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Sybil Unrest by Larissa Lai and Rita Wong

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Erratum

Wrong publication date.

***Sybil Unrest* by LARISSA LAI and RITA WONG**

New Star Books, 2013 \$18.00

Reviewed by **EMILY MCGIFFIN**

Allusion, alliteration, internal rhyme, metaphor, onomatopoeia: *Sybil Unrest*, a book-length poem co-authored by Rita Wong and Larissa Lai, uses them all. Its politically-charged verse is a linguistic kaleidoscope, a sinuous movement through tirades that twist into word games, nursery rhythms, and the jangle of commercial jingles. It tunnels into the dark matter of contemporary life then springs away from the danger of taking itself too seriously. Beyond the highbrow literary devices, though, the work owes a hefty part of its success to an unsung hero: the lowly pun.

Their accomplishment is striking. In their hands, puns—the ordinary stuff of corny jokes and advertising—gain exceptional life and power. Their double entendre illuminates cliché and morphs banality into irony. The opening pieces alone give us “shrinkwrapped pushy / condemns on sale,” “safe sects,” and “global swarming.” Drawing on sources ranging from the Bible to Rage Against the Machine, their lyrics boom with deep intelligence and razor-sharp wit:

*she drove a Plymouth satellite
faster than the speed of light
to the love hotel to the smack
smack smack
of the catfish shack
all the while
knock knock knocking on
chevron’s door
pulling all the master’s strings
till she sets the night on fire
the oilfields are alive with the*

sound of mutiny

In this stanza and throughout the book, the poets capture multiple meanings in puns that, like metaphor, record the literal and the gesture beyond it. Their lines allude to familiar turns of phrase, yet through twists of wording or spelling the authors insert altered perceptions that inflect back onto the original concept. The recurrent irony in the double entendres troubles the assumptions that lurk behind everyday sayings and aphorisms, and reveals cliché where it had gone unrecognized. Meaning builds up in layers, lines resonate with new ideas, and the echoes of the original cliché or nugget of pop culture are rendered unfamiliar and transparent.

Take the title, for example. The two words crane towards the invisible phrase they stand in for. The ear hears both “sybil unrest” and “civil unrest.” It sticks there, caught not only by the sly wit but also by the ways in which the implied meanings reverberate off one another. A sibyl is a prophetess, a clairvoyant. Here she shares her solitary unrest with the civil body: communal, social. More than the stirrings of an unsatisfied public, the unrest here is also the cogent, prescient unrest of an oracle who calls the future as she sees it.

Originally published in 2008 by LINEBooks, the book was reprinted in 2013 by New Star Books, an independent Vancouver publisher specializing in political writing. In their discussion of the book’s origins, the authors explain that the poem “began in a renga spirit during the 2003 Hong Kong International Literary Festival.” With the SARS crisis unfolding around them in Hong Kong and daily footage of the invasion of Iraq flashing across their hotel TV, “it was a fraught moment.” The book

emerged over a series of emails in the years that followed.

True to its subject matter and origins, the poem eschews a narrative thread. Stream of consciousness, pinball machine, or scattershot, the text bounces from the Gulf War to gender politics to rock lyrics. This form is demanding—it takes concentration to follow the linguistic and political leaps that are rarely linked by conventional syntax. Unpunctuated, the language flows breathlessly through mounded adjectives, multi-hued lists. The style aptly reflects the idiom of contemporary media sound bites, the breakneck pace of modernity, and the poets' own outrage as "economists pantomime / the pollution of oceans / the razing of old growth / on spreadsheets."

The book is divided into three untitled sections, but formally it divides itself into two halves. In the first, the poems, albeit unpunctuated, maintain an orderly, left-justified form. In the second, the authors let go of the margin, freeing the poems to seek their own individual arrangements on the page. The protean structures give the poems an added fluidity

and spontaneity aligned with the shape-shifting language of each piece. Through dropped lines, caesura, and close attention to the physical form of the typography, the poets add further layers of thinking and meaning to the richly textured pieces.

Overall, *Sybil Unrest* is exemplary in its skilful entwining of poetry and politics and its experiments with language to find new ways to critique, query, and lampoon twenty-first century North American society. It is a book that takes you out dancing then sucker-punches you with linguistic virtuosity. It is a poem for the curious, the sceptical, the disenfranchised, for those searching for ideas drawn together with powerful rhythmic momentum.

EMILY MCGIFFIN is a PhD student in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies. She is the author of two poetry collections (*Between Dusk and Night*, Brick Books, 2012, and *Subduction Zone* Pedlar Press, 2014) and a contributor to the forthcoming anthology *Speak to the Wild* (University of Regina Press, 2015).