

Review: *Encounters with Inscriptions* by Kristin Czarnecki

- John J. Ronan

Kristin Czarnecki's *Encounters with Inscriptions* is labeled a memoir. It is wonderfully that, a touching history of her late parents' gifts of books and their rich content. And it is more. The twelve books, the twelve encounters, she pulls down from her library are inscribed by her father or mother or both. The books remind Czarnecki of her debt to them, help soothe her grief, and by extension show how the varied authors opened her life. The span of gifts runs from 1981 to 2010, taking her from a girl of twelve to a married professor of 41. In the process, the memoir doubles as a memory play, tracking with dramatic force the forming, creative arc of the author's character.

Warmth and charm in the early going demand attention: Shel Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic* and *A Child's Christmas in Wales*, by Dylan Thomas. The young girl was wonder-struck by these discoveries, and it is not a stretch to conjure Alice, both then or decades later, re-reading Silverstein: "One picture puzzle piece / Soakin' in the rain... / It might be a magical bean, / Or a fold in the red / Velvet robe of a queen." There is a child's amazed joy here while the inclusion of robe and queen seems no accident, a subtle suggestion of the adult who will mull over fashion, feminism, and power. The Welsh Christmas inspires similar surprise. Czarnecki, as Thomas wrote in another context, "tumbled for words at once." She also revels in the memories the words recall, like her father's struggles with Christmas tree stands or the frank, funny, description of her cats' adventures with tinsel. (No spoilers here, but do pay close attention to chapter two.)

The books are not presented in their chronological gift order. The memoir jumps and weaves and is full of what a dramaturge would call reveals. With Seamus Deane's novel *Reading in the Dark*, we are given the Ireland of postcards and literary magic tarred by political violence, though the two worlds continue to co-exist. As Seamus Heaney famously said of his own art, "...poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the car bomb."

Salman Rushdie's *Luka and the Fire of Life* is a parallel piece. The chapter is a serious take on fantasy, provided for by literature (Rushdie and the other books), and by the dreams of a literary academic life (Czarnecki's) contrasted with the grit of work, commutes, covid, and the horror of Rushdie's own trials. Though not placed last in the memoir, Rushdie's was the final gift, in 2010, from both parents. Her father would die in 2018, her mother in 2019.

Czarnecki's prose is fluid and honest, never slow. She jumps from book to book, gift to gift, the topics and authors ranging widely. From Flannery O'Connor to Virginia Woolf (she is a past president of the International Virginia Woolf Society), from Gail Collins to Thomas Merton and even to a cookbook, her reading informs and deepens both her love and appreciation of her parents and of these specific books. The cookbook, for instance, by Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins, leads to a serio-comic chapter about her mother, Czarnecki's own trials in the kitchen, and the struggle to redefine women's roles in a contemporary, somewhat feminist America.

One important chapter deals with a dual edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, a gift for the author's 14th Christmas. It was both formative and predictive of what became Czarnecki's academic wheelhouse, English literature. We are given a glimpse of top tier scholarly analysis that cites imitators and worshippers of the Brontës, among them Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and the novelist Jean Rhys, living her own novel even as she wrote one, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Czarnecki's own reflections follow, having again "devoured" both novels as she had "...so many times before." The scholarship is enjoyable and intriguing, even for a reviewer not steeped in the Brontës. But we are soon pulled back to the memoir, the arc. She closes wanting to tell her father how much she treasures this formative volume, "...his gift of the Brontës." And wishes, too, that she and her mother could have visited Haworth together.

There is good example of Czarnecki's honesty in the cookbook chapter: the embarrassing admission that she does not really (Read: at all) enjoy cooking and is not particularly adept at it. I too share that embarrassment. True, it is much easier in our culture for males to admit this lapse, except for the macho-meal exception of grilling, but I still needed absolution. On cooking, I felt saved by our shared distaste.

Honesty is even better, more bravely, illustrated in the essay on Alice Munro's *The Love of a Good Woman*. Through the chapter, I kept thinking about how I felt about this beloved, iconic Nobel Laureate. And how I'm seldom able to share the heretical opinion that I don't actually care for Alice Munro. Czarnecki saved me again – confessing at chapter's end that, despite respect for Munro's talent, she doesn't really enjoy reading her, either.

Encounters with Inscriptions closes with the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, the Persian poetry collection of sketchy provenance and universal fame. Its *carpe diem*, here and now, themes suit Czarnecki, writing in middle age, grieving her parents, grateful for them and the prompting print. Both mother and father were voracious readers, and she inherited that hunger, along with the knowledge that reading provides. The innocence-to-awakening pattern, memories in a grand arc, is both moving and intelligent, rich in the author's affection for parents and literature, and the importance of seizing a full life, both grief and dream.