



Granary Books, Inc.
168 Mercer Street, Ste 2

TELEPHONE: 212.337.9979
FACSIMILE: 212.337.9774
New York, NY 10012

sclay@granarybooks.com
www.granarybooks.com

REVIEWS & PRESS

Susan Howe & Susan Bee. *Bed Hangings*. Granary Books, 2001.

•

Jullich, Jeffrey. "Review of *Bed Hangings*." *Electronic Poetry Review 2*.

Susan Howe's new book happens after dark. It's lit dimly: at best, a reading lamp on a night table. Misspelled nightingales and a rotund, capitalized hoot owl swoop through its elegant midnight:

Evening for the Owl
spoke wisely and well
willing to suffer them
and coming flying night
from the Carolingian
mid owl falcon fable...

But the Owl here may not be calling out "Hoo! Hoo!" I think I heard it say "Howe!"

Susan Bee's matching illustration takes the meaning deeper: a winged, female-faced sphinx soars above the stanza, and a bird-footed, feather-tailed human figure hobbles beneath the block of text, pen-and-ink-black images with white inner lines taken from Hellenic pottery drawings, ancient images next to post-modern poetry (in the vein of Nancy Spero's feminist archaeological artworks).

Alright. Let's up the ante on high praise: Susan Howe may be our greatest living American poet. Or, if not our greatest poet, then certainly among our greatest poets, but certainly the finest "ear" in contemporary poetry. Or one of the finest ears.

That term, "ear," has dropped out of current critical discourse, turning up only rarely, used loosely in blurbs on the back covers of books. Once, not long ago, the word meant something. It is especially out of fashion and perhaps ill-suited to use for a poet of Howe's allegiances: she came out of a phalanx grouped together as "Language Poets." Their innovation was, ostensibly, to perfect an anti-voice and more "grammatological"-typographical aesthetic based on the

written sign, rather than the spoken. This emphasis on text broke with the earlier, "breath"-based doctrines of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain School.

And indeed, Howe is a forerunner instrumental in carrying forward that new approach. She has taken the "grammatological" approach to its limit. Each book of hers, for a page or two, is stamped with an autograph device of hers: flattening pages into a zero-gravity choreography where the lineation is printed askew at all angles (usually toward the end of the book-length poem). The reader is then forced to tilt the book or hold it upside down to follow the topsy-turvy diagonals and upsidaisies, sometimes squashed word-under-word by narrowing the space between lines.

Rumble, Ken. "Review of *Bed Hangings*." *Rain Taxi* 6.3 (Fall 2001).

Susan Howe's latest collection of poems, *Bed Hangings*, focuses on a peculiar field of study—18th-century American bed frame decorations. As usual, Howe explores this specific subject until it connects with a much wider historical context: decorative arts of colonial America, religious awakening, and Puritanism. Howe does not simply recreate the history; she investigates by stringing together episodes along a narrative; she re-presents history with all its messy fragmentation. This approach is furthered by her mixture of modern-day vernacular and the esoteric language that 18th-century contemporaries used to describe bed hangings, vocabulary which then lends its antique sounds to the poems' lyricism. The words are like the "Surviving fragment of/ New England original/ bed hanging handsome/ cambleteen red curtain/ (1746) a sort of fine/ worsted cambels' Camet/ imitation camet strap/ To describe Camlet I will/ look into Chambers." The words are artifacts Howe arranges and rearranges, fighting the impulse to impose order on a chaotic historical record.

Bed Hangings, however, is also fun; it is a testament to Howe's prowess that she presents such a variegated vision of her subject. She moves through the poems with what one might imagine is a wry smile: "One of the perplexing questions/ on which members of the Bed/ Curtain Seminar were able to/ shed very little light was that of/ how early valences attached/ to the tester frame Technical Note/ Other rubbish a bottomless chair." Aided and abetted by Susan Bee's surreal and often funny illustrations, *Bed Hangings* achieves a rare synthesis of linguistic rigor and humor.