of Shaughnessy's is as sure and sharp as an archer's eye, and it finds its targets. The mystery of love; the bravery of living; the hard-won wisdom that comes from experience. These poems feel deeply inhabited, soul-making, celebratory.

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### **SmarterLilac says**

Good, but I sometimes felt that even these excellent poems could have gone a little deeper. What I like about this book, though, is that even the pieces that appear to have common, everyday subjects, like "Magi," have dark and sharp edges that leave one surprised without succumbing to gore or cheap thrills. Her thoughts about parenting in poems like "Hearth" remind me of Sharon Olds.

I hope this poet becomes more famous.

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### **Maxwell says**

Shaughnessy plays wonderful with sound. Her poems beg to be read out loud. She conveys very specific ideas and images in a punchy way, making you wonder how you never thought of that before. She writes from a mother's perspective in this collection, and the title poem, over 20 pages long, is gripping, emotional, and beautiful.

Particular favorites include: "Streetlamps," "To My Twenty-Three-Year-Old Self," "To My Twenty-Four-Year-Old Self," "To My Twenty-Five-Year-Old Self," and "To My Twenty-Eight-Year-Old Self," and "Hearth."

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### **Grace says**

Our *Andromeda* was surprising and WONDERFUL. It is a poetry collection that envisions a parallel existence of each of us in the *Andromeda* galaxy, somehow free of our Earthly prejudices and fears. The writing is beautiful. In particular, the last long piece about Shaughnessy's son is heart-rending and really clear and sharp about her experiences with him. It's a wonderful collection, highly recommend.

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### **James Murphy says**

Brenda Shaughnessy writes love poetry, I think. Not romantic love poetry, exactly. The long poem "Our *Andromeda*" which closes this volume and which lovingly imagines an alternate world where her son, Cal, who is seemingly disabled in some way and fragile, is heartbreakingly about a mother's love for her son. But Shaughnessy is in love with the world around her, too. Her poetry, while it recognizes the warts of the world, generously welcomes whatever she comes into contact with. She acknowledges there may be shadows, even in herself, but bravely whistles her way into endurance and coping. In one poem she writes of "the shock and the godlessness / and the rictus of crushed flesh," closing on her as a dark hole but knows she'll get through it. She sees life as lit by street lamps, as in her poem by that title. Light peppers the darkness until the real light of life's sunny side comes again, when the rooster always crows.

The crowning achievement here, though, is the poem she wrote to Cal promising him there's an *Andromeda* where he'll live the life she wants for him, unfettered by the too delicate, the ordeal, where caregivers know what they need to know and insurance companies never use the word claim. We know Shaughnessy can give Cal such a world because her language has not only the muscle to protect but the ability to articulate mercy, broadcast inspiration like seeds, and fill the world with love. "We've only just arrived here," she writes, "rightly, whirling and weeping, / freely, breathing, brightly born." She means it.

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### **Deborah Markus says**

A poem's job is to be beautiful.

A poem's job is not just to teach, but to make a reader eager to show up for class every day.

A poem's truth should be at once stunningly obvious and blindingly original.

A poem should make us happy to slow down and savor in a world of fast-food writing.

Reading a poem should only be work in the sense that some people are lucky enough to have jobs they love so much they'd do them for free.

Reading a poem should be the kind of workout that makes you feel shaky but strong afterward, as triumphant as if you'd discovered new muscles in your own body.

I looked for *Our Andromeda* at the library because I stumbled across one poem from it, fell in love, and needed to see if this was the real thing or just a one-night stand.

Definitely the real thing.

Liking poems or poets doesn't imply a moral imperative to adore every poem in the world, or even every poem by a poet you love. Some of the poems in this collection don't work for me. "Card 0: The Fool," for instance – inspired by the Tarot card. It seemed too flippant, bawdy and grotesque for the sake of it.

