*Helen of Troy, 1993*, Maria Zoccola rev. by Arely Hernandez

Scribner

*Helen of Troy, 1993* is Maria Zoccola’s debut poetry collection. She has a BA in Writing and English from Emory University and an MA in Professional Writing from Falmouth University. Maria Zoccola is a queer writer from the South and currently teaches in Tennessee. Several of her poems in this collection were previously published in a range of literary journals such as *Alaska Quarterly Review, The Atlantic,* and *The Kenyon Review.* In her collection, Zoccola rewrites the Greek mythological figure Helen of Troy into a struggling Southern housewife in the 1990s Tennessee. Helen’s character is layered in conflict as she is caged into the box of wife and mother. Helen is our speaker for most of these poems, however, we are also offered an outside perspective of Helen’s life from a swan and the Spartan women.

Zoccola doesn’t make it necessary to be familiar with Helen’s Greek mythological background. Zoccola includes a family tree at the beginning of the book, showing parents and offspring. This is a reimagining of Helen, changed to suit the 1990s. Rather than Zeus transforming into a swan and raping Helen’s mother, Helen is given a typical nuclear family. The swan image is instead turned into our second speaker. And rather than being abducted by Paris, he is the one Helen has an affair with. Some characters are also never referred to by their real names but instead given nicknames. Paris becomes “The Stranger” and Menelaus is “The Big Cheese.” Helen being the only character referred to be her actual name reinforces her as the sole subject of this collection. She is telling her story.

Helen tells that story in a nonlinear timeline. The first poem opens with a more present-day moment in her life when she seems to be arguing with her neighbors. The next poem, separated by a section title “Sparta, Tennessee,” describes Helen’s birth from an egg. This nonlinear storytelling feels more intimate as Helen shares different points of her life. She shares both small and large glimpses into her life which have shaped her to be the woman we hear speaking in these poems.

Zoccola’s first poem “helen of troy feuds with the neighborhood” serves as an introduction for this reimagined Helen. She opens with confidence as she asserts herself as the main speaker of the poems. This is Helen’s story as she tells readers, “i want you silent. / i want you listening to me” (1). Despite Helen’s internal struggles caused by her housewife status, Zoccola never makes Helen’s character small. She maintains her rage and fierceness and is given the voice to tell her own story.

Helen’s emotions are limitless in her poems, flooding into the tones of Zoccola’s poems, from rage to boredom to a dissociative vulnerability. “helen of troy in the delivery ward” is Helen’s birthing of The Child: “i closed the space inside my mind where i lived / and became a thing made of oil and rag” (18). Zoccola shows the struggle of giving birth to a baby, highlighting the mental toll it can have on the mother. Her writing also speaks deeply to Helen as she births a baby she struggles to fully care for. Helen seemingly disassociates during her birthing process, which translates into the distanced relationship she has with her daughter. Zoccola’s collection is filled with vulnerability as Helen freely discusses even her most intimate thoughts with readers.

Helen often discusses her affair separately from the rest of her life. While most poems begin with “helen of troy...,” she separates her secret life by using “about the affair” and building on from that title throughout the collection. As she discusses her affair, she experiences a mixture of emotions:

“the blazing went on

until the dark came,

and the dark went on

for much longer than that.” (11)

This part of her life is separate from that of motherhood and wife. Although she willingly participates in this affair, she feels guilt and emptiness throughout it. There is also a distance she has with The Stranger, often pulling away from him emotionally or physically as he attempts to push the affair forward. Despite the appeal the affair had for Helen, she always steps back into the life she has built with her husband and child. There is a complexity to her decisions which leaves readers turning the page to read what she will do next.

Zoccola provides outside perspectives to Helen’s life, giving readers an even deeper understanding of this complex character. The Spartan women seem to judge Helen from a distance, acting as though they are a group of women in the town gossiping to one another. These women, however, can see the many different parts of Helen’s life, even her affair with The Stranger. They never villainize Helen but rather are intrigued by the complexity but also simplicity of her life. The swan is similar in its view, often referred titled as “interlude.” Its ability to see Helen is more limited, at some point examining her husband and child when it cannot locate Helen. The swan admires Helen more closely, considering smaller actions she takes, whereas the Spartan women remain vague to an extent. The swan is an animalistic tie to Helen as she was hatched from an egg while the Spartan women are her feminine connections, providing different understandings of her character.

Most of Zoccola’s poems are a single stanza, left indented. These simple forms are still rich in character development and language, giving a piece of Helen that is necessary to the story. Zoccola does occasionally play with form, making for a nice change in the collection, ranging from prose poems to using white space. Her spaced and indented poems reel readers back in as she shows new ways of telling Helen’s story on the page.

Zoccola also includes golden shovels, specifically the version of the *Iliad* translated by Robert Fagles. In her poem, “one more thing about the affair,” Helen describes an instance where The Stranger attempts to take a step further into their relationship, to which Helen reacts,

“the wrecks of half-sunk stills, skeletal deer, the

bone-clean breath of gods

of starving i can’t hear any voices. i can’t find a way to

call up my own blame” (44)

This form allows Zoccola to pay homage to her source of inspiration, specifically Fagle’s translation of the *Iliad.* Zoccola bridges together the Greek mythological version of Helen with her 1990s retelling, holding them together in these golden shovels.

Zoccola’s writing is imaginative as she creates various scenes in the different chapters of Helen’s life. Her language and sound choices help elevate the image she puts down on the page. In “helen of troy meets the big cheese,” Helen describes the weather, “---sopped with rot and soft with death--- / drop together to the pine needle core of the forest floor,” (16). There are repeated “s” and “f” sounds in these two lines, an auditorial additive to the visual of fallen leaves. Zoccola’s diction is dark, rooted in deathly imagery in a poem meant to describe the first time Helen meets “the big cheese.” This poem demonstrates how unfocused Helen is toward her husband as she fixates on the weather, carrying her emotion through the winter occurrences. The weather is a connection to the disconnection she feels in her relationship with the man she married. In turn, just like the weather, Helen and her husband will die together, alongside each other—‘til death do them part. Zoccola’s imagination carries complexities through her words as readers dig through layers of snow.

Zoccola’s debut poetry collection is imaginative and fueled with the complex emotions of a 1990s housewife version of Helen. While paying respect to the original version of her muse, the Helen that Zoccola creates throughout her poems is intriguing to readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the Greek mythos; any will enjoy listening to Helen as she shares her life through Zoccola’s powerful storytelling.