

Bullet Points

two reviews

Stacy Flynn

2021

***Big Girl* by Meg Elison. PM Press 2020**

The body is the locus of authoritarian control in Meg Elison's *Big Girl* (number twenty-five in PM Press's Outspoken Authors series.) Gorgeously surreal, the collection includes speculative short stories, essays and an interview with Elison by Terri Bisson.

Elison, whose debut novel *Book of the Unnamed Midwife* won a Phillip K Dick Award in 2014, has a stunning emotional range. Her work can be prosaic, comic, rageful, grotesque and full of sorrow, all within the same piece, sometimes within the same sentence. The title story recounts, through news reports, the journey of a sixteen-year old girl who grows to enormous proportions. She wakes one morning with birds roosting on her eyelashes, she slogs through the San Francisco bay, she flicks away men who climb her, and she comes to occupy her own island like a B-movie monster.

Elison's prose is reminiscent of work by Kelly Link and Nell Zink; the oddness, the magic and the mythic take place in ordinary worlds. The verve and inventiveness of Elison's stories temper what could otherwise be a heavy-handed social critique, though it's when she savages the dominant culture, that the work is at its best.

The Pill, a story of a magic bullet pharmaceutical that permanently and painfully, cures fatness while killing many who take it—a final solution either way—dives deeply into the prohibition of, and the perverse fascination with, large bodies. A girl watches her mother shrinking, which affords the woman common respect and the admiration of strangers. So reviled is fatness this mother pressures her child to risk death in order to be thin. The wonder pill is so successful, the whole society is eventually transformed and fat people soon exist only in underground fetish clubs where they are paid simply to walk around, bathe, get dressed. Elison creates a lush and disturbing landscape—her near future dystopias rage against monocultures, repression, the state; excavating the fascination with women's bodies and how they are policed. She meticulously picks apart the small betrayals and complicities that comprise a culture based on shame, conformity and control.

Part way through his interview Bisson asks Elison if she ever wished she was smaller. After reading the collection you can almost hear her laugh. "If I had my way," she says "I'd be much, much bigger. My true form is fifty feet tall and made of gold, shrieking like Godzilla and eating whole oyster beds."

***Disorder* by Leslie Kaplan, translated by Jennifer Pap. AK press 2020**

Leslie Kaplan's *Disorder* is a rare delight; practical, comic and inspiring. At thirty-four pages, plus an afterword by the translator, this political fable is the most charming book about killing since Monique Wittig's 1969 classic *Les Guerilleres*, and far more egalitarian. Using an open setting and time period, and the light prose of a fairy tale, this tiny gem recounts a series of murders committed by clerks, wage earners, farm workers, household help, and

people stuck in poverty, noting only that they begin, out of nowhere, in the spring. These killings spread throughout the country, dispatching bosses of every variety, sparking philosophical conversation and debate.

“Other people who claimed in their own way to have a long view of the situation, pointed to the need to explain to the criminals that they were mistaken, they had chosen the wrong enemies, they should take aim at the system and not at individual cases. Still others laughed in their face and shouted back at them that the general only exists in the particular, and that the system without particular cases is a theoretical fantasy.

Featuring T.L Simons’ illustrations of a burning truck, blood splattered scissors, a gun, a wrench, *Disorder* takes its place in the canon of transgressive revolutionary literature alongside work by Virginie Despentes and Monique Wittig, and yet somehow it gives us more to hope for; the triumph of a collective practicality and common sense, the rejection of individual manipulation and insults to intelligence, the transcendence of a gendered interpretation of oppression. All of this is neatly summed up in the killers’ battle cries: “Stop. The. Bullshit.”

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/408-winter-2021/bullet-points>
Fifth Estate #408, Winter, 2021

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net