Other poems in the Tarot series aren't bad, but seem like missed opportunities, such as "Card 20: Judgment," which I present here in its entirety:

*What did the stand of pines say  
to the herd of elephants  
wearing swimsuits  
and carrying large suitcases?*

"Nice trunks!"

Cute, but – why? Why this response to this card? (If you're not familiar with it, an angel blows a horn; below him, human figures rise from their graves, naked, arms raised in adoration.) Why this flippancy in the face of the end of excuse-making and the beginning of eternity?

So there are these few unsatisfying ventures. And then there's the whole rest of the book, which hits it out of the park when it comes to the criterion listed above.

Here's the end of "Vanity":

*Like murders in books, but with reverse  
precision, how anyone becomes herself  
is a mystery. A miracle. A myth.*

And here's a particularly wonderful passage from "My Water Children":

*Often, as a child, when I did  
something wrong and got away  
with it, I thought a ghost  
  
or spirit or a kind of assistant  
god (not the Real God, who was  
  
too busy for the souls of children  
and it turns out that is true)  
  
would bleed through to me  
from the skin of the other world,  
  
cut by my misdeed or sin,  
and catch me.*

And, of course, there's the poem I went in search of in the first place, "I Wish I Had More Sisters." I'd like to include the whole thing, but I might break Goodreads. So here's just a bunch of it, including the beginning and the very end:

*I wish I had more sisters,  
enough to fight with and still  
have plenty more to confess to,  
embellishing the fight so that I  
look like I'm right and then turn  
all my sisters, one by one, against  
my sister. One sister will be so bad  
the rest of us will have a purpose  
in bringing her back to where  
it's good (with us) and we'll feel  
useful, and she will feel loved.*

*Then another sister  
will have a tragedy, and again,  
we will unite in our grief, judging  
her much less than we did the bad  
sister.*

...

*My sisters will seem like a bunch  
of alternate me, all the ways  
I could have gone. I could see  
how things pan out without  
having to do the things myself.*

...

*There would be both more and less  
of me to have to bear. None of us  
would be forced to be stronger  
than we could be. Each of us could  
be all of us. The pretty one.  
The smart one. The bitter one.  
The unaccountably-happy-  
for-no-reason one. I could be,  
for example, the hopeless  
one, and the next day my sister  
would take my place, and I would  
hold her up until my arms gave way  
and another sister would relieve me.*

Which brings me to the last job poetry should perform:

Reading a poem should leave even a non-writer feeling that she could write a poem; that she *should* write a poem; that poetry is *not* the domain of the precious; that life and poetry are really just thirst and water.

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## Christy says

I read this book of poetry collection again today, on Mother's Day. As a rendering of motherhood, it is so primal and inventive and pissy: "I know I am his mother, but I can't/ quite click on the word's essential aspects,/ can't denude the flora/ or disrobe the kind of housecoat/ "mother" always is. Something/ cunty, something used."

Shaughnessy loves words, their liquidity, playfulness, doubling, but she also mistrusts their naming of things. The book is best when she is pressing on that mistrust and doubleness, the fear that she herself has inhabited a word like "mother" without really understanding what it means, without being able to control its meaning. In that way, the book becomes a philosophical exploration of language as a way of knowing and not knowing and learning about the self. At times, she is "artless," as she says in the opening of the book; at other times, she is full of the power of art, she creates a new world, a new universe, where she and her injured son can live, and things can make sense.

There are poems where her strongest impulse seems to fade or go underground. At times, the poems become just ways to defend with language, not to create with it: "Outfoxed," I thought, was one of these. But overall, the book is gorgeous and sharp at the same time, compressed by the difficulty of loving, of taking on responsibility for others, of exploring boundaries that keep disappearing.

What is the point of other people,  
being so separate, if we can't  
help a person get that pain

will stick its shiv into anything,  
just to get rid of the weapon  
and because it can? For if we share

ourselves then they, too, must  
also be in so much pain.  
I can hear it. Oh, my loves.

