

BRINGING THE HIDDEN INTO THE LIGHT

a review by Moira Crone

Elaine Neil Orr. *Dancing Woman*. Blair, 2025.

MOIRA CRONE was born in Goldsboro, NC, and studied writing at Johns Hopkins University. She has published three short story collections and three novels, including *The Ice Garden* (Carolina Wren Press, 2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016). For many years, she taught in the MFA program in creative writing at Louisiana State University, directing the program from 1997 until 2002. In 2009, she received the Robert Penn Warren Award for fiction from the Fellowship of Southern Writers for her body of work. Her dystopian work of eco-fiction, *The Not Yet* (University of New Orleans Press, 2012) was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award for science fiction paperback of the year. Read Jim Grimsley's John Ehle Prize interview with her in *NCLR* 2020, which featured expatriate North Carolina writers.

OPPOSITE Sweet Spirits on the Porch, 2024 (oil and collage on canvas, 36x24) by Moira Crone

Dancing Woman by Elaine Neil Orr is a wise and suspenseful story about a young woman's desire to find herself and realize her artistic potential. The novel will hold readers in its thrall.

It's the early 1960s. Isabel Hammond has followed her husband Nick, an American agricultural agent, to Kufana, Nigeria. She left Virginia a young bride barely out of college, hoping to abandon "the past of inchoate inadequacy and invisibility [and] discover some means of expressing her soul" in an ancient land (43). In Africa, however, she is lonely and alienated. Her husband is absorbed in his work. She is ignorant of local customs. Her inner spirit is stifled, and she realizes she desires the soaring holiness of an artist's path, outside the horizontal, the quotidian. She has two quests – one, for a harmonious, normal, family life in a foreign country, with a husband she loves, and another, "for a larger expression of her inner world, to join . . . with a sweeping unifying force . . . between the visible, the felt, and the imagined" (49).

As a result, the novel has two stories: in the first, we have Isabel struggling to be a good wife, lover, mother, and caregiver. We observe her sewing dresses, creating a garden, seeking potions to rekindle her husband's desire, confiding with her friends, trying

to find a few moments for herself. We witness her seeking to improve the lives of the locals, to have a charitable impact where she can, to understand this world. But Orr is not creating a "white savior" in this novel; rather, her experiences in this new culture make it possible for her to save herself.

The expat community in Nigeria is vivid; people of wide-ranging backgrounds are pressed together, creating a forced intimacy, mutual support, and a lot of gossip, in an unfamiliar exotic, seductive land. This aspect of the novel resembles many stories of the British in India, or Americans in Asia, the Pacific, and Africa, from the last two centuries. Yet Orr's rendering of it is full of fresh sensuality and specificity: local music has notes "flitting like fireflies" (73). A sturdy generous Dutch woman "smell[s] like rose dusting powder and starch"; an overgrown garden's squash plants are "big leafed and bossy" (67). Many secondary characters, white and Black, are well developed as we follow them through the years. Isabel's relationship with her steward Daniel, a member of the Tiv ethnic group, is especially well drawn. And while there may be a touch of romanticizing in Isabel's view of the black male singer with whom she becomes

involved, he is a very fully realized character, his reactions and behavior, given the complex situation that takes place, are not exoticized. The novel inverts and rearranges the social arrangements and relationships between white and black characters, in comparison with older stories about Europeans in developing countries. While characters of color are seen as "background" to the essential tale in older fictions in such settings, in Orr's novel, black characters are central to the plot and change the entire meaning and trajectory of the protagonist's life.

The episodes of the vertical story – of the deeper path Isabel is seeking – hold an entirely different energy. She finds an ancient, mysterious sculpture, possibly of a goddess, buried in her backyard. When the gifted singer comes into her life, his "grace" (48) and "magic" (202), whose very touch, awaken something inside her that she thought she had left behind. He tells her at one point, "*We must bring the underground up*" (68). What is more, he appears and reappears in her life, with seeming clairvoyance about her circumstances. The novel also includes a chief in the role of an ancient wiseman in a parable, insisting she learn what the discovered sculpture is trying to "tell [her]" (52). This chief also seems to know Isabel's secrets. We have infant twins, who, in Nigerian folklore, carry a single soul. This thread of the novel is archetypal. Due to Orr's skill, however, it is entirely believable that the mundane and the sacred exist side by side. The magical musician is a recording



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

star. The chief wears glasses and is worried about people stealing his mangos. The twins are Isabel's own babies. In this novel, Orr illustrates the merger of the numinous and often unconscious mystery of existence with the everyday. This very coupling, we learn, is what the practice of art means to the protagonist.

The novel also abounds in beautifully rendered scenes of Isabel's explorations as a painter, where the two levels, mundane and sacred, she hopes, work in unison. She is delighted by the pure joy she feels when concentrating on capturing

a scene in watercolor. But early on, it also makes her feel ashamed, and isolated:

She started with the pale leaves. The slightly off-kilter angle of the trellis. There was one hibiscus blooming, off to the side, but she moved it to fit her composition. . . . [S]he found the curve of the chameleon's back, the greater curve of his tail, the essential eye, the non-committal mouth. Her brush seemed to move of its own accord, inspired by a force beyond her but also part of her. But who would celebrate with her, or understand? She walked about the yard, ecstasy in her arms. Her chest expanded with her power. Isabel carried the painting inside, tiptoed past her family . . . (in the extra room). Then, in a squat, hands clasped,

ELAINE NEIL ORR is an English professor at NC State University, and she serves on the faculty of the brief-residency MFA in the Writing Program at Spalding University. She is the author of two scholarly books, *Tillie Olsen and a Feminist Spiritual Vision* (University Press of Mississippi, 1987) and *Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women's Fictions* (University of Virginia Press, 1997). Her memoir, *Gods of Noonday: A White Girl's African Life* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), was ranked by Book Sense second among university press books of the year. Her first novel, *A Different Sun* (Berkley Publishing Group/Penguin Books, 2013), was a SIBA Bestseller. Orr had won fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the North Carolina Arts Council, and she is a frequent fellow at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Read the interview Kathryn Stripling conducted with Orr in *NCLR* 2015.

elbows between knees, Isabel lowered her head and sobbed. (143)

As a painter myself, I found the rendering of the pleasure, agony, and serendipity of the practice on point. The sense of embarrassment and the fear of losing track of time and place, and a family's needs, when in the soar of creativity, will be familiar to young mothers everywhere who pursue any private art.

Isabel wants to hide her paintings at first. Even more, she wants to conceal the eruptions of the mythic, which insist on asserting themselves in her everyday life. Her alarm is riveting and thoroughly relatable. Eventually the consequences of her desires and their fruition threaten to destroy her family, and herself. Orr creates a strong sense of suspense up to the last few pages.

The beautifully rendered setting and incidents bear comparison to classic works about women of European descent struggling for a new sense of significance and self in a foreign culture. Works by Isak Dinesen and Rumer Godden come immediately to mind. Orr's novel, however, is not a repeat of these former classics. The book is in part, a commentary, and a soulful undoing of the distances between cultures, between European and African ways of being.

Though the book portrays existences a world away, the life of the soul within is always here and now. A riveting book about art in life, *Dancing Woman* invites its readers to bring the hidden into the light, discover its true nature, and allow it to shine. ■