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***Bad Bad* by Chelsey Minnis**

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CHELSEY MINNIS

Bad Bad (Fence Books, 2007)

When *Bad Bad* arrived in the mail I felt deliciously naughty. It looked like a Victoria's Secret box, a tin of pink popcorn, a candy-striper's uniform. And that title: "Bad Bad"—like something an anorexic carves into her upper thigh as self-admonishment for eating donuts—I wished I'd thought of it.

Inside: a charcoal drawing of a two-headed fawn. Hearts & Stars. *Bad Bad* looks like the notebook of a talented schoolgirl. Even the blurbs on the back—"...indulgent and melancholy...moments of extreme morbidity and anger"... "DECADENT! CHILDISH!"—give the impression that this is the Sofia Coppola film of poetry books.

It is, ultimately, a *girl's* book. More specifically, a girl poet's book. It delights the filthy, precocious fifteen-year-old in me beyond measure. But what to do about the shock of a "Preface" in sixty-eight parts? Or the discovery that the book is rife (yes, *rife*) with ellipses and exclamation points—you know, those things shaken out of us in poetry school lest we sound "...indulgent and melancholy..." Opening *Bad Bad* is akin to opening Dara Wier's *Reverse Rapture* for the first time: "Oh, dear!"

But anyone willing to give the book half a shake will soon realize that it redeems itself from most projected pitfalls on behalf of the reader. Fans of Minnis' first book, *Zirconia* (Fence Books, 2001) will nearly choke on their own delight. On the surface the books look very similar. *Bad Bad* lacks none of *Zirconia's* imaginative, sensual, or linguistic bravado, but it feels more mature—its daring-do feels fortified with intention, control, and *culpability*.

The Preface is partly responsible for this, teaching us how to read the book via the anathema: *Poems About Poetry*. It's unnerving how directly Minnis addresses her likely audience (fellow members of the PoBiz)—alternately bragging ("People say 'nothing new' or 'the death of the author' but, I am new and I am not dead"), self-flagellating ("My last book was very bad! I wrote it just for showing off..."), bemoaning the trappings of her craft ("I will never submit to fellowship committees...Because I do not like encouraging handwritten notes!"), speaking to every possible objection we might be inclined toward ("This is supposed to be very objectionable but it is not too objectionable, like

naughty beige...”), and thumbing her nose at fellow-practitioners:

I know what will be fun! I'll buy your book and ask you to sign it and then throw it in the trash.

Of all the beautiful rip-offs this will be my favorite...

Here is a book that reviews itself—reviews its own ambitions, bumbles, contradictions, and boasts (“I have not challenged myself in my failures”) and even addresses reviewers in the very first poem (“And all these blurbs are for s—. Like if I were to carry around a turd and pretend it's my baby...”)

It would be easy to dismiss Minnis for cheap theatrics and hubris, but she doesn't let us off the hook that easily. The shock value is tempered with joy, truth, and the utter delight of language. Yes, the book is self-indulgent, but only in service to its commentary on self-indulgence. It holds a mirror up to our own vanities, confessions, dramas and other “no nos” in serious contemporary poetry—it's quite liberating to watch her get away with it. In this way *Bad Bad* seems to have taken a spiritual cue from Bishop's “though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.” *Bad Bad* does nothing if not inspire readers to describe the experience of reading it by using its very own similes: “and it feels good...like a champagne bidet.”

Unfortunately, Minnis' ellipse-bejeweled formatting makes excessive excerpting somewhat impractical. But the use of ellipses allows the book to unfurl at a pleasing rate. The images and sensations are so vivid and numerous that we need these silences (be they pauses, spatial cues, or indicators of erasure) to maintain our enjoyment of *Bad Bad*, the way a gourmet French meal needs lemon sorbet between courses to cleanse the palate.

Kudos to Minnis for writing poetry that's fun, but never in service of a cheap joke. Minnis doesn't need hip lack of affect or pop-cultural droppings to drive her poems. Even if, as she states in “Anti Vitae,” she once was “Told [her] poems ‘lack agency,’” it's difficult to imagine somebody leveling that criticism at her now. Here is a poet with the full command of the English language, both past and present, at her service. If she has chosen to explode its possibilities rather than restrict them, she does it with conviction and clarity of vision. *Bad Bad* moves with a serpentine wisdom, venom, and grace—in and out of the Gordian knot of what it means to be a poet moving through the modern world, a chip of diamond on her shoulder.

Reviewed by Karyna McGlynn