



Incarnadine: Poems

Mary Szybist

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The troubadours

knew how to burn themselves through,

how to make themselves shrines to their own longing.

The spectacular was never behind them.

-from "The Troubadours etc."

In *Incarnadine*, Mary Szybist restlessly seeks out places where meaning might take on new color. One poem is presented as a diagrammed sentence. Another is an abecedarium made of lines of dialogue spoken by girls overheard while assembling a puzzle. Several poems arrive as a series of Annunciations, while others purport to give an update on Mary, who must finish the dishes before she will open herself to God. One poem appears on the page as spokes radiating from a wheel, or as a sunburst, or as the cycle around which all times and all tenses are alive in this moment. Szybist's formal innovations are matched by her musical lines, by her poetry's insistence on singing as a lure toward the unknowable. Inside these poems is a deep yearning—for love, motherhood, the will to see things as they are and to speak. Beautiful and inventive, *Incarnadine* is the new collection by one of America's most ambitious poets.

Incarnadine: Poems Details

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Author : Mary Szybist

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From Reader Review Incarnadine: Poems for online ebook

D.A. says

One of those books that invites endless re-reading, it is both contemporary and timeless in its vast reach.

Dain says

I never thought anyone would rival Mary Oliver - but Szybist's poems were equally beautiful and moving.

Andrew Crocker says

Quiet. The rhythm of these poems didn't take immediately. Szybist's subjects are different than what I would typically read and probably even contemporary poetry as a whole. Her point of focus would seem to be religion and at first glance is, with half of the collections titles starting with 'Annunciation' after *the Annunciation*, yet is never so obvious. Once the rhythm caught, around the second half of the book, I found myself going back to the first part to re-read those poems I took nothing away from to find more was there.

Her other subject is herself and her relationship to the world. She displays her influences in epigraphs and notes in the back, all of which are interesting and wide-ranging from Duchamp to medical journals to transcripts of G.W. Bush. I love where she comes from and how she writes, how she makes the reader stop and listen. Though there are times that she lost my attention. Then, there are at least 2 or 3 poems that arrested me. Where as I read I second-guessed her and was wrong and was so happy to be wrong and when I finished the poem the only thought I could think was, Fuck was that honest.

As a whole, the book could've used some cuts or re-working or more focus. It just didn't feel as complete as it could have and the consistency of the poems' quality was lacking. I was reminded of her first book when I finished it thinking, Her next book will be better. And this one *is* better and there are poems here that soar while others fall flat.

Aidan Owen says

A beautiful, creative, and sometimes jarring (in a good way) collection. The book is centered around poetic meditations of the Annunciation, all of them beautifully crafted. Some of these captivated me, others not so much. In general I preferred the non-Annunciation poems in the collection, many of which capture the sense of "nothing" at the heart of "everything." A very good read.

Brittany Picardi Ruiz says

The strength of *Incarnadine* as a collection is a result of the muscle of the individual poems. There is an almost dizzying array of forms collected here, each uniquely suited to the content of the poem. Some poems are fairly traditional, with mid-length lines. Other poems are prosaic, with lines stretching across the wide page. One particularly spectacular poem, "How (Not) to Speak of God," features eighteen lines arrayed in a starburst pattern with no beginning or ending. These varied forms give the impression that Szybist composes carefully, with an ear and an eye towards doing what is best for the poem.

Though *Incarnadine* is only Szybist's second collection, it's clear her poetic muscle is strong. As postmodern as some poems are, Szybist's subjects are universal and timeless. Through lyrical language and disquieting hybridity, these poems draw the reader in and force them to rethink what they thought they knew. Even if a third collection takes another decade, there is enough to unpack and experience in this book to last until then.

Harrison Gearn says

I'm giving her a four because she deserves it, not to indicate that I loved the book. She writes with extreme density and, simultaneously, light-heartedness. There's a texture to this book that isn't normally found in contemporary poems. She is unafraid of saying her piece. The religious thread that runs through the book is at once distrustful and accepting. Though she may or may not have found peace, the collection asks you to be at peace with the liminality of faith.

