

## REVIEWS

Molly Bendall, *Under the Quick*, Parlor House Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Eric Finer

### **As Above, So Below: a Poetry Review**

Molly Bendall's fourth book of poetry, *Under the Quick*, like her earlier books, possesses an unmistakable incantatory quality evident even from the first poem, "Reminds Me of Panic," which opens: "Push me in, let me"—an invocation after Homer. Indeed, though Bendall's forms reject Classical poetics, her work nonetheless finds some concordance with the great Greco-Roman poets, and not simply through her use of allusion and mythological imagery: *Under the Quick* seems born of a (post)modern pagan state, one where Veronica Mars coexists with Clytemnestra and everyday habits are literal rituals tied to unseen forces. "Time Tunnel" (38) connects cooking to dark matter, making aprons sacred garb and crumbling peppercorns a magical rite.

Rather than disrupting her poems' spell-like tone, Bendall's radical forms instead reify it. She lays words out in patterns that might be mistaken for chaos, as if her poems were snapshots of machines too huge to comprehend, using space to communicate the inadequacy of language. Bendall's spaces express a primal ineffable, rather than a postmodern uncertainty, between which she constructs pseudo-sentences and non sequiturs that invite comparisons to Gertrude Stein's hermetic poetry. However, *Under the Quick* does not belong to any hermetic order, extant or otherwise. The book eschews the language of the ancient temple and the elegant parlor for that of the alleyways and airwaves of late capitalism.

Molly Bendall & Gail Wronsky, *Bling & Fringe: (The L.A. Poem)*. What Books Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Francesca Mastrangelo

### Beyond Decoration: a Poetry Review

In the realms of experimental poetry and critical theory, punctuation can be used as a status symbol in much the same way as a fashion accessory. Open up Molly Bendall and Gail Wronsky’s book of poems, *Bling and Fringe (The L.A. Poems)*: punctuation marks litter the pages, simultaneously celebrating and critiquing frivolity. Bendall and Wronsky’s punctuation moves beyond decoration by challenging conventional perceptions of words as discrete, coherent entities through their creative use of slashes and parentheses to create a poetic interstitiality: a space between traditional conveyances of meaning. For instance, the poem “Eyes/Fish Scales” uses parentheses to emphasize how gender influences poetry and receptions to creative expression.

I’m in a                      working-class  
                                       neighborhood    gallery/    coffee house/  
                                       perfor(man)ce space/

Here, the authors not only depict the sensory detail of a particular setting, but also insert an alternate message within their surface-level narrative: the letters with the parentheses inform readers that this space is male-dominated, investing the poetry with a complexity of meaning. Consider the “mindful/plaidful” dichotomy in “Casual Shoes” (30). The slash placed between interiority (“mindful,” indicating emotion) and materiality (“plaidful,” indicating a clothing print) implores the reader to question what characterizes this oppositional relationship. *Bling and Fringe* exemplifies how language can both actively defy conventional modes of thought and playfully mock the traditions of theoretical analysis. Molly Bendall and Gail Wronsky’s

collaboration allows readers to indulge in a linguistic joyride, tickling the imagination while stimulating one's poetic sensibilities; *Blinge and Fringe* is always entertaining and consistently subversive.

Alessandro Barbucci and Barba Canepa, *Sky Doll*. Marvel, 2008.

Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, Don Heck, and Jack Kirby, *Essential Iron Man Vol. 1*. Marvel, 2000.

David Mazzucchelli, *Asterios Polyp*. Pantheon, 2009.

Reviewed by Julian Chambliss

### A Graphic Review of Comic Literature

Recently graphic literature has generated attention as successful film adaptations rule the marketplace. This success highlights the medium's quasi-respectable status. Caught, as they are, in the trap of superhero iconography, the range of comic content remains unknown to the average consumer. The truth, and it bears repeating, is that although the superhero genre is the most recognized (and best selling), it represents a fraction of published graphic literature. An expansive review reveals the medium's kinetic depth and challenges the assumptions that marginalize comics in the United States.

David Mazzucchelli's *Asterios Polyp* provides, for those too "mature," the literary feel required to justify comic readership. The story of an architect seeking a solid foundation after losing everything, *Asterios Polyp* displays an undeniable artistry. Mazzucchelli's authoritative examination of the struggle to find life's meaning demonstrates how graphic novels merge words and pictures to provide a transcendent cognitive experience. Referential in concept, *Asterios Polyp*, is alternately brilliant in its clarity (a complex commentary on modernism in art) and painful in its obfuscation (the visual iconography buried within is meaningful and meaningless). Mazzucchelli's work is cerebral, linking desire and intelligence to create an engaging read.

Alessandro Barbucci and Barba Canepa's *Skey Doll* is a transatlantic collaboration between Soleil and Marvel publishers. The result is a graphic story with sex, religion, and the meaning of life wrapped in a sci-fi narrative. With art and story referencing *Heavy Metal*, the seminal Franco-American illustrated magazine, the story centers on Noa, a life-like female android who exists only to serve the state's desires. When she meets diplomatic missionaries she escapes, beginning a journey that lays bare the excesses of religious extremism, selfish commercialism, and exploited masses. *Skey Doll's* fusion of lush art and complex story questions beliefs. Like *Asterios Polyp* it delivers plot twists, as well as arresting visual and literary flavor. Yet, there is action and the traditional fantastic adventure that speaks to the American reader.