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## Abby says

Most of these poems just didn't make it through my thick skull. The language is playful and energetic, but I'm not super in touch with my emotions—I don't trust them, really—so all of this emotional flailing made me take a few mental steps back. In language, I value clarity over style. On those poems where she achieves both (i.e. the title poem "Our Andromeda"), I was with her all the way. But there weren't quite enough of those to make me want to read more.

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## Candace Morris says

I stumbled into the poetry of Shaughnessy via Cheryl Strayed's FB page, who recommended it. I gave my daughter the middle name 'Andromeda' so I am always interested when I see it chosen as a name for something else. I wasn't prepared for the heart-break and beauty of her poetry, especially the title poem.

Though I hate to draw comparisons (namely because I hate it when people do that with my own writing), but I kept vibing Plath in her poems, seeing the flatness of blunt thoughts which are simultaneously pregnant with meaning - a meaning the reader is invited to read, but never given the key to fully understand.

I was impressed.

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### **Bill Tarlin says**

There are lots of great poems in this book. Shaughnessy's signature internal rhymes and personifications are engaging. Like most collections the poems that are just "OK" are disappointing because I want to be wowed every time. But enough deliver to make this highly recommended.

What makes the book essential is the long title poem that concludes the book. It is witty, painful, angry and exultant; sometimes all at once. Our Andromeda is a cry for escape to another galaxy where the stupid fact of human frailty and pain are not eliminated but ameliorated by compassion, sympathy and dignity. Its a teary indictment of the way we run from the misfortunes of others and it pulls few punches.

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### **Sophie says**

Fierce collection. Lucid and gripping.

"That loud hub of us,/ meat stub of us, beating us/ senseless."

"There are always places, none of them mine."

"Feelings seem like made-up things,/ though I know they're not."

"year after ancient,/ ridiculous year."

"That's what you get for believing in aliens,/ for replacing our earhorn of plenty/ with a megaphone of corpsedust."

"this world/ butted up against the next."

"Whatever meaning the word itself/ is covering, like underwear,/ that meaning is so mere and meager/ this morning."

"I have the breasts, godawful, and he/ the lungs and we share the despair."

"the awful softness."

"How terrifying it is to try trying!"

"I'm told a kind of eerie light/ flicks on when mind becomes itself./ Like when a book is opened,/ and read, or just falls off the shelf."

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"You'd think a square was an ungodly/ fluke, an aberration, not the life force/ behind writing tables and scaffolding."

"What other way, but to/ forget, is there to endure/ the day, the street?"

"I put/ everything in the fire/ because it was too confusing."

"My life wold be like one finger/ on a hand, a beautiful, usable, ringed,/ wrung, piano-and-dishpan hand."

"Blue fingertips. Could mean a beach-party/ manicure or a corpse. Or: and a corpse./ To be touched intimately by blue fingertips./ To put it more bluntly: to be fingered/ by the pool in which you drown."

"Though I am well,/ and deep, and fall asleep well,/ I am not the wisher that I am."

"These wishes: baby,/ body, poem. Or body, hobby,/ bone."

"But no. I'm selfsame:/ a wordsmith wearing too much paint,/ my inking irons heavy in the rain."

"Like murders in books, but with reverse/ precision, how anyone becomes herself/ is a mystery. A miracle. A myth."

"You'd pass me on the street/ as well, a "normal,"/ Someone who traded/ in her essentials for/ a look of haunted/ responsibility."

"Wearing a jacket of blood/ from an earlier crime,/ which was also mine."

"Rage that those/ who are so fearful of my pain are the ones/ who will be most spared it in their own lives."

"She could be right/ and the driver wrong and her kid dead./ Two out of three is what happened instead."

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### **Amy Eller Lewis says**

I don't read a lot of poetry, and not contemporary poetry at all. Perhaps I had my fill at workshops in my MFA program. I find so much of contemporary poetry to be just poems about how hard it is to make a poem. But these poems are About Things -- not just Abstract Things like "Love" or "Justice" or "Loss" (though they are about them too), but about Things That Happened. There is a SF-nal quality to them that I liked as well. Has happily put me on a poetry kick.