T.D. Whittle says

This is so beautiful, in so many ways. Szybist is a new favourite poet of mine, now that I have just finished both this book of poems and *Granted*, her first published collection. These are modern contemplative pieces that are well introduced by the two quotes Szybist has included at the beginning:

"The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation." — Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

"Repose had again incarnadined her cheeks." — Thomas Hardy, *Far From The Madding Crowd*

How apt those quotes are, since in the poems, Szybist draws our rapt attention to the intersection of flesh and spirit, and the inevitable constellation of feelings born there: hope, longing, fear, dread, the breathless fluttering of hearts — the particulars depend upon who is meeting whom, of course.

The icon she has chosen as her central motif, around which the poems are wrapped smoothly as ribbons around a May pole, is the Annunciation. (The Annunciation, in brief: The angel Gabriel appears to the Virgin Mary to announce to her that she has been blessed and favoured by God to bear Jesus, the Son of God, and

that this will happen through the intervention of the Holy Ghost. For the full text, see the Holy Bible, KJV, Gospel of Luke, 1:26-38.) The most beautiful and famous visual depiction of this scene is Botticelli's Annunciation, painted in 1608 and housed at the Uffizi, a reproduction of which graces the cover of this book.

Of course, in the Bible, Mary responds demurely and graciously to Gabriel's announcement, accepting her role as handmaiden to God. But Szybist wonders what a woman in such a position might really be thinking. What didn't she say? That book never got written. This deeply personal response to the ineffable and mysterious, which we encounter not only in the kingdom of Heaven but also here on Earth, is Szybist's realm of exploration, and it's a trip worth taking with her. It is helpful to have some supplies in your backpack, including knowledge or resources about art history (European, Christian, Middle Ages through Renaissance) and the Holy Bible (KJV). There are quite a few references to both.

Szybist's style is quiet (except when it's not) and subtle (mostly) and funny and tender and biting, and brimming with what I can only think to call a kind of perpetual yearning, but without clumsy pity or insincere remorse. She does not venture only into the religious mystical realm, but broadens her theme to include other encounters that fill us humans with equal parts awe and trepidation, wonder and terror, and always always longing to know more and to understand better.

I love The Lushness of It, which begins:

It's not that the octopus wouldn't love you —
not that it wouldn't reach for you
with each of its tapering arms.

You'd be as good as anyone, I think,
to an octopus ... (p. 64)

This poem is the last in the book. I was delighted to find myself arriving here, floundering in a wild sea and aching to be embraced by its tentacles, from such a lofty starting place, where Heaven and Earth overspill each other's bounds and angels ascend and descend with alarming regularity.

I cannot say which poems are my favourites, since I liked every poem in this collection. Anyone who reads poetry knows that this is rare. Also, like many other fine poets I read and enjoy, I am absolutely sure I missed some of the subtler and finer things she was saying. Never mind. I plan to reread and reread this one, so I will notice more as I spend more time with these poems.

Here's a brief quote from Knocking or Nothing, which is definitely a favourite (along with Here, There Are Blueberries), despite my not having favourites:

Knock me or nothing
ring in me, shrill-gorged and shrewish.

clicking their charms and their chains and their spouts.
Let them. Let the fans whirr.

All the similar virgins must have emptied
their flimsy pockets, and I

was empty enough,
sugared and stretched on the unmown lawn,

dumb as the frost-pink tongues
of the unpruned roses.

When you put your arms around me in that moment,
when you pulled me to you and leaned

back, when you lifted me
just a few inches, when you shook me

hard then, had you ever heard
such emptiness? ... (p. 62)

Zach says

“What I want is what I’ve always wanted. What I want is to be changed.”

This single, direct line feels like the most essential in the collection. It’s almost an echo, or an answer of sorts, to Mary Oliver’s famous question in *The Summer Day*:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

I was lucky enough to take a class with Mary Szybist when I was a student at Lewis & Clark College, so I appreciated having the chance now to read her own poems many years later. Incarnadine puts into context why she chose the poets for class that she did, and enriched my reading of these pieces.

