

THE ENDURING POWER OF A WOMAN WITH A SECRET

NEW NOVELS BY JANET RICH EDWARDS AND PAULA McLAIN TRACE THE INFLUENCE OF FEMALE CREATION ACROSS CENTURIES AND EXPLORE WHY IT HAS SO OFTEN BEEN SEEN AS A THREAT TO WESTERN CIVILIZATION

BY BETHANNE PATRICK

TWO FIGURES will always haunt the human imagination: the woman in ecstasy, and the woman in madness. This enduring fascination may stem as much from the paper-thin line that separates the two states as it does from our deep-seated fear of both. If the devoted nun resembles the raving patient, does that not justify locking them away, protecting ourselves from their unsettling power?

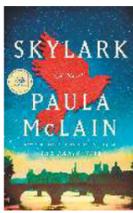
Two recent novels go behind the walls of anchorite and lunatic cells in different centuries and for different purposes, yet wind up demonstrating how women forced by circumstance behind walls influence the lives of others into the future. In “Canticle,” a debut from Janet Rich Edwards, a young woman named Aleys enters religious life in 13th-century Bruges, Belgium, after a Franciscan, Brother Lukas, witnesses her fervor. A series of unfortunate events ultimately lead to her permanent cloister, a tiny cell built into the wall of a cathedral. Paula McLain’s new book, “Skylark,” spans several centuries in Paris, beginning in the 17th when Alouette Voland is sentenced to the Salpêtrière asylum after protesting the arrest of her father, an expert fabric dyer, from prison, for the brilliant blue hue he has concocted — actually his daughter’s recipe, which contains dangerous arsenic. Alouette’s attempts to reclaim her work as her own instead of her father’s result in her consignment to Salpêtrière.

While both novels feature terrific and authentic detail about the rough confines that Aleys and Alouette endure, the message beneath the descriptions is far more terrifying and authentic: For centuries, the fear of female agency and non-male approaches to power has led to deep trauma, not just for individual women, but for Western civilization itself. For instance, Aleys’ late mother cherished books, even though common people rarely knew how to read and write, let alone owned books. Aleys treasures the tiny, exquisite psalter her mother inherited from an abbess aunt. Although Aleys’ mother cannot read, she knows the stories of the saints and relishes embroidering them with “goriest” details to keep her children interested. Yet even as Aleys’ world begins to change with the rise of lay literacy, those lay people are almost entirely men. Women, whether secular or religious, remain forbidden to read, write or tell stories.

Aleys, at first, seems to be on a path toward personal enlightenment. Brother Lukas declares her a Franciscan, persuading his superior, Bishop of Tournai Jaan Metz, that the young woman possesses special spiritual gifts. The Bishop agrees but insists that since no



Spiegel & Grau



Simon & Schuster

DEBUT novel “Canticle” by Janet Rich Edwards top left; Paula McLain penned “Skylark.”

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other Franciscans are female, Aleys must be sent to the nearby Beguines — laywomen who take no vows, live in community and work to support the church. Though Aleys initially finds the Beguines “wanton” due to their “strange rites,” including casual dress and meetings, their charismatic leader, Grand Mistress Sophia Vermeulen, persuades Aleys of the group’s higher purpose.

Aleys later discovers that a beguine named Katrijn Janssens has been secretly translating Latin scripture into Dutch. In the evenings, the women often perform ecstatic dances while someone reads from the “Canticle of Canticles” (also known as the “Song of Songs”). Aleys already has a strong mystical bent, and after some time in the Begijnhof, she supposedly cures a young boy’s illness. Unfortunately, she’s unable to do the same when Sophia becomes sick. Her subsequent eviction from the Beguines leads to her accepting the Bishop’s offer of sanctuary — as an anchorite, destined to live out her days in a tiny stone outcropping. Her only contact with other humans is a slit through which she can hear daily mass, save for Marte, the low-ranking Beguine assigned to deliver her meals and empty her slop bucket.

