In the mind of Ayako, an old woman in exile on a mountain in medieval Japan, nothing is certain, and nothing holds a familiar shape for long. This is a map of a psyche exalted and destroyed by solitude, and on its contorted surface Shinto philosophy, Greek mathematics, Hawaiian goddesses, Egyptian legend, quantum physics, and Babylonian myth meet and merge... In Catherynne M. Valente's second novel since the critically acclaimed The Labyrinth, language and myth construct a strange new geography of the self. This is The Book of Dreams: open it and walk the shadowy paths of this extraordinary landscape.

My Personal Review:
Catherynne M. Valente, Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams (Prime, 2005)

Sometimes I feel as if I should have a "five-and-a-half star" ranking. I've given a lot of books five stars in the past couple of years-- more five-star reviews than I'd given out in the decade before, almost. (Blame my getting a library card again, and thus not being limited to my own books.) But there are some books that transcend even the five-star rating, that are not only outstanding works of art, but that are so beautifully written that they deserve a place on the short shelf of sacred literature. The benchmark, for me, of this trait has long been Wendy Walker's The Secret Service, the book I consider the most beautifully written and constructed book I've ever read. Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams is the first book I've come across since reading The Secret Service that rises to the same level.

Throw away your conceptions of what a novel is before cracking the cover on this one. All the stuff you got taught in English class, chuck it out the window. Yume No Hon is character study in its purest form. The problem is, you've got an autobiography from the most unreliable of narrators (cf. Lauren Slater's Excellent Lying, to which this bears a passing resemblance more than once, were our main character epileptic and living in America); every time you think you've got an answer as to Ayako's real nature, you're
likely to turn around and find yourself with many more questions. It's the mimetics of creative nonfiction, but turned around and attached to fiction; is Ayako dying and delirious, or possessed by powerful spirits? Is she ghost, hermit, memory, God? Ultimately, the answers to the questions don't matter (though the very end of the book does offer the reader a chance to resolve them); the journey, rather than the destination, is the point here.

And what a journey it is. Valente's language is lush, rich, precise, every word slotted into place with painstaking care. While reading this, I found myself with a constant sense of overwhelming rightness in word choice ("rightness" here as opposed to "suitability;" a Dennis Lehane or George R. R. Martin novel contains suitable language, but the sentences could be phrased in many ways and still get the point across; the right language is that place where you think that there really is no better way to phrase something). The book is rich with striking, original metaphors and turns of phrase that will have the lover of beautiful language scrambling for a notebook to copy it all down. Buy two, actually; you may end up filling one completely before you're done.

While the one negative effect of all this is to highlight the book's few typos (and, comparatively, there are very few; if memory serves, I found five, and two of them were arguable), this is one of those exceptionally rare pieces of work where stumbling upon a typo became something forgivable.

Yume No Hon belongs with Walker's The Secret Service, McCarthy's Blood Meridian, Koja's Strange Angels, and a handful of other novels on the short shelf of sacred literature-- the first stuff you save when your apartment catches fire. It is a small jewel, to be read, pondered, re-read, and (for novelists) aspired to. Find a copy. Read it. *****

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