

The Blazing World by Siri Hustved
Review by Alexa

If you skipped the Editor's Introduction at the start of this fiction, then you would have missed the structure of the story. That is, this collection of interviews, letters and diaries is "collated" by IV Hess, professor of aesthetics, who seeks to "unmask" the artist, Harriet Burden, after her death and after spending 6 years trawling through Burden's work and attempting to speak with her children, lover, friends, co-workers and art reviewers. The book launches the "mask" motive immediately when IV Hess reveals that the following provocative quote by Brickman in a letter to a publication actually belongs to Harriet (Harry) Burden:

All intellectual and artistic endeavours, even jokes, ironies, and parodies, fare better in the mind of the crowd when the crowd knows that somewhere behind the great work or the great spoof it can locate a cock and a pair of balls.

Therein lies the purpose of this novel and sets the scene: that the male domination of the art world is about to be hoaxed by a bitter woman whose artistic endeavours are undervalued or sneered at. As Siri Hustved commented in an interview for Crikey, "At the same time, what thrills us about these hoaxes is that they do seem to reveal judgments that are based on other aspects of perception, certain biases that we all have for example."

To briefly summarise the plot, Harry embarks on a project entitled "Maskings", choosing to use 3 male artists to front her installations in order to expose the anti-female bias of the art world. This is not a new concept, as the Guerrilla Girls have been fighting sexism in the art world since 1985. These New York artists wear masks (which they still do today) to highlight the fact that their identities are not important regarding the worth of their creativity or the issues they are tackling.

On a deeper level, by embarking on this project, Harry wishes to explore the influence of human perception and unconscious ideas regarding the interpretation of works of art. Hustved pours much thought and philosophy into this aspect of the novel, which may interest some readers or put them off entirely. One could really get bogged down by googling every reference Burden makes in her diaries.

The pseudonyms for Harry's 3 art shows come in the form of the young and naïve Anton Tish (shit backwards), who barely understands his installation entitled "The History of Western Art", the mixed race gay Phineas Q Eldridge whose work is called "The Suffocation Rooms", and the masterly Rune who created "Beneath". Harry plans to reveal her true identity behind these works and to expose people's prejudiced attitudes towards female artists. Lo and behold! Harry becomes the victim of her own hoax when Rune denies that she had anything to do with this latter work, and callously depicts Harry as a mentally deficient dowdy old woman. So how does Harry wreak revenge?

The structure of this novel in the form of diary entries, notes, interviews and letters has the obvious advantage that we can peruse Harry's thoughts, ideas and intentions. At best, the multifarious views of Harry provide insight into a complex character. At worst, the emotional rantings in Harry's diaries are just me, me, me, and more of me. Yet IV Hess did warn us in her introduction that the diaries contain emotional rants! Nonetheless, Harry's analyses of her male relationships, her father, her former husband, her son become rather uninteresting.

A further advantage of the novel's structure is that the diverse voices provide a shift in tone and character that relieve the claustrophobic focus on Harry's temperaments and ideas. For instance, her lover and poet, Bruno Kleinfeld, elicits a creative style that is more pleasant to read. The straight story-telling by Rune's sister, Kirsten Larsen Smith, is refreshingly clear, though still requires editing. Actually, Hustvedt's strategy of including various viewpoints exemplifies Harry's emphasis on each character's different perception and perspective on her life, artwork and motives.

Harry is well read. Unfortunately, the result of her encompassing so many references to artists, thinkers and philosophers is that we become overwhelmed with information, much like surfing the Net for more and more information that drags the reader far distant from the original purpose of reading a text. As Terry Castle (2014) comments in her response to Robert Boyers, "A Little Wikipedia Is a Dangerous Thing. The fact is, the book is pretentious and contrived to the point of readerly burnout. It is also (dare one say) often dead-in-the-water boring." For me, it's as though Hustvedt has fictionalised a textbook. The long descriptions of the artworks are also very boring and diminish the visual element that would have been more powerful.

The novel's title "The Blazing World" is "chosen" by IV Hess because of Harry's devotion of Margaret Cavendish, the 17th century Duchess of Newcastle who wrote a fantasy under the same title in which she is the empress of the philosophical world. Hustvedt is similarly enamoured of this writer, poet and philosopher who struggled to be heard by the men in her circle and therefore challenged gender stereotypes.

Overall, the novel contains intellectual and pertinent themes regarding the art world, of which Hustvedt is expert. In fact, this book showcases her knowledge exceedingly and would most likely make a great university text. However, the casual reader need not pay too much attention to the philosophies if not so inclined in order to follow the story. As Holly Williams commented in *The Independent* (16 March 2014), "you don't need a PhD in Kierkegaard to enjoy Hustvedt's writing, and it's a pleasure to feel your brain whirring as it forges links and finds the cracks across differing accounts".

My rating: 2.5/5

According to her website, Siri Hustvedt has "also produced a growing body of nonfiction. She has published a book of essays on painting (*Mysteries of the Rectangle*) as well as an interdisciplinary investigation of a neurological

disorder (*The Shaking Woman or A History of My Nerves*). She has given lectures on artists and theories of art at the Prado, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. In 2011, she delivered the thirty-ninth annual Freud Lecture in Vienna. *Living, Thinking, Looking* brings together thirty-two essays written between 2006 and 2011, in which the author culls insights from philosophy, neuroscience, psychology, psychoanalysis, and literature".