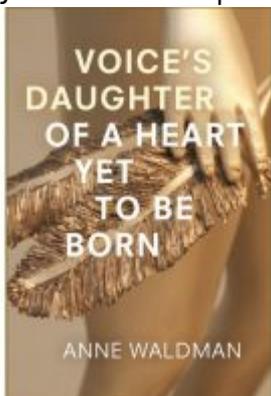


# Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to be Born by Anne Waldman

written by John Yohe | June 8, 2016



*Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to be Born* by Anne Waldman

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160 pages – [Coffee House](#) / [Amazon](#)

Anne Waldman is one of the poets who changed my poetry life when younger, changed how I thought about poetry, what it could do and what was possible. Growing up in conservative Jackson, Michigan, all the poetry I could find was either "The Raven" or "Charge of the Light Brigade" or maybe at best "Ozymandias." I did manage to find Ginsberg somehow (through Kerouac's fiction), and so began to see the potential wildness of contemporary poetry (which, still, "Howl" was about 35 years old by then).

Not until studying creative writing at Michigan State with Diane Wakoski (and a notable TA, now professor, named William Barillas) did I really even start to get my mind blown, with the likes of Charles Bukowski and (early) Sharon Olds. Diane would play recordings of poets in class, so we could hear their *voices*, which in some cases was a disappointment (like with Sylvia Plath and her British affectation) but mostly was another way to get my mind blown, in particular with Waldman. When I heard "Fast Speaking Woman" I was like, wow, poetry can have that much energy!? And still be deep!? And funny!? That poem is what I guess is now called a 'chant poem' with repeated phrases used to build a rhythm and energy, and in that sense, even while being an accepted part of mainstream poetry, Waldman, in my humble opinion, is the mother of performance poetry, even if performance poets may not know it (since, ok I'll say it, they don't seem to read much poetry besides each other).

Waldman went on, with Ginsberg, to found Naropa University, the only accredited Buddhist university in America, and the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, where she also teaches (including a performance poetry class), and explores more long-form (like book-length) poems, such as the *Iovis Trilogy* and *Marriage*, that I just could not get into as much, if only because they didn't seem to have that energy that I liked about her earlier poems. Or, that is, you just can't sustain that kind of energy over a whole

book. Plus, marriage, ugh.

I did, however, really like her last book *Manatee/Humanity*, which was a return to the chant poem, and I finally had the opportunity to see her read from it when she came through Ann Arbor in 2009. She was full of energy and had the room electric, even if, again in my humble opinion, she didn't need her son's recorded music to accompany her. But she's trying new stuff, experimenting, while keeping the interest poets had back in the 50s and 60s (and a little in the 70s) in combining poetry and music.

Because at her best, Waldman's poetry—the words and the *sound*—is close to music, and really comes alive when read out loud. So too with her latest, *Voice's Daughter of a Heart Yet to be Born*: I'd much rather be hearing/seeing her read it, than reading it, because somehow at a poetry reading I'm more likely to let go of an expectation about the poem 'making sense.' Which, much of this book kind of doesn't.

In an afterward called "Threads," which should have been the Introduction, Waldman offers some explanation for her poems—much of what she's doing is playing with the mythology of William Blake in the surrealist style of Artaud, two poets whom I happen to think are overrated (go ahead, crucify me), though I know many readers do like them: if so, if you're *really* into them, then this book may be for you. If not, and especially if, like me, you like to open a book of poetry randomly, you might be a little lost. Not that that's always a bad thing, but I really found myself not understanding, though wanting to understand, wanting to eagerly enjoy this book. Instead, I had to backtrack, try from the beginning, still not get it, consult "Threads," go, "oh," then re-delve. Once I kind-of got the Blake connection, I could start to understand that *Voice's daughter* is filled with the voices of (female) angels, either their voices, or a third-person narration of what they are thinking/feeling:

She exists as untested instance of conscious immortality, how can it be said she was born on such-and-such date in the year of or that she departed late and funeral rites followed. Obsequious clips in motion. A soul to rise. She overlords us. Now she stoops, she bends, she touches the earth. Earth her gravesite, maw opening is eternal witness, our own dysfunction. Labors for all of it, *perpetuam mobile*. Command of language forgotten of what she does no one even understands.

Note how the repetition of 'she' in "Solace" begins to tap into Waldman's use of chant. In small chunks this can be mesmerizing, and live, I'd love to just sit back and listen. On the page, after about this much, I begin to lose interest/focus. Which could say more about me as a reader than about Waldman.

At her most interesting here, her Artaud-like surrealism approaches a type of science-fiction poetry, like a few pages later (!) in "Solace" :

Movie measures enter the void samsara at dawn time, of dream of prophecy traveling in the bardo and come to birth and look at wombs to enter and they are metallic and glowing. All actors in place. Radioactive wombs in the Japanese love hotels. Please come enter here. Soundtrack from the

Antinomians. "But I feed not the little flowers because they fade away."  
Unborn is a steady state that defies suffering. Unsanctioned. Choiceless.  
Travel through sickness and pain and artifice before birth is constructed  
to hamper you. We are being tested. Our wounds. Come on in.

Whew. I don't know what the hell is going on here, but it *sounds* cool. *This*  
paragraph anyways. I think because of the shorter lines and fragments, which  
read more as a stream-of-consciousness. But remember this is one paragraph in  
a pages-long poem, which itself is part of a book of (I think?) connected  
poems, some prose, some not, some both.

Waldman is never going to get anything from *Voice's daughter of a heart yet  
to be born* read by Garrison Keillor on *Writer's Almanac*. She's not interested  
in being some kind of wise-woman to dispense pithy lines about living  
comfortably in white middle-class-ness. Waldman wants to be out on the edges  
of meaning where, notably, concepts like class don't really seem to apply. I  
guess I can't go out that far with her, not with this book anyways. But  
perhaps we need poetry like this just to broaden our expectations.

In any case, if you get the chance to hear her read, take it.