

☪ She Walks In a Darkness...of Her Own Making

She Walks in Darkness by Evangeline Walton, Tachyon, September 2013, 192 pp., \$14.95.

reviewed by Caren Gussoff

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Published posthumously, Evangeline Walton's novella *She Walks in Darkness* drinks deeply from the well of gothica: its elements include a crumbling castle in a ruined landscape; sinister secrets bound to the misdeeds of long-dead ancestors; a pair of well-fed innocents whose love is tested by a seductive villain; and the villain himself, a curdled example of pure evil on Earth.

In this specific case, Professor Richard and Barbara Keyes, newlyweds, arrive in rural, isolated Tuscany, a countryside scorched barren from within by underground volcanoes. Richard and his bride are to spend the summer at Villa Carenni, studying the remains of the underground catacombs built by the native Etruscans a thousand years earlier. The catacombs lie beneath the villa, but the influence of the ancient Etruscan society is as palpable in the small town as it was before the Romans. The villagers are still bound by its complicated hierarchies of breeding and honor, and are close-lipped concerning the fantastical urban myths about undiscovered Etruscan treasure hidden deep in the subterranean labyrinths, as well as the horrific rumors regarding the murderous tendencies of the villa's great owner, Prince Mino Carenni.

Richard and Barbara find the villa empty, and the action unfolds dependably. Richard has an accident and sustains a serious head injury, which leaves him unconscious, while Barbara discovers the body of the murdered villa caretaker at the bottom of the cellar stairs. She is too afraid, too weak, and knows too little Italian to get help, and instead dithers between sobbing over Richard and sobbing in the cellar. When the caretaker's body disappears, Barbara goes through the meat grinder, seemingly never to be whole again. Then a beautiful local Lothario, Floriano, comes to the Villa looking for the caretaker.

It takes exactly ten minutes of action before Barbara is tempted by the fruits of her young Italian savior. However, her desire doesn't portray her as a fleshly woman who is sensually aware. Instead, she seems to bend towards any man like a daisy towards the sun, and since her husband is out for the count, Floriano qualifies simply by showing up and seeming to want to help. Though Barbara ultimately rejects Floriano's aggressive advances, she does so with the force of an overcooked noodle. In fact, though things quickly go off the proverbial rails, the most authentic tension of the story develops from Floriano's rapeyness, as well as the fact that Richard is allowed to sleep while suffering an obvious concussion.

As the plot thickens, so does Barbara. It's not just that Walton closely follows genre conventions; it is that the reader can see the twists miles ahead of Barbara. Having a fool for a narrator can be an effective tool for constructing an excellently unreliable narrative, but in a romantic gothic mystery it's the narrative's undoing. We are not frightened with Barbara, we are not surprised with her, and we do not feel horror as the story literally descends into the depths of Hell. Barbara is a woman of all exclamation points and question marks, and so the power of the brutality that lies at the core of the murder, the accident, and the mythology of Prince Mino is never given its due. The careful research Walton conducted about the ways and lives of

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the ancient Etruscans and artfully wove into the book is stripped thin as it filters through Barbara to the reader. Stripped thinner is the reader's hope that Barbara will rise as the hero, growing stronger even as she grows weaker.

Walton (1907 - 1996) was known for the visionary, gender-fucking characters in her Mabinogion tetralogy. She herself was a feminist and pioneer, living as an independent, progressive artist working in an (at the time) overwhelmingly male genre. For those fans who know her thusly, *She Walks in Darkness* will prove a let-down. As a trifle, a perfectly formed, predictable specimen of the gothic lit that begat B movies, it's a perfect draught.

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Caren Gussoff is an SF writer living in Seattle. She's the author of *Homecoming* (2000), and *The Wave and Other Stories* (2003). Her new novel, *The Birthday Problem*, will be published by Pink Narcissus Press in 2014. Find her online at spitkitten.com.

SF and Fantasy in Mind-Expanding Mix (cont. from p. 15)

to her afterwards. "Firefly Epilogue" by Jodi Cleghorn is an interesting story that reveals its premise quite gradually; difficult to describe without spoilers, but I enjoyed both the pace of the reveal and the overall tone of it. "Shadows" by Kate Gordon concerns a young girl and her widowed father and the Shadows that accompany her; I especially appreciated the poetry that it includes. "The Ways of the Wyrding Women" by Rowena Cory Daniells is a fantastic tale of the intersection of many different kinds of power: political, patriarchal, magical, feminine, matriarchal. Like "By Blood and Incantation" it is not an easy story to read, but it packs a lot into its short length.

In any anthology not every story will work perfectly for every reader. One of my current pet peeves is stories that read more like fragments than complete tales, and that's a charge I'll level at "Indigo Gold" by Deborah Biancotti, as much as I love the heroine of this investigative-journalism-meets-paranormal-phenomenon story. Likewise, Cat Sparks's "Daughters of Battendown," an interesting look at a girl discovering the previously unglimped context of her society, left me with some unanswered questions.

But a wise editor like Wessely will choose stories such that the reader ends on a high note, and the final two stories do not disappoint. "Ella and the Flame" by Kathleen Jennings and "Morning Star" by DK Mok are two entirely different tales of people soldiering on in intolerable circumstances without giving up hope or giving in to despair. Both authors come very close to melodrama but manage to escape its clutches, instead giving us two views of strength and love. "Morning Star" especially, returning to the science fictional milieu I had expected to find originally, warmed my heart.

Some anthologies have a very narrow interpretation of a theme and hew to it closely. Others take a broader view, expanding every which way and introducing the reader to perspectives she may never have considered. While this was not the anthology I was expecting, it was an anthology I was glad to read. Did I forget to mention that all the authors involved are Australian women? If so, it should come as no surprise, considering the strength of the output we've had from that quarter over the last few years. One notable absence here is Margo Lanagan, but no editor can ever get every story she wants. I will be looking forward to more Wessely anthologies and more stories by these authors, with eager anticipation.

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Karen Burnham is vocationally an engineer and avocationally a fiction writer. She works at NASA's Johnson Space Center as an electrical engineer. She edits *Locus* magazine's *Roundtable* blog.

