

The Corresponder



Fall 2010

Fan Letter on Minnesota Writers

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Suspect

By Kristin Wolden Nitz
Peachtree Publishers, 2010
Price (Hardcover): \$ 16.95

Reviewed by Lisa Lamor



It's not always easy to depict the thoughts, feelings, and interactions of a teenager. It's not always easy to craft an entertaining mystery novel either. Kristin Wolden Nitz skillfully does both in her new young adult fiction novel *Suspect*.

The story revolves around a young woman named Jen, who at seventeen is struggling with the kinds of things that are somewhat universal to teenagers. She has just broken up with a boyfriend and is trying to prepare to apply to colleges. Following a hectic finals week, she agrees to go help her grandmother for the summer at Schoenhaus, a family-owned bed & breakfast in the Missouri countryside. Grandma Kay is an eccentric character, who is planning an exciting weekend of murder and intrigue at Schoenhaus; it's an annual Mystery Weekend at the bed & breakfast.

However, Jen is also struggling with the kinds of things that are not universal. Jen's mother, Ellen, disappeared when Jen was little. Grandma Kay is obsessed with figuring out what happened, and revolves the entire Mystery Weekend around Ellen's disappearance. The loss of her mother is an aspect of Jen's life that provides a poignant twist on a story of an otherwise 'normal' teenage girl.

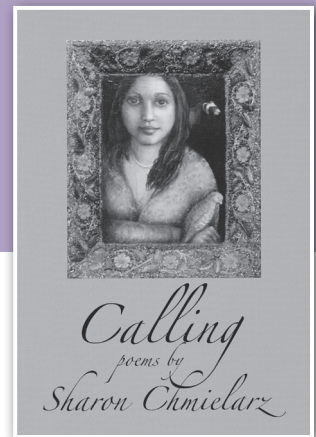
Nitz's use of dialogue emphasizes the feeling of normalcy within the story, and it is easy to identify with the characters. The family dynamics are just abnormal enough to feel familiar to contemporary young adult readers – divorces and deaths and disappearances add up to odd but not outlandish family structures. Likewise, the plot twists and turns are just enough to maintain interest, but are not overwhelming or distracting. There are clues and red herrings throughout the story that consistently keep the reader guessing and engaged.

Overall, Nitz's novel weaves the lives of many characters together comfortably in the setting of an entertaining Mystery Weekend. Her primary achievement in the novel, however, is in making the text come alive through familiar characters and easy-flowing dialogue. Young adult readers who enjoy a little intrigue could definitely enjoy the fun puzzle presented in *Suspect*.

Calling

By Sharon Chmielarz
Loonfeather Press, 2010
Price (Paperback): \$12.95

Reviewed by Seth Wells



If you read Sharon Chmielarz's *Calling*—and you should—get ready to be enveloped in a world of lush sensuous detail and thrust into the vortex of her immense poetic imagination. Her latest book is split up into five sections which flow into and speak to each other seamlessly,

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organically, making for a surprisingly quick read for a full book of poems, thanks to the precise language, that does not surrender anything by way of description, which is rich and spot-on.

There is a lot on popular culture in Section One. Although, much of it is in regards to figures of the distant past, many of these figures are still popular or considered geniuses today. There are good portrait poems throughout *Calling*, portraits of a score of historical figures, known and unknown—like poet Anna Akhmatova and Stalin's daughter—and Chmielarz brings them back to life in shocking, triumphant, and riveting ways.

The first poem, "Subjects," an ekphrastic poem, reflects on how the poet reacts to Artemisia Gentileschi's baroque painting *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, which depicts a rape victim (Judith) and her maid decapitating the rapist, Holofernes, in retribution. Gentileschi's is a powerful painting—someone taking vengeance and ultimate moral law into her own hands—and the poem is a great work to stand beside it. The painting and the poem take on even more power and resonance when one realizes that

Gentileschi was raped as well, as a young apprentice, by her tutor: "...the subject's, Judith's, face, mirroring / the painter's," while she slashes through Holofernes' jugular as if it were a thin bit of thread—Judith and her maid surprise the rapist in his sleep. This poem is forceful and exacting, daring in its language, just as bold and incendiary as the painting itself, one you can't look at without having a potent if not visceral reaction to. Shuddering is good.

The first section is full of other remarkable poems, most notably a thrilling piece that depicts a conversation between Dorothy Wordsworth and Nannerl Mozart (sisters of William and Wolfgang Amadeus) in the afterlife. Also, Chmielarz writes from the point of view of Vincent van Gogh's brother and Goethe, and has a poem dedicated to J.S. Bach's daughters in this section, among other gems.

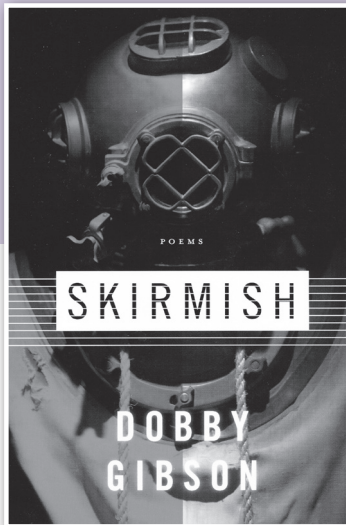
This poet creates imagery on the page like a painter does at her easel, sometimes horrific, sometimes beautiful. Either way, it moves you, reminds you what it's like to be alive; it's full of evocative sensory delights. I was enchanted by the great voice that inhabits the various characters of these poems.