Incarnadine is a mixed collection, anchored by the theme of the Annunciation, traversing a variety of forms and topics from high culture to pop culture. While some experimental forms worked better than others, I was floored in particular by the concrete poem *How (Not) to Speak of God*, its sun-shape on the page nearly glowing with the radiance of the language. (I was pleased to learn in the notes at the end of the book that this poem was actually painted onto the ceiling of the Pennsylvania College of Arts and Design.) I remember learning from Mary about concrete poetry and wondering who could ever possibly pull off one of these types of poems — it turns out, of course, that’s she’s skilled enough to do it!

Too Many Pigeons to Count and One Dove, also experimental in its own right, was another standout. The first half of the piece leads the reader along the minute-by-minute experience of watching birds. (Something I too love to do.) But there are all these slippages back into interiority, as the mind so often leads us, and the voice in the poem confesses, “Two flap / their wings without leaving their branches and / I am tired / of paying attention. The birds are all the same”. We then wander into thinking about a lover and wondering if it is even possible to access the feelings of the past, whether we can remake them, whether love is better at a distance or even possible from afar. What I admired about this piece was how true to life it feels — watching something, often out in the world or in natural places and finding yourself captivated with the magic of it, but then feeling the mind inevitably intrude and you find yourself drawing back into the ever-editing landscape

of your past lives. There's also, naturally, the constant desire to project our lives onto the natural world around us, which this poem works through too — the clustering, ceaselessly energetic pigeons never alighting anywhere for long, and the lone dove (a symbol, of course) being impossible to find in the swirl of all of the feathers.

Other exceptional poems, or ones I at least noted, were: *Here, There are Blueberries*, which you find is dedicated to her father at the end, and gestures towards the *enoughness* of the world; *To Gabriela at the Donkey Sanctuary*, an excellent prose poem and where that first line I quoted comes from; and *The Lushness of It*, a final poem about an octopus. (Just read it!)

C says

A perfect book.

"The Troubadours Etc."

Just for this evening, let's not mock them.
Not their curtsies or cross-garters
or ever-recurring pepper trees in their gardens
promising, promising.

At least they had ideas about love.

All day we've driven past cornfields, past cows poking their heads
through metal contraptions to eat.
We've followed West 84, and what else?
Irrigation sprinklers fly past us, huge wooden spools in the fields,
lounging sheep, telephone wires,
yellowing flowering shrubs.

Before us, above us, the clouds swell, layers of them,
the violet underneath of clouds.
Every idea I have is nostalgia. Look up:
there is the sky that passenger pigeons darkened and filled--
darkened for days, eclipsing sun, eclipsing all other sound
with the thunder of their wings.
After a while, it must have seemed that they followed
not instinct or pattern but only
one another.

When they stopped, Audubon observed,
they broke the limbs of stout trees by the weight of their numbers.

And when we stop we'll follow--what?
Our hearts?

The Puritans thought that we are granted the ability to love
only through miracle,
but the troubadours knew how to burn themselves through,
how to make themselves shrines to their own longing.
The spectacular was never behind them.

Think of days of those scarlet-breasted, blue-winged birds above you.
Think of me in the garden, humming
quietly to myself in my blue dress,
a blue darker than the sky above us, a blue dark enough for storms,
though cloudless.

At what point is something gone completely?
The last of the sunlight is disappearing
even as it swells--

Just for this evening, won't you put me before you
until I'm far enough away you can
believe in me?

Then try, try to come closer--
my wonderful and less than.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I picked this up because it was longlisted for the National Book Award in poetry in 2013.

Religious under/overtones? Yes, although I'm not always certain if they are favorable or critical. The poet Mary plays with the idea of Mary in a myriad of ways, and the poems are emotional and musing. I enjoyed them even if I wasn't always sure I knew what was going on. There is also a lot of bird imagery, which makes me think of a certain Catholic I know.

Ron Charles says

"All you can do is fail," said Mary Szybist about the challenge of measuring herself against the ideal of the Virgin Mary.