In “Skylark,” Alouette has become an adept of dye recipes. Even though she and other women are able to read, write and keep ledgerbooks by this date, the complicated and often secret tinctures

concocted for fabrics remain the province of men.

Like Aleys, Alouette forms alliances with other women, Sylvine and Marguerite, the latter of whom carefully documents the guards’ abuses in a ledger. These abuses include the killing of inmates’ infants, a fact that galvanizes the pregnant Alouette (the father of her child, Étienne, is a quarryman) into joining a plan for escape through the Paris sewers. The women find refuge in a convent and, ultimately, in a seaside town where some measure of peace awaits them.

It’s a far happier ending than that of Aleys, who is met with a darker fate. That is partly because McLain’s novel doesn’t end with Alouette’s relatively soft landing; “Skylark” continues in 1939 through the perspective of Kristof Larsen, a Dutch psychiatrist in Paris. His relationship with his Jewish neighbors, the Brodskys, grows closer as Nazi power corrupts France. Despite his ties to the resistance, Kristof cannot save the entire family during the 1942 Vélodrome d’Hiver roundup, but he takes responsibility for their 15-year-old daughter Sasha. Along with his compatriot Ursula, they are guided to safety through the same Paris tunnels that sheltered Alouette centuries earlier.

The fragile tie between Alouette and Sasha rests in a tiny piece of glass found during the restoration of Notre Dame de Paris after the 2019 fire. A conservator uncovers the shard, which bears an intense blue

figure of a skylark — evidence, at least to the reader, that Alouette’s recipe endured, and a symbol of how both she and Sasha escaped. Female creation and resistance, the novel suggests, endure too.

At first, that seems at odds with Aleys’ tragic fate. “As the crowd parts before her, Aleys sees the path of gray cobblestones receding to the stake. Parchment is piled high at its base. Smaller fires have already been lit, dotting the plaza. They’re burning her words, too...” Yet, it’s no spoiler to reveal that during her long weeks and months as an anchorite, Aleys found the means to slowly and secretly teach Marte, lowliest of the Beguines, how to read and write. “They write words on the sill between them and wipe them off, their palms and feet dark with dust.” Just as Aleys’ mother passed on her passion for books and Alouette pursued her passion for beauty, Marte will carry on a passion for stories.

More important, however, and something that ties “Skylark” to “Canticle,” is that Aleys and Alouette, Marte and Sasha, live on through work done by and with women. Whether it’s a recipe for dye, a hunger for divine knowledge, or the means to freedom, the main characters in both novels believe deeply in women’s full humanity. Aleys acknowledges the contentment of the Beguines, understanding that their communal labors knit their “hopes, their labor, even their disagreements” as “strands in a single weave.” Kristof says of Ursula that she “charts her course in full light with eyes wide open, and still she chooses danger. Chooses — over and over — not to surrender.”

It’s true that the authors of these novels live in 21st-century North America, where many people believe in equality even if the full humanity of others is under attack, but neither Edwards nor McLain indulges in anachronisms. Aleys yearns for divine ecstasy but does not come across as a would-be influencer, let alone as a Mother Ann Lee fomenting spiritual revolution; she believes in the church, even if not fully in its leadership, until her end. Alouette and her comrades pursue a different life but do not seek it for everyone, which feels right not just for their era but for their experience of trauma. Even Ursula and Sasha rely on men for their escape, accepting that whoever has the correct experience and expertise should lead the way.

What “Canticle” and “Skylark” get right about their very different heroines and time periods is that change doesn’t happen overnight, nor does it benefit everyone. Aleys teaches Marte to read, but Aleys will suffer for her ideas. Sasha will escape Vichy France, but her family will still die in the concentration camps. Switch the clauses in those sentences around, however, and you’ll be reminded that change can and does happen, one determined woman at a time.

Patrick is a freelance critic and author of the memoir “Life B.”

Review MEREDITH MARAN

Passionate analysis of sexual fetishism

BEFORE YOU read this review, dear reader, please answer this question in the privacy of your own mind.

