

WHAT BLOOMS IN THE WILDWOOD?

a review by Amber Knox

Marly Youmans. *Seren of the Wildwood*. Wiseblood Books, 2023.

AMBER KNOX has an Associate in Arts degree from Pitt Community College as well as a BA in English from East Carolina University. She recently completed her master's degree at ECU, with a CAP (Comprehensive Assessment Project) on the National Book Award winning novel *Hell of a Book* by North Carolina writer Jason Mott. During her time at ECU, she worked as an NCLR intern and editorial assistant.

MARLY YOUMANS is the author of fourteen books of poetry and fiction, including *Charis in the World of Wonders* (Ignatious Press, 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). Her novel *The Wolf Pits* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001) won the Michael Shaara Award for Excellence in Civil War Fiction. She is a two-time winner of the Theodore Hopfner Award for short fiction and winner of the Ferrol Sams Award for Fiction for her novel *A Death at the White Camellia Orphanage* (Mercer University Press, 2012). Read an interview with Youmans in *NCLR* 2004, and find links to more reviews of her work in *NCLR Online* via our [Book Review Index](#).

The book-length poem *Seren of the Wildwood* by Marly Youmans is an intriguing exploration of not only the dangers of growing up in a sometimes-predatory society, but also the strength of the human spirit. The main character, Seren, deals with several traumatic losses and violent confrontations in this fantastical narrative. Between her parents' grief, which damages their relationship with each other and makes them protective of their daughter, and the dangers she encounters within the liminal boundaries of the wildwood, Seren experiences tremendous pain and personal difficulty, but she is shown that there are also "paths to blessedness" (1) and a capacity for love and beauty in the world. Through this young girl's relationships with her family and with the wider world outside her childhood home, Youmans explores human nature and personal growth in the wake of grief and trauma. By presenting this story as a book-length narrative poem, she also highlights the emotional and spiritual impact of Seren's journey and links *Seren of the Wildwood* to the tradition of classic narrative poems and fairy tales that shape the modern literary world.

Youmans's poem focuses on the life of a young girl, Seren, whose family lives on the edge of "a place / Of paradise and hell and mundane hours" (62) known as the wildwood. According to Youmans, "The wildwood is a tough / Terrain, yet beauty springs / Like diamonds from the rough" (1). This description could also apply to the events of Seren's life, which is haunted by tragedy yet still blessed by the love of her family and the beauty of the wildwood. At the start of the poem, we are introduced to

Seren's family, her mother, father, and two older brothers. When Seren's father expresses his wish for a daughter, it seems as if he is heard by something in the nearby mysterious woods, where "everything that says the world is not / Exactly what it seems is hidden" (1). His wife soon becomes pregnant with Seren, with disastrous consequences for their sons who immediately become sick: "The infant in her mother's belly thrived / As if she drank her brothers' strength away" (4), until Seren enters the world just as her brothers are leaving it. This strange and tragic beginning gives Seren's existence a sense of mystery.

Despite her birth being accompanied by tragedy, Seren's childhood is relatively happy, even while marred by family grief and her parents' fear that she will meet a fate similar to her brothers'. She grows up surrounded by the "summer buds and flowers washed by sun / And tended by the buzz of honeybees" (5) on the edge of the wildwood and is loved and protected by her parents. However, much like the wildwood themselves, the beauty in Seren's life is accompanied by pain. Her childhood is also "twisted and confused / By living close to death, by childhood grief" (56) for the two brothers she never got to know. The ghosts of the two little boys are as much a part of Seren's family as her living, grieving parents. She often dances at her brothers' graves and sings for them, "As if they listened from the ground and knew" (8), and the trauma of their loss has a lasting impact on Seren's life. Her father is cold and angry after the death of his older children, while her mother is nearly mad

with grief. Perhaps only love for their daughter can pull the parents from their mourning and they hold tightly to the young girl. Seren is placed in the role of "infant savior who must live / And never dare to go adventuring / In realms inhabited by mysteries" (10). Her parents love her, but Seren also finds their love and care somewhat restrictive. She is a curious child who "dashed along the forest's crooked edge, / Daring the hidden beings in the trees / To come into the sun and show themselves" (8). Despite her parents' protectiveness, Seren wants to explore and learn about the world. In these circumstances, her mother's wish for her to stay safe at home is never destined to be fulfilled.

When the call of the wildwood becomes too much, and Seren can no longer ignore the "Siren hum of nature / That lured the child to come, / To see, to adventure" (6), she finally ventures away from the boundaries of her childhood existence and begins to explore the larger world on "unfamiliar, darker paths / where light came spindling down through thicket leaves" (14). Seren's childlike naivety makes itself clear as she wanders further from her parents' home. Reality in the wildwood is confusing and malleable, and Seren is unprepared to deal with its harshness. She quickly finds herself deceived, assaulted, and left to "weep for hurt, / For high indifference and lack of love" (20).

However, danger is not all that Seren encounters in the wildwood. Seren meets several

friendlier characters within the boundaries of the wildwood who offer her a chance to heal and take the first steps "upon the way to something else" (36). The attention of these otherworldly characters and the time she spends in the wildwood with them help Seren reach a better understanding of herself, her family, and the world around her. The narrative's roots in classic fairy tales begin to show as Seren grows and matures through her interactions with the mysterious denizens of the wildwood. Although Seren encounters demons and evil kings on her journey, there are no "stout-hearted, noble knights" (19) to save her. The denizens of the wildwood offer guidance, but Seren is forced to face her greatest obstacles, both internal and external, on her own.

This tale is a beautifully written exploration of a liminal world beyond the fabric of reality "where gates / To other times and other regions serve / As passageways for beings, good or ill" (45). The emotionally impactful language of this poem draws the reader in. Youmans's choice of this lyrical format to tell Seren's story is much

more than aesthetic, however. The cadence of the poem and the sense of time stretching and bending give the story a dream-like quality reminiscent of classic fairy tales.

Seren of the Wildwood is a captivating narrative that takes place in an intangible reality where fairies and demons roam, wishes are granted with disastrous consequences, and questions are often left unanswered. By calling on themes of good vs. evil, and the coming of age of a young and isolated girl, and through references to Snow White, "witch's apples" (15), and "a secret princess in a tower" (8), Youmans reaches back in time and reconnects with the classic tales that have served as the foundation of so much of our modern literary world. However, much like its literary ancestors the basis of *Seren of the Wildwood* is much simpler and more relatable than it at first appears. At its heart, this is a story about a young girl growing up and discovering who she is while also being forced to face more complex ideas about family, love, trauma, and all of the confusing, conflicting realities that life contains. ■



RIGHT Marly Youmans (right) and Sally Thomas at Goldberry Books, Concord NC, 2023