"There's something profoundly inhuman about her. She is valued because she is a mother and because she is a virgin. And I am not either. So how do you make your way in the world as a woman when you are not aspiring to and cannot be valued for either of those and do not want to be valued for either of those?"

Szybist, who won a National Book Award last year for "Incarnadine," was my guest for "The Life of a Poet" at the Hill Center on Sept. 17. A video of our conversation — her first appearance in Washington since winning the NBA — has just been posted. . . .

Click here to read the rest of this piece at The Washington Post:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/s...>

Robin says

Wow. Wow wow wow.

I did not think I was going to enjoy this as much as I did, as her last collection, *Granted*, was a bit of a hit or miss for me. But this. Wow... just wow.

I find it difficult to articulate just WHY I adore this so much. There were a few in here that just completely and utterly punched me in the gut. Namely, "An Update on Mary" was so heartbreaking. Overall, this collection was so personal, so illuminating, so vulnerable and beautifully written and set up, picking from across all kinds of spectrum and integrating into a cohesive, and awe-inspiring theme.

Just wow.

TinHouseBooks says

Meg Storey (Editor, Tin House Books): The best reading experience I had in the month of February was a live reading. Mary Szybist's second poetry collection, *Incarnadine: Poems*, was released by Graywolf this month, and since Szybist is a local poet (and Tin House Summer Writer's Workshop faculty member and a personal friend), I had the pleasure of attending her book launch at Powell's. Hearing her reinterpretations of the Annunciation and her observations of motherhood (there is a particularly haunting poem about a mother who threw her two children off a Portland bridge) in Mary's own lovely voice was a wonderful way to experience the work. But the next-best thing has been lingering over them at my leisure, and I encourage you to do the same.

Mary says

I know I don't read a lot of poetry, but can it be a coincidence that two of my favourite poets are now named Mary?? I think not.

Mallory says

I think the reason people don't read poetry is that they're scared of it; poetry can be so personal and raw and critiquing it feels like you're critiquing the poet themselves. This collection is certainly pretty; you want to read the poems aloud because the words sound good in your mouth and they bring hazy images into your mind. I wasn't exactly sure what these poems were about all of the time; I think the author, Mary, tries to connect herself to the Virgin Mary in some ways, and there are splashes of other religious colorings throughout the whole collection. I liked the way the poems sounded, but I'm not sure I got anything else out of them, and maybe I didn't need to.

Kevin Lawrence says

It is smart of Mary Szybist to begin her collection with a poem called "The Toubadours Etc.," and with the opening line: "Just for this evening, let's not mock them." It self-consciously addresses a contemporary audience that I think Szybist suspects is choking on its own post-modern jadedness and so she preemptively implores us mildly not to mock. Fair enough -- this is a serious poet with a serious subject: revisiting the Annunciation and repurposing that heavily-fraught scene for some of her other preoccupations (being confronted by evil-doing (i.e. kids thrown from a bridge by their mother) that forces the poet to question her faith even as she herself seems to want to have a child but is also considering aging/mortality and whether she can live up to her own expectations of motherhood). Szybist is true to her word and doesn't ever engage a mocking tone in her book and I am not about to sully the water by bringing in such a tone in my brief comments on this book. There is something cringingly embarrassing after a while, though, about the idea of conceiving a child being on par with Mary's (her namesake's) conception of the Lord, Jesus Christ. So there is that burdensome "etc." in the title that seems to want to have it both ways -- don't mock me; but yeah, I get that we're late in the poetic tradition and belief in Christianity isn't necessarily the structuring principle of that tradition anymore, etc., etc., etc.. I think that self-conscious unease with tackling such an emphatically traditional Christian subject in a 21st century context is best handled in poems where Szybist deploys unconventional forms (i.e. "Girls Overheard While Assembling a Puzzle" -- an abecedarian little gem; or the concrete poem "How (Not) to Speak of God;" or a second-by-second storyboard poem like "To Many Pigeons to Count and One Dove;" or a whole new form altogether like "Do Not Desire Me, Imagine Me" that then writes simultaneously as corpse, hair, skull, dirt, dust, etc.) -- the "etc." energy of the 21st century moment gets absorbed by the playfulness of the form while allowing the poet to still honestly engage her religious subject matter. In other poems, the Jorie Grahamesque alteration between short- and long-lines cascading down the pages are done competently, but as a non-believer I feel like Mary is sometimes getting carried away and things can start to feel stagey (the angel Gabriel taking his lines from Nabokov's *Lolita* and Kenneth Starr's report?!? Too staged, I'm afraid.) I also couldn't shake the feeling while reading the volume that Szybist and Colm Toibin at some point must've been in conversation with one another about their respective Mary projects -- their revisiting Mary's life seems to be in conversation with one another. (Well, okay, maybe that conversation is only in my head, but it nagged me a lot while reading this volume.) Not that they arrive at similar places in how they see Mary, by any means, but rather the techniques in some of Szybist's prose sections sounded incredibly similar in intention and effect (this part is from the poem "Entrances and Exits": A few hours ago, the 76-year-old woman, missing for two weeks in the wilderness, was found alive at the bottom of a canyon. The men who found her credit ravens. They noticed ravens circling--). I don't know -- ravens as dark angels that could easily be Gabriel approaching the Holy Virgin I guess doesn't herald a joint project; it's probably just that they share a similar subject matter rather than a stylistic sensibility. Bottom line after reading this volume in one evening: this is a serious volume by a seriously talented poet; but if you're a non-believer, like myself, you might find the preoccupation with the Annunciation scene overwrought and unconvincing as a viable poetic terrain, especially in order to structure the whole volume.

