



A review of
Fabula Rasa's
poetry collections

Zoe Mitchell

A Midsummer Night's Press have published a broad range of titles which celebrate and demonstrate the vibrant heritage of mythology and folklore. The recent titles highlight the continued relevance of these ancient stories in the personal, social and political spheres. The startling, moving and often vivid work published under the Fabula Rasa imprint for mythic poetry inspires a fresh look at old stories.

The first title under the new imprint, *Fairy Tales for Writers* by Lawrence Schimel, explores the creative process through the lens of fairy tales. The poems in the collection show empathy for writers at all stages in their journey, from the absolute beginner to the published writer. The wry humour of Little Red Riding Hood casts a cynical eye over the vanity publishing process but is always sensitive to the writers themselves. The poem 'The Princess and the Pea' opens with 'The writing life is full of tests of authenticity', and the collection is certainly an authentic look at the writing life. Schimel takes universal stories and focuses them on the very specific challenges of writers in a way that will prompt laughter and tears, perhaps even both at once.

Fortune's Lover: A Book of Tarot Poems from Rachel Pollack uses the tarot deck in much the same way as early Renaissance writers, as a jumping-off point for creative expression. This compact collection embraces a wide range of forms and perspectives, bringing these iconic and timeless images into the modern world, as seen in the opening poem of the collection and the discussion of the Fool in a New York apartment 'twenty five stories over / Second Avenue'. While the collection isn't simply looking at the imagery as portentous symbols, it does not ignore their significance. In 'Wheel of Fortune', the speaker takes a clear-eyed view of fortune telling and the motivations behind it, suggesting 'We who read the cards / are Fortune's lovers'. The collection considers the depth and clarity of symbols and adds a fresh and sometimes challenging view of fortune telling.





Fairy Tales in Electri-City is one of two titles from Francesca Lia Block published under the Tabula Rasa imprint. This slim collection demonstrates the solace found in fairy tales and magical stories. The scope of the collection is vast, encompassing Prospero, vampires, centaurs and ancient gods. There is a quality of breathless wonder about the collection, both in terms of the stories being related and their telling. While magical tales are shown to provide comfort in difficult times, Block doesn't shy away from showing the sharp teeth of the real world. This is also

a very sensual collection; in 'Muse/Baby', the speaker asks, 'What does your muse look like? Is she fair or dark? / Does her hair smell like black tea / or chamomile? / ... does she wear a red dress or white? / velvet silk or antique lace that shreds in your hands?' The muse, like all the magical and fantastic creatures in the collection, is never just an abstract idea, and as a result, the poems linger in the imagination.

Roz Kaveney's *What If What's Imagined Were All True* is another example of the fantastic made real through poetry. Kaveney expands beyond mythology and into more modern perspectives from steampunk and science fiction. Kaveney uses the sonnet form to great effect. In the Orpheus sequence, the form supports an exploration of both the strictures and the possibilities of the original myth. The following two sections, What's Imagined and the Steampunk sonnets are further examples of the extensive possibility of the form and contrast in their perspective from limitless possibility to a very specific aesthetic and worldview.

Kaveney opts for free verse in the poem 'Engagement Present' and genuine warmth exudes from the work; what could have been one step removed from the story as the 'watcher' is in fact very much at the heart of it.



Lilith's Demons by Julie R. Enzer has a clarity and confidence that is mirrored in the certainty of the columns of poetry that explore an ancient story. While it is clear that the writer has extensive knowledge of the text, it is not the Biblical references as much as the humanity that shines through in this work. The work begins, 'I name them / as they seep / from my body', and the 100 demons of the Jewish tradition are unleashed throughout the collection, the weight of their demonic status balancing the energy of the poetry. There is something desperate about Lilith and her demons, for all

their power. As Zelda states, 'Lilith / feeds on the joy of others. / She cannot generate / her own happiness'. Despite this, and the fact that her garden is populated with barbed plants and unwanted animals – nettles, thistles, ostriches, billy goats, hyenas – 'Lilith's garden endures'. This suggests that the story is not complete and lends the poems a particularly haunting air which shows how this ancient tale remains relevant today.

Dead Girls is the second title from Francesca Lia Block under the Fabula Rasa imprint and is an arresting collection giving voice to the female experience. As female voices emerge from the collection, it's clear that there is a cost for this expression. In 'Handless', the creative use of footnotes shows how much is still left in the margins and, in contrast to the reception that women face in many circumstances, how much we usually accept without needing context or explanation from myths and fairy tales. These strident women accept responsibility for themselves – speaking about a modern Bluebeard on a skateboard, the speaker says, 'What scares me about Bluebeard / isn't that he killed me / but that I let him'. These are fully realised, autonomous women reaching out from the depths of stories and revelling in the magical impossibility of the poetry, where 'voiceless harpies sing'.



Given the high quality of the releases to date, the Fabula Rasa imprint looks set to be a jewel in the crown of the Midsummer Night's Press, with timeless tales reimagined for the modern era.

Authors: Lawrence Schimel, Rachel Pollack,
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