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Review of *VillianElle* by Lynn Crosbie

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sion; many accomplished this. But I was increasingly appalled by the in-
dustry I was helping them plunge into... In their [the industry’s] rhetoric, 
“democracy” and “market forces” seemed to have become the same thing.
An especially sinister achievement of advertising was its gradual take-
over of our increasingly undemocratic electoral machinery, in which a 
campaign had become a war of “commercials” booked by advertising 
agencies, financed by the help of kickbacks (“campaign contributions”) 
to receptive politicians...[this] threatened to engulf hallowed U.S. tradi-
tions. (218)

No wonder The Nation has dubbed him “a major national resource,” as the 
book jacket tells us. Barnouw’s perspective on this group of fascinating 
episodes in recent media history makes his book a pleasure to read.

JENNIFER PETERSON

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Lynn Crosbie is Canadian, just like Douglas Coupland, the man who put the 
X in “Generation X.” The connection does not stop there: like Coupland, 
Crosbie speaks in, and capitalizes on, a hipster’s voice. This particular pose 
works as both a strength and an irritant in her recent collection of poetry, 
VillainElle.

On the plus side, these poems are not dull academic paeans to the duck 
pond in the Quads. Who could resist “Strange Fits of Passion,” a poem 
dedicated to Xaviera Hollander, a.k.a. The Happy Hooker? Crosbie’s titles 
alone entice: “Nancy Drew’s Theatre of Blood,” “I Am Curious (Yellow),” 
“The Chicken Baby,” “Jesus the Low Rider.” These titles are often coupled 
with epigraphs snatched from B movies, Top-40 records, and Romantic 
poetry, lending the poems an eclectic, thrift-store ambiance.

Crosbie’s immersion in popular culture is refreshingly sincere. Even 
though her subject matter screams camp, the tone of her poems tends to be 
earnest and even impassioned. For instance, from a title like “Saturday Night 
Fever,” we might expect a poem that mocks or smirks. Instead, Crosbie 
gives us the plaintive first-person account of a girl who eventually gets 
molested in that film’s infamous “bridge scene”:

His white suit a peerless lily the wide lapels
an allegorical breastplate, the Prima Porta Augustus,
his arm-divine is raised to the glittering ceiling.
"Saturday Night Fever" takes its speaker seriously, attempting to examine a disturbing moment in the history of on-screen date rape. The girlish voice is convincing and even touching as she works through the problem of being a sex object buried in a teen flick.

Crosbie maintains an unflinching commitment to exploring the adolescent sensibility from within. In a poem like "Saturday Night Fever," this method works wonders, transforming a movie plot into a meditation on sexual subjugation. But at other points, she just sounds pretentious—like a kind of Kathy Acker Lite—as in "Ultra Violet," which begins:

I am wearing crystal-haze drop earrings, a fake black Breitschwantz coat and pillbox hat. I am holding a Bible in my hand, marked with a paper cross at Colossians

Warhol’s factory workers, Ultra Violet included, were at their most dull and irksome when they lost their sense of humor. This poem makes the same mistake. The very seriousness that raises "Saturday Night Fever" out of the retro-kitsch basement and into the realm of compelling poetry often makes Crosbie’s work unreadably self-dramatizing, like the scribblings of an undergraduate "poetess" with one too many tattoos. A failure to consistently capitalize, à la e.e. cummings, accentuates this juvenile air.

Despite its juvenile airs, though—and in fact partly because of them—VillainElle is an interesting second collection of poems that stands out from the timid post-M.F.A. pack. Its language is jagged, heartfelt, and not afraid to go overboard. But almost every poem could open with the phrase, "Dear Diary":

the proprietor of Salome’s is a fallen man, unloved, anxious, but he smiles at me as I enter. the pink walls are a mardi gras of whips, chain mail and leatherette. ("Nancy Drew’s Theatre of Blood," 59)

It’s nice to see a post-boomer, and a woman at that, try to engage with pop culture on its own terms and in its own language. But by the end of VillainElle,
I found myself wishing that Crosbie would pull a little more wit and irony out of her pillbox hat.

ANGELA SORBY

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Piecing together a collection of stories can tempt any writer. The urge is to include it all. Even deft, economical writers can forget that more is not always more. Yet a collection of stories should progress effortlessly from one story to the next, perhaps as naturally as the flow of good paragraphs. Aware of this, A. Manette Ansay, in Read This and Tell Me What It Says, has assembled an organic collection that builds upon itself, tacking on only a few small pieces that detract more than they offer.

Set mostly in Holly’s Field, Wisconsin, the stories in Ansay’s first collection share a common Midwestern landscape and a tone of flat, regrettable optimism. The collection repeatedly expands on its central concerns, reinterpreting several times over the stories of children abandoned by their fathers, women navigating the waterways of religion and faith, small town people who aspire to little more than love and the security of knowing where they’ll spend their next night. For example, “Silk,” an economical story about a woman with a sloth of a husband and a gorgeous, sassy son with a penchant for ladies’ undergarments, is one of many stories about people managing the obligations of a religiosity they took on years ago and that now feels cumbersome in their daily lives. “Neighbor” is a quiet story about the mistakes made when choosing faith, both for ourselves and for others. “Evolution of Dreams, North of Sheboygan, 1986” elegantly tells the story of an unemployed young man whose body has grown to giant proportions while his mind and heart have remained childlike.

If Ansay missteps, it is when she includes the shorter pieces, like “Lies,” “The Trial,” and “Lessons,” which feel less like crafted fictions and more like writing workshop sketches. The author also commits a few of the technical errors common to young writers, such as giving some characters distracting names like Ajax, Blossom, Marilee, and Pip.

Yet more often Ansay’s work results in stories like “July,” a simple story unconcerned with craft but inspired by art; here surfaces Ansay’s talent for evoking the quiet moments that change us all. She understands the