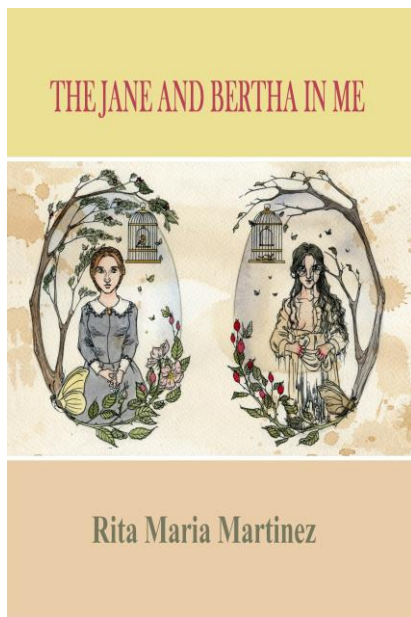


BOOK REVIEW

The Jane and Bertha in Me, by Rita Maria Martinez (Aldrich Press, 2016).
89 pp. Paperback, \$17.

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Rita Martinez's first full-length poetry book is inspired by Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, capturing and developing the distinct characters of Jane Eyre and Bertha Mason Rochester, in various forms. Published in Charlotte's bicentennial year, the poetry collection is timely; it is an innovative and clever homage to the novel and to its author's now-legendary imagination. Kate O'Keefe's finely drawn cover image aptly represents Jane and Bertha as 'Two Sides of the Same Coin'.

Martinez opens by quoting a memorable extract from Charlotte's novel that sets the tone for her book of poetry. The extract exemplifies Jane's restless character as she paces the third storey of Thornfield Hall with a racing mind, with intense emotions, and with surges of imagination and vigour. This image of Jane echoes that of the incarcerated Bertha. The spirit and energy of both women permeate Martinez's work, together with a large measure of poetic licence. The reader is presented with every part of the spectrum of womanhood: traditional archetypes, femme fatales, wayward women, cultural icons, and countless permutations of Jane and Bertha from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. We are given trans-cultural, trans-national, trans-historic, and trans-temporal perspectives; crossing borders, spanning divides, and traversing literary, cultural, and gender/sexual boundaries. Martinez injects *Jane Eyre's* women with a twenty-first century dose of realism that will appeal to the next generation as well as to longstanding readers of the Brontës.

Elsewhere, Martinez defines herself as a 'hardcore Brontëite', who was deeply moved by the experience of viewing a *Jane Eyre* manuscript twenty years earlier (depicted in the final poem) and who still delights in studying the minutiae

of Brontë's extant letters.¹ Though Martinez's work is creative, it is carefully grounded in factual, textual, and academic detail. Several of Charlotte's letters, including those to best friend Ellen Nussey, Mary Taylor, literary advisor W.S. Williams, and beloved former teacher, Constantin Héger, are not only referenced in the poems, but moreover used to shape their meaning. The book's key influence is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal critical text, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which introduced us to the psychoanalytic concept of Bertha as the dark, sexually exotic alter-ego of Jane, the virtuous English rose. Similarly, no discussion of Bertha can ignore Jean Rhys's prequel to Charlotte's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which gives Bertha an identity and a voice as Antoinette. A number of Martinez's creations owe much to this ingenious work.

The poetry collection is organised into three parts: 'Femme Covert', 'The Gothic Grotesque', and 'Promiscuous Reading', each theme offering a selection of poems with thirty-eight in total. 'Femme Covert' presents a modern adolescent girl, covertly binge reading *Jane Eyre* and learning about sexuality. Taking inspiration from Gilbert and Gubar's text, the title poem presents Jane with Bertha as her alter ego. It alternates between verses on plain and reticent Jane, with her bun and 'bottle-thick' glasses, and on her brazen gypsy twin, wearing a turban and 'chandelier earrings'. In another poem, we see Jane transported to be a guest on American late-night confessional television shows, being interrogated by guidance counselors. It is not surprising that Martinez, a confessed Elvis Presley fanatic, compares Jane to the 1960s icon Priscilla Beaulieu and places her in Presley's Graceland home, where Jane resists becoming Rochester's mannequin.²

The most extreme revision of Charlotte's novel comes in the form of Charlotte as a cross-dressing Currer Bell seen standing in a crowd, wearing a 'stick on mustache', a bathrobe, and a pink satin girdle. Although extreme, the poem is so witty and clever that I forgave Martinez for this unedifying image of Charlotte/Currer. Again, the poem's source of inspiration is Gilbert and Gubar's text, which explores the notion of the pen as a phallic symbol and male sexuality as the essence of literary power. It asks: what organ may women use to generate texts?³ Martinez's poem smartly draws on the episode of Rochester cross-dressing as the gypsy fortune-teller and suggests that Currer Bell might envy men for their efficiency in dressing, rather than for their appendage, given the many layers of clothing Victorian women were obliged to negotiate. Martinez employs

¹ Rita Martinez, 'Celebrating Charlotte Brontë's 200th Birthday', *Cultured Vultures* (4 April 2016): <https://culturedvultures.com/charlotte-bronte-birthday/> [accessed 3/11/18].

