

The Afflicted Girls

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The “afflicted girls” are the accusers in the Salem Witch trials. Elizabeth Parris, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, and Mary Warren speak again in the author’s second book of poems.

Cooley’s investigation of women’s voices under duress continues from her 1995 poetry collection, *Resurrection*, and her novel, *Judy Garland, Ginger Love*. Here, she patterns the voices that she has discerned from reading Salem trial testimony and examining archival material from the trials, while writing about her desire to subsume her own voice. “How the voices will pass through. Remember you are no one / in this story,” she concludes the poem “Directions for Ordering the Voice.”

The Afflicted Girls joins recent poetry books which, on the surface, seem identically based on words of women: Martine Bellen’s *The Vulnerability of Order*, partially based on autobiographies by American female celebrities; Ellen Bryant Voight’s *Kyrie*, sonnets from letters by women in Alfred W. Crosby’s *America’s Forgotten Pandemic: The Influenza of 1918*; and, Enid Shomer’s LSU Press book *Stars at Noon*, from aviator Jacqueline Cochran’s autobiographies.

These other works were written for different reasons, however: Bellen investigates the sign; Voight illustrates her opinions about form; Schomer retells a forgotten story. Cooley explores voice. In *Resurrection*, Cooley spoke as famous or fictional, living or dead, women, including Diane Arbus and Patty Hearst. In her new volume, she derives voices from source material. These voices, together with two of Cooley’s, become the poems’ narrators.

Cooley notes in the poem titles the difference between those drawn from impressions of physical objects, including texts and videos, and those from impressions of testimony. She narrates the “Archival” poems herself, and in the “Testimony” poems, she names the narrator in the subtitle. In “Testimony: Bride of Christ,” Elizabeth Eldridge Parris, mother of one of the “afflicted girls,” speaks; the narrator in “Testimony: The Mother” and “Testimony: Talk Through Her Body” is Dorcas Good, the four-year-old daughter of Sarah Good, one of the accused. The voices together narrate the poems and the poems together recreate a larger drama. Since Cooley has included herself and her research, this larger drama is not limited to the historical witch trials, but includes a modern understanding of them, as well as her own fascination with these trials.

By virtue of this publication, *The Afflicted Girls* becomes a postmodern part of the abundant Salem Witch trial literature, which includes Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables*, revisiting his family connection with the trials, and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, about the McCarthy hearings. Cooley includes characters in the trial drama that are literary inventions as well as actual historical figures. Her poem about Giles Corey, “He or His Apparition,” alternates declarative text with passages from the trial testimony about the apparition of Corey and his silence. Cooley concludes, “the magistrates pile stone after stone on his ribs to crush him into speech. / Nobody can see the lesson: nothing can drive the voice out of the body.”

It is Cooley’s conclusion “to crush him into speech.” The “nobody” driving the voice out of the Corey character is Cooley herself. *The Afflicted Girls* is a book obsessed with the idea that speech can be fictional and even fictional speech can have results in the real world. The book includes a poem about the audience-participation play staged in Salem for tourists, “The People vs. Bridget Bishop, July 1999.” Cooley expresses puzzlement that the audience nearly always votes Bishop guilty, that the speech (including the vote) of a people could be wrong.

Cooley’s poems display a modernist and contemporary concern with form, voice, and source rooted in the

ideas of T.S. Eliot, which are a large part of academic writing program curricula, as well as a postmodernist desire to use the past to depict the present, something Arthur Miller also did.

“We know what they want: / to speak in unison / to have a single voice,” Cooley writes in the title poem. The anxiety she expresses becomes personal, weighted with emotion, the anxiety of thinking that, in her own writing practice, as in politics, there is no single voice.

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