s.penkevich says

Rather disappointed in this collection. It may be due to my fanfare for Frank Bidart's collection, which was also shortlisted for the National Book Award, or my recent realization that so many poetry grab for the

sentimental as an excuse to avoid true perfection. There were a lot of great moments, especially her combination of *Lolita* with statements about the Clinton affair, but so much was drowned out in sentimentality and cutesy nods to falling asleep on yoga mats and other such modern-day middle-class problems. I really wanted to like this, too. She plays with form in several poems, but it came across as an experiment hell-bent on impressing with experimentation that it forgot to be a worthwhile poem. I may also be being a bit harsh of Szybist, who is clearly a genius poet. I just wish more was from the soul than from the heart. If that makes sense.

World Literature Today says

"Szybist's style is unusual in its imaginative force she invigorates the genre of devotional poetry with an uncommonly light yet vibrant touch. Conflating the mythic and the ordinary, the carnal and the sacred, her poems consider the range of ways in which annunciative confrontations that transform the spirit and heal the soul might occur in modern life." - Rita Signorelli-Pappas, Princeton, New Jersey

This book was reviewed in the November 2014 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/1DmxE5i>

Leola says

Here, There Are Blueberries

When I see the bright clouds, a sky empty of moon and stars,
I wonder what I am, that anyone should note me.

Here there are blueberries, what should I fear?
Here there is bread in thick slices, of whom should I be afraid?

Under the swelling clouds, we spread our blankets.
Here in this meadow, we open our baskets

to unpack blueberries, whole bowls of them,
berries not by the work of our hands, berries not by the work of our fingers.

What taste the bright world has, whole fields
without wires, the blackened moss, the clouds

swelling at the edges of the meadow. And for this,
I did nothing, not even wonder.

*You must live for something, they say.
People don't live just to keep on living.*

But here is the quince tree, a sky bright and empty.

Here there are blueberries, there is no need to note me.

Sasha says

One of my contemporary poetry Bibles, and Gorgeous as ever.

(read: June 2013, May/June 2015, July 2016. Perfect summer-season read when one is surrounded by a Pacific Northwest blaze of green and aqua colors and flowers in blue, red, pink, yellow."

Really one could about turn to any page and pick something worth underlining, fit to write down in one's notebook and press to one's chest to savor the lushness of it.

"Days go by when I do nothing but underline the damp edge of myself.

What I want is what I've always wanted. What I want is to be changed."