See *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, Vols. I-III, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

² See aforementioned Martinez article.

³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Second Edition (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 3-4.

the perfect blend of talent, imagination, and Brontëite knowledge to win over any reader.

In part three, Martinez exploits Sheri Erwin's zombie tale *Jane Slayre* (2010) to present Jane's rival as a bloodsucking Blanche Ingram in a literary mischievous act that many readers will find pleasing. Another double appropriation recasts Jane as the Cuban version, Juana, before overthrowing it and reflecting on all the iconic Janes, only to return to the 'quintessential Plain Jane: Jane Eyre'. Here, Jean Rhys's novel influences two poems on Bertha. The first draws on colonial stereotypes from popular culture (are you old enough to remember Johnny Weissmuller?) and the second, 'Letter to Bertha', ironically brings the character to life with its poignant wish to save her from inevitable death. Martinez has the reader squirming at the flies beneath the bed, backing the transformed, empowered, kickboxing Creole, then moved by the image of her caressed face, unburdened from its painful memories with tender kisses.

Martinez also gives us Jane's close friend, Helen Burns, rescued from death, marrying St John, and disappearing to India as a missionary. This is a revision of Charlotte's novel that I thoroughly endorse. There are several nods to the famed *Bewick's*. Indeed, virtually all the novel's characters, from John Reed to Miss Temple to Mason, take on a role; even Rochester's ex-lover, Giacinta, features. Still, I would have liked to have seen more development of these characters, perhaps also the inclusion of Jane's childhood friend, Mary Ann, who is rarely noticed by readers or critics of Charlotte's novel. During the typhus epidemic at Lowood, Jane ventures with Mary Ann far beyond its confines. The two frequently spend hours roaming free like gypsies. They are seemingly 'partners in crime', a notion that could lend itself well to invention and embellishment. My favourite performances, however, are the three ingenious triptychs on Rochester, Mortification, and Vintage Bertha, which are neat, beautifully-crafted tributes that offer new perspectives on key characters.

Charlotte Brontë's bicentenary in 2016 inspired countless *Jane Eyre* (and *Villette*) afterlives that are shaping stage productions and modern fiction (including neo-Victorian), and being debated in current academic texts. As Deborah Wynne explains in 'The "Charlotte" Cult', since the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's 1857 biography of the author, Charlotte's mythical and literary legacy has been increasingly pursued, appropriated, and commodified, a trend that shows no sign of abating.⁴ Louisa Yates has delineated it as *Jane Eyre's* 'sexual and financial afterlives' due to the novel's misappropriation by some authors and publishers of erotic novels.⁵ Though widely acclaimed, Jean Rhys's novel was surrounded by an 'ethics of appropriation' when first published,

⁴ Deborah Wynne, 'The "Charlotte" Cult: Writing the Literary Pilgrimage, from Gaskell to Woolf', in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, eds. Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 43-57.

⁵ Louisa Yates, "'Reader, I [shagged/beat/whipped/f****d/rewrote] him": The Sexual and Financial Afterlives of *Jane Eyre*', in Regis and Wynne, pp. 258-60.

something that will always be raised when the work of a venerated author is reinvented, especially one who is entrenched so deeply in academic scholarship.⁶ Unusually, Martinez uses the medium of poetry to offer a broad, fresh, and diverse range of guises that embrace many of the novel's fundamental and timeless concerns, including the fight for feminism, permissible sexual expression, the desire for liberation, and feelings of displacement. I believe her contribution will stand strongly within the genre. Despite being a traditionalist at heart, I commend Martinez for skillfully giving us such a multitude of contemporary Jane and Bertha personas; it is difficult to conceive a more creative tribute to *Jane Eyre*. In my opinion, *The Jane and Bertha in Me* is an artistic endeavour that Charlotte Brontë – who first published as the poet Currer Bell – would have more than approved.

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⁶ Regis and Wynne, p. 32.