Skirmish

By Dobby Gibson

Graywolf Press

Price (Paperback): \$15.00



Reviewed by Seth Wells

Dobby Gibson's poetry in *Skirmish* is equal parts tender, triumphant, exhilarating, disturbing, and thought provoking: it's fantastic. He writes veering and restless poems that never stop searching and exploring. Wit and humor abound throughout. It all comes together for Gibson here: this is exciting stuff.

Skirmish is an advancing book. It does not dwell upon any one image or idea for too long but will constantly move on to others, often many within a single piece. These pieces are energetic and deeply profound. This book abounds with brilliant assertions. Gibson poses important questions for the reader.

The author reads our (the readers' collective) fortune during the course of this book, but it certainly doesn't come across as didactic, but rather relevant and adaptable. One example is in "Fortune (#2)," when he starts it out, "We think we are little gods, / yet the one thing we fear most is to be left alone." Later: "To be loved, speak with your hands." Another noteworthy poem is "Truce", where the poet admits,

So far, I have learned very little. / I want to, for instance,

but can't, / render this in something realer, / in a leaves that not only blesses leaves, / but in a leaves that makes them more so.

This is poetry that aims and strives high.

While Gibson is an "idea" poet, he employs great, well-placed images. You will be made to think. Image to image, thought to thought, idea to idea, premise to premise, Gibson moves the reader and leads him along in this book over a tight rope—a journey not for the tame—to look down on this world as it really is, beautiful and haunting. Gibson has a keen eye, looks to antecedents, to the roots of things, and so in turn, looks forward to what is timeless at the same time.

This book should be read by everyone who is interested in keeping a finger on the pulse of great modern poetry. Because, as stated in "Are We There Yet?," "We're all struggling to say the same old things / in new and different ways. / And so we must praise the new and different ways." I hereby credit Gibson for his effort and aspiration.

Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder

By Travis Nichols

Coffee House Press, 2010

Price (Paperback): \$14.95

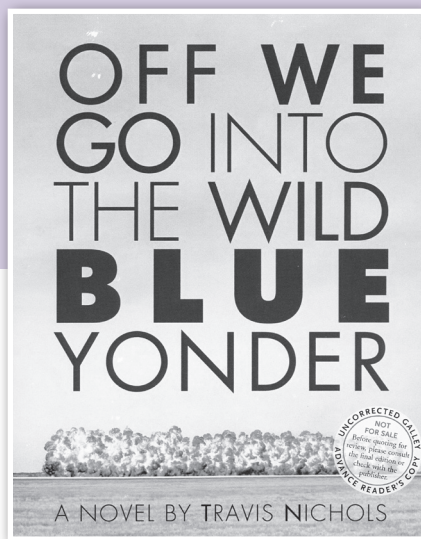
Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder, Travis Nichols' debut novel, is a story about stories. It is about discovering the story of one's self, of one's family, of one's history. It is an exciting narrative that spans sixty years and thousands of miles.

The novel is epistolary; it is told through a series of letters the narrator writes to Luddie, inspired by a photograph of the woman with a street address on the back from 1945. Because of this, we never see the action as it takes place. The trip to Poland is given to us in short fragments of time filtered through the narrator's reflection as he writes these letters.

The novel opens up with the narrator setting off on a journey with his girlfriend Bernadette, and his grandfather, a World War II veteran affectionately known as the Bombardier. They are off to Europe to find Luddie, the Polish woman who helped save the Bombardier when his plane crash-landed in the Polish countryside while he was bombing an oil factory during the war.

In Poland they chase down history. They visit Oświęcim, where the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was located. Then they look for the oil factory the Bombardier had bombed sixty years earlier. From there they continue on to Rzeszów, the town where Luddie was supposed to have lived decades ago.

Along the way the characters discover where their



Reviewed by Kasey Ulysses Pfab

individual stories intersect and repel. While the Bombardier tells stories of fighting on the Eastern Front of World War II, the narrator feels unease at his grandfather's disregard for Pacific-side of the war, where his paternal grandfather had died on the ill-fated U.S.S. Indianapolis. He is afraid of what happens when this story is not told,

as if it could vanish from history.

Travis Nichols manages to keep the novel from falling into melodrama, which would have been easy—especially with the visit to Auschwitz. The narrator tries (though unsuccessfully) to remain emotionally distant from the journey so he can act as a reporter or interpreter, and Nichols does a good job keeping the action flowing through the narrator's constant correspondence. Nichols was also able to create nice parallels between the war and the modern day lives of his characters, which keeps his book from becoming stiff with history lessons.

Some stories don't mesh with history, and they haunt us. This novel shows the narrator coming to terms with this along with his girlfriend and his grandfather. It does this remarkably well through these letters—stories in their own right. Nichols shows us in *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* that the difference between truth and meaning can be very profound.

Two thumbs up.