Stan Lee, Larry Lieber, Don Heck, and Jack Kirby's *Essential Iron Man Vol. 1* presents a conventional comic, yet with it we can glean greater meaning from the superhero. The lone armored figure is a metaphor for the United States' defense ideology. Tony Stark's life as hero and corporate symbol is rooted in the U.S. response to communism's global threat. Recent cinematic success highlights the resonance of the U.S. versus "them" framework stressing both the comfort and confusion Americans associate with the military industrial complex. *Essential Iron Man Vol. 1* collects the origins and foundational adventures, introducing Cold War inspired villains. The Black Widow (socialist seductress), the Crimson Dynamo (militaristic Stalinism) and the Mandarin (the menace of Red China) provide form to collective fears. The Iron Man's triumph is not the point; the technical and moral superiority that allows him to win is the payoff. These books taken together defy the collective wisdom about comics. Go ahead, take a walk on the graphic side.

*Doctor Who*, series 1-5. BBC, 2005-2009.

Reviewed by Claire Jenkins

### New Doctor, New Man

The reinvention of *Doctor Who* in 2005 was a huge success on British television, and internationally. The program with which many of us grew up with returned after fifteen years away from our screens (excepting the one-off television movie starring Paul McCann in 1996), revamped for a new generation. The four series that have followed continually seem to oscillate between thoughtful and gripping episodes such as *The Long Game* or *Blink* and the rather more bland and forgettable. The first “new” series arguably began in such a way, taking place in central London and introducing us to Rose Tyler (Billie Piper) and her irritating family and boyfriend. When Mickey, Rose’s beau, is turned to plastic even she doesn’t notice the difference. That said, as the various series get into their stride it is for the most part an entertaining drama series.

*Doctor Who* remains very much the work of British television, although by the second series the budget has clearly increased and special effects are greatly improved. The production values, and at time acting standards, wither when compared to current American television drama. That said, the “naffness” of *Doctor Who* is undoubtedly part of its charm. The program remains tied to its British roots. British iconography and settings are prominent, as are the recurring use of Welsh locations and actors (the program is made by BBC Wales). Although *Doctor Who* has always been quintessentially British, the suggestion that a rift in time and space lies underneath Cardiff is hard to believe, even in the *Who* universe. Of course, as with any national television series or film, *Doctor Who* will inevitably make use of its home territory, but the majority of episodes take place in the UK when there are supposedly a great number of planets, worlds and galaxies. However, British Prime Minister Harriet Jones’s refusal to accept the help of the US president when saving the world (*The Christmas Invasion*), and Harry Saxon/The Master’s disavowal

of American intervention (*The Sound of Drums*) consciously provides a refreshing change to the numerous Hollywood disaster films that see the American president as the savior of the earth.

The bias towards British-ness, though, seems to be a bias towards English-ness. Tennant's Doctor speaks with a cockney accent rather than the actor's native Scottish tongue. Although Cardiff is the site of the rift, it is England, and specifically London, that is the home to the majority of the action. Furthermore, the Doctor and his sidekicks frequently come in to contact with great English characters such as Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria, William Shakespeare, and they witness the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II.

The eccentric Englishman has always been the model for the Doctor, despite his many guises. The reinvented Doctor takes two guises as Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant. Both channel the same eccentricity as the previous Doctors, and both channel English-ness, but in very different ways. Eccleston's Doctor lacks much of the dandyish-ness of his previous incarnations, and arguably of Tennant's Doctor that precedes him. He wears a rather non-descript black leather jacket and is otherwise dressed unremarkably. The multi-colored scarf is sadly long gone. Eccleston's Doctor is more masculine than the Doctors of old, but is still not an acutely physical man. For the first time there exists a sexual tension between the Doctor and his sidekick, evident in his relationship with Rose. The fallout from time-war, leaving the Doctor as the only surviving Time Lord, has also led to him to become a more tortured and pensive man, having witnessed the destruction of his race. The incarnation of the Doctor as a three dimensional character and emotionally scarred man is in keeping with popular representations of masculinity and manhood across contemporary Western film and television. The new man is thoughtful, soulful, and damaged. Throughout the four series we are confronted with a character who is perhaps more human than in the past. He is a romantic figure, not only through his relationship with Rose, but through his obvious attractiveness to other sidekicks, including Martha Jones and Captain Jack Harkness.

Captain Jack is an important character in the new series. His ambiguous sexuality demonstrates the diversity of the new *Doctor Who* universe. Martha is the Doctor's first black sidekick, and Rose's boyfriend Mickey is black, embracing a mixed-race relationship. Indeed, race is never really an issue, and arguably shouldn't be in a program that embraces so many alien worlds and cultures. That said, the Doctor remains a white English man. His sidekicks are normally women, leaving them in a supporting role, although they often save the world and the Doctor. The suggestion that River Song is the Doctor's future wife in *Silence in the Library* allows hetero-normative ideologies to be perpetuated. Therefore at the center lies a relatively traditional set of gender politics, despite the program's diversity. Indeed in the UK there was much speculation that once David Tennant abdicated the role of Doctor we might see our first black Time Lord, yet once again he regenerated into a white, English man.