Which are you least comfortable sharing publicly? A) Your weight. B) Your greatest mistake. C) Your sexual kink.

If C is your answer (it is mine), you are not alone. In a 2020 survey of 2,000 Americans’ sexual habits and preferences conducted by a market research firm for a lingerie company, nearly half said they currently had a sexual act they’d like to try with a partner, but hadn’t, out of fear they would be judged. Of those respondents, 40% feared that sharing their sexual cravings with a partner might end their relationship.

British writer, curator and self-described fetishist Anastasia Fedorova wrote “Second Skin: Inside the Worlds of Fetish, Kink, and Deviant Desire” to vanquish the shame behind this type of fear. Her aim is to liberate humans from depriving ourselves, and our lovers, of the full-spectrum sunlight that shines on those who manifest their whole sexual selves. “I started writing this book because, while the

world of kink and fetish was becoming increasingly visible in mainstream culture, there was still a lack of deeper understanding,” Fedorova writes. “We also seem to be on the brink of a shift, as people become more open to a nuanced and complex understanding of sexuality.”

Practicing what she preaches, Fedorova opens the book with a scene that discloses her “own deviant desires.”

“By the large hotel bed, my play partner waits on his knees, hands cuffed behind his back,” Fedorova writes. “Second by second, we enact a fantasy: him on a leash, me standing above him, wielding the control he’s entrusted me with. Like most sexual scenarios, it has been lived out countless times before us. We slip it on like a second skin... We have, above all, an insatiable drive to know one another. Naked is not naked enough. Two layers of latex stop our bodily fluids from mixing, yet the mental distance between us compresses until it dissolves into nothing.”

Lest that scene mislead you, a clarification. The author’s erotic experiences, and those of the people she interviews, are the place settings



ROBIN CHRISTIAN



Catapult

AUTHOR Anastasia Fedorova researches the history and sociology of kink.

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of the book, not the meal. The meat of the manuscript is Fedorova’s historical/sociological analysis of the elements of fetishism, also known as kink, each explored in one of 10 chapters: Leather, Latex, The Domatrix, The Gimp, The Chaser, Feet, Medical Gloves, Cars, Monsters

and The Fetish Club.

“To have a fetish,” Fedorova explains the basics, “means being drawn to a particular object for pleasure or excitement — and to be turned on by the possibilities and scenarios this object provides.”

Fedorova devotes much research and many pages to the costuming she says is a must-wear for fetishists like her. “A fetish garment,” she writes, “transforms how you view and inhabit your body. The moment you put it on, it creates a new, unknown erotic entity. In the mirror, I recognise my facial features, but I am not my usual self — I have stepped into uncharted territory, where I can temporarily embody something different. Rubber accentuates my curves, and yet I feel free of any gender.”

Reading this meticulously researched, passionately penned book, you’ll become knowledgeable about surprising subjects ranging

from the Mesoamerican discovery of the rubber plant in 1600 BCE to the evolving social messages conveyed by the wearing of a leather jacket to the percentages of Americans who fantasize about feet (18% of heterosexual men, 5% of heterosexual women). You’ll learn which movies to watch if you’re a car fetishist; the erotic delights of wearing a dog mask, the unspoken rules of play in the “spaces of radical freedom” known as fetish clubs, “the first places where the exploration of who we are and who we want is possible. It also often leaves one feeling empty come morning.”

“Second Skin” is more sociological than sexy; more anthropological than animalistic. Its raison d’être is not simply to convey the history, the mechanics, the meaning or even the sexual pleasures of fetishism. More significantly, in this American era, with basic human rights being violated in our legislature and on our streets; when being “different” and/or challenging the powers that be is punishable by death, this British-born book advocates for a person’s right to like what they like and to get it consensually. “An understanding of your own extended capacity for joy brings with it a terrifying demand,” Fedorova writes, “that you live your life in accordance with the joy which you know to be possible; that you ask for more; that you provoke, unsettle and reach towards personal and political power.”

Maran, author of “The New Old Me” and other books, lives in a Silver Lake bungalow that’s even older than she is.