
Mary Ann Caws. *To the Boathouse: A Memoir*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004. 204p.

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Introducing her memoir, Mary Ann Caws writes: "This tale was to be called an autofiction, as half-true as are all memoirs" (xi), and thus in part a novel like the one for which it is named. It reads like a novel, as inevitably the reduction of the multiplicities, simultaneities, and overdeterminations of the mind to the ordered sequences of language requires simplification as the price of intelligibility.

To the Boathouse recounts the weaknesses and strengths, losses and gains, deprivations and riches that have figured in the life of an illustrious scholar. In fact it is difficult to reconcile the picture of struggle that the memoir paints with the professional achievement of Caws, who has written a series of major studies of both literature and art, French, English, and American, of the twentieth century and has translated avant-garde French poetry as well. In this intensely personal memoir the achievement hovers vaguely in the background. Why did Caws write *To the Boathouse*? Why didn't she leave the monument to stand alone in its grandiose impressiveness?

Caws grew up in a North Carolina family in which there "were lots of things not to talk about" (11), with the result that as a young woman she "wasn't good at discussing" (66). It was also a family that regarded the ability to catch and keep a husband as a woman's most important attribute. "Darling," an aunt asks Caws, "darling, have you noticed the difference in the blue of your blouse and your skirt? It doesn't matter in the slightest, of course. But I know your dear mother would want me to ask" (31). Gradually through the catalytic breakup of a long marriage, Caws finds a voice, a geographic center in the boathouse in Central Park, and, inseparable from them, the strength of independence.

Food is a powerful symbol for Caws, both in its painterly sensuousness and its association with domestic life and responsibilities. The memoir includes recipes, and food plays a part in nearly every episode. For instance in the kitchen of Caws' cottage in the Vaucluse:

A bunch of dried flowers, blue and yellowish, with a few sprigs of white, rests on the round iron cartwheel suspended from a wooden peg at the side, and overhead hangs another larger cartwheel to hold the net bags of vegetables: purple aubergine, green squash, yellow onions. On the table, some old, uneven wooden platters and heavy bowls: piles of bright tomatoes, green beans, peaches and apricots. Different sizes of potatoes are heaped up in the woven baskets against the wall, where we keep our assortment of onions and long tresses of garlic, with a few lemons. (85-86)

Sometimes the table appropriates the intellect and imagination: “Do I cook the main course and then the soufflé, or can I prepare the basic part of the soufflé while I am going along? Do we have any Grand Marnier? I am using Bee Nilson’s *Desserts*. I am feeling used” (73); sometimes it empowers them:

I love in particular those crunchy Bordeaux cookies made by Pepperidge Farm. I am convinced I write anything better after them. When I was writing poetry, years ago, it was the thick taste of a milkshake and the sight of the drops condensing on the outside of the cold metal container they beat it up in. The way the traces would still mark the inside when some was poured out. (144)

The account of Caws’ marriage begins with two foreshadowing expressions of rage, both involving food. In the first, a disaster on the honeymoon, the bride’s careful preparation of her new husband’s three-minute egg is not to his satisfaction, and she responds to his request for another by hurling the egg and its cup to the floor. In the second, later incident, the faculty wife prepares, at her husband’s suggestion, food for a party for his colleagues, and then, in the presence of those colleagues, pours coffee all over the sandwiches, dips, and potato chips.

Caws belonged to the generation who came of age when marriage was all and everything that their families and their society expected of women, only to experience the dizzying expansion of their horizons with the feminism of the 1960s. Indeed her father objected to her being paid for her work, and her mother suggested that she respond to the acceptance of her second book by the Princeton University Press with a thank-you note on behalf of her parents as well as herself. Caws writes fairly and affectionately about the men to whom she was close and who disappointed her, like her father, her husband, and the poet René Char. She is less tolerant about others, with whom her relationships were brief and who appear in sequences of psychotherapists of both sexes and of the men she dated after her divorce.

In and through *To the Boathouse* she becomes the mirror image, identical and reversed, of her father. Injured and decorated for heroism in the First World War he lied about his age to fight in the Second, but while he manifested his heroism in reticence, his daughter publishes what she knows about both their secrets: “I’ve just seen my face in the mirror. Always a surprise. I look like my father, a thing I used to regret; but he had spunk and moral strength. My chin sticks out like his, as if I were determined. Don’t know to do what” (196). The book describes the private counterpart of Caws’ professional success in discovering the voice and the home, linked as in the experience of learning one’s first language, that were always already lost. ✱