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## Nw23 says

I was introduced to Brenda Shaughnessy's *Interior with Sudden Joy* by my MFA mentor and I was immediately caught by her cleverness and inclination to blend philosophy with poetry. While I enjoyed some poems in that collection, I tended to shy away by the big words she used. Then, her next collection *Human Dark with Sugar* is more accessible yet witty and spicy at the same time. Her *Our Andromeda* gives me mixed feelings and I think I should give an overall 3.5 stars to this book. My favorite section of the book is the first one called "Liquid Flesh". It contains lyrical poems which demonstrate the excellent sense of craft of the poet. Most of them are surprising in terms of diction and syntax, which suits my taste. The book starts with "Artless" and one cannot not be impressed by the sound play and the poet's intention to end each stanza with a word that has a suffix '-less': "Artless// is my heart. A stranger/ berry there never was,/ tartless// Gone sour in the sun, in the sunroom or moonroof,/ roofless."

"Liquid Flesh" is also a memorable longer piece of work, in which the speaker (a mother) wonders why her newly-born son becomes her priority of her existence. The tone departs from the conventional representation of nurturing maternity and perceives the new baby with a fresh perspective: "... He howls and claws/ like a wrongly minor red wolf/ who doesn't know his mother." "... It's so obnoxious/ of me: I was an egg// who had an egg/ and now I'm chicken,/ as usual scooping up// both possibilities,/ or what I used to call/ possibilities. I used// to be this way, so ontologically/ greedy, wanting to be it all. Serves me right." "I was here way, way first/ I have the breasts, godawful, and he/ the lungs and we share the despair."

The poems in the second section "Double Life" could not wow me as the first. The poems in this section concern doubleness in existence and the strongest piece, I believe, should be "Why Should Only Cheaters and Liars Get Double Lives", which is a poem within a poem. The cleverness of the lines plays with the form of the work.

The section I have long waited for is actually the third one called "Arcana", which contains poems written based on tarot cards. I know it sounds gimmicky and what I was hoping to read is how the poet can twist this new age belief with her wit and craft. However, I have to say I am disappointed. Most of the poems are light and I feel that they are there just to make the section long enough to be a section of a bigger project. My favorites here include "Card 5: Hierophant", "Card 12: The Hanged Man", "Card 17: The Star"

The book ends with a longer section that deals with the pain of the poet to her son that is no longer with her. The sections of this long poem are mainly confessional and some lines are rather flat. It's the poet's anger, despair and doubt that sustain the lines and push the poems forward. Some parts are overtly obvious and the emotions are spilling out.

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## mel burkeet says

A lovely book, rich in style. One of the major themes (parenting) I find to be less powerful than the word play, rhyme, and sonic edge found in so many poems.

Some favorite lines:

-A book that took too long to read but minutes to unread--that is--to forget.

-An idea like a stormcloud that does not spill / or arrive but moves silently in a direction. / Like a dark book in a long life with a vague / hope in a wood house with an open door.

-The books on the bookshelves are touching themselves / like virgins. But I've had them.

-O that roaring, not yet and yet / and not yet dead. // So many fires start in my head.

-It seems unlikely that so much literature / could be made from twenty-six letters.

-We're the deep, hot gleam in your wet, cold holes.

-The leaves, little green lamps for the sunblind.

-Super-polished on the very top / of the world's biggest root.

-But no. I'm self-same: / a wordsmith wearing too much paint, / my inking irons heavy in the rain.

-Like murders in books, but with reverse / precision, how anyone becomes herself / is a mystery. A miracle. A myth.

-This finitude is infinite and infinitely expanding.

-The floating red hand / that means don't walk looks / like a heart.

-You were hardly alive, hardly you, / horribly slim-chanced. I blacked out / hard but I heard you were blue.

-But then, "beginning" begins with "beg."

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