



PROJECT MUSE®

Messiahs by Marc Anthony Richardson (review)

Kimberly Wainscoat

American Book Review, Volume 44, Number 1, Spring 2023, pp. 110-112
(Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/902836>

🔗 For content related to this article

https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=article&id=902836

MESSIAHS

Marc Anthony Richardson

Fiction Collective 2

<https://www.fc2.org/authors/richardson/#messiahs>

158 pages; Print, \$17.95

Kimberly Wainscoat

Messiahs seems to take place in our dreams. It's a macabre love story set in a wintry forest and on death row, somewhere between reality and a frightening dystopian society. The characters are nameless archetypes, known as the Black man and the Asian woman, and it revolves around an archetypal opposition: justice versus prejudice, predictably personified by the wrongfully imprisoned. The Black man is hopelessly jailed for a crime he did not commit, and the Asian woman is about to follow in his footsteps, and as such, she seduces him to better understand his predicament. It is a painfully told tale, fearless in its storytelling, in that it marries austerity with a sensuousness depicting lust, aloneness, and betrayal. It is also the sexiest book of 2021.

The radical nature of the book is its shifting narrative, which meanders through minds, prisons, letters, and storms, fiercely navigating a society that is unnervingly similar to our own. It is as quiet and dramatic as silent cinema. In this world, an innocent person, usually a woman, can legally take the place of a convicted felon on death row. It is called a "proxy." Not unlike the United States, where innocent people die legally in an astonishingly cruel prison system that never fails to disgust anyone burdened by a conscience.

The two protagonists find each other through the proxy law. "She had heard of him through a film that featured him and others like him as part of a publicity campaign, which was possibly keeping him alive because of the public outcry, for a stay of execution had been given."

The story opens on death row. The Black man witnesses a devastating act of passion and depravity as two male inmates on either side of his cell castrate themselves in an act of desperation, and that bleeds into a scene with the Asian woman, "Yes, she knows why he's thinking about this . . . the quail eggs at supper, the white plate, the spilled wine upon them." In many ways, *Messiahs* feels eerily similar to *The Handmaid's Tale*, swapping out oppressed fertile

young women for oppressed, scapegoated people, forcing them to sacrifice their lives for those unworthy of the sacrifice, and their ensuing tragedies.

The Asian woman, navigating her own difficulties, is urged by her mother to sacrifice her own life for that of her brother, a murderer who is nonetheless their mother's golden child. As she considers surrendering her life for this unworthy brother, she reaches out to the Black man on death row who has proxied himself for a young nephew. We later learn of the tragedy she has suffered and which propels her forward into the abyss: "The woman imagined her mother making her absence about something else *other* than the disownment, imagined her saying in silence that my daughter who used to be my daughter does not want to submit to the genius of her brother, who has two daughters and a wife who can still produce a son, and *keep* him, unlike my daughter—who's not fit to have another one." The reader should take note that the narrative in *Messiahs* can often feel like a poetic riddle; it is not an easy read.

Before the two become lovers, they communicate through letters, where "in his cell, in the shadow of a doubt, he would wonder if she was writing to him to learn what it was like for him, in order to learn what it *could* be like for herself."

After his surprise release, the pair find themselves hunkered down in a snowy, remote landscape where a vast wilderness envelops their secluded cabin and a mysterious interiority divides them. They weave together moments that feel cold and brittle yet are filled with astonishingly intimate lovemaking and passion. Still, her mother's presence haunts her. "She wanted their time together to be free of any feelings of uncertainty, but after that mid-December phone call from their benefactor, hers and his, she is now left with the possibility that her promise might have to be kept, and much sooner than later."

In many parts of the book, there isn't a period in sight; there are no stops, no breaks; you're at the mercy of an author who takes risks and takes hold of you and doesn't let go. It is like a wild plunge down an undammed river: sometimes there are peaceful, calm eddies, but rarely; the fever dream barely releases its grip through the rapids until you close the last page, and even then you dream of it for days.

The cold hurts, and the peaceful blue sky has deserted the landscape, replaced by placid, heavy clouds. Silence, except for the sounds of torturous

thoughts and lovemaking, fills the void like a quiet European film with little dialogue. You feel your way through this book. While the world freezes, the couple immerses in the ecstasy of lovemaking, the only pleasure within grasp, and therefore the richest and deepest pleasure. “I see a maze in you. A route. I see a labyrinthine route. It is circuitous and is sinking down into your flesh like a compression mold, my love, your body your whole body is covered by it, your forehead your face—my God, don’t you ever go! I love you.”

He is free. But her feelings of dread and secrets linger. The story does not disappoint. Because while women are both the heroes and the villains, they are also like the coywolves that howl in the woods. Mother dearest, in this story, finds her way into her daughter’s mind and turns the key, opening the door to an unexpected ending. “Mother, my warrant will be signed. But you can save me. You can save me from myself. For though I cannot imagine you will save me, your daughter, I still must imagine it.”

KIMBERLY WAINSCOAT is a freelance writer and former food journalist in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Mills College in Oakland, California.

THE PISSERS’ THEATRE

Eckhard Gerdes

Black Scat Books

<https://blackscatbooks.com/our-books/>

112 pages; Print, \$12.95

Lew Collins

I found myself during my second reading of *The Pissers’ Theatre*, Eckhard Gerdes’s latest and fifteenth novel, negotiating the inside and outside spaces his “story” inhabits, attempting to interpret what the rendering of theatrical space means—complete with journeys by theatregoers to the toilet blocks—to the play and play within the play.