An Auto-Erotic History of Swings
by Patricia Young

Reviewed by Anna Mioduchowska

Alright, so I can’t get a smile off my face while writing this review, but bear with me. I suspect that Havelock Ellis, sexologist, physician and social reformer in Victorian Britain, whose six-volume Studies in the Psychology of Sex inspired Patricia Young’s latest poetry collection, would have the same reaction. The very capable and much awarded Patricia Young might already have nine poetry collections and one book of short stories to her name, but the poems in An Auto-Erotic History of Swings exhibit the fresh-faced vitality of a seventeen-year-old throbbing with lust.

There are so many ways to explore the flesh. Young has chosen to play – with language, with Ellis, and with our expectations. She is exuberant and funny as she focuses her imagination on the art of making love, conception, fetishes, masturbation and prostitution, or explores the power of scent and dreams. Nothing is taboo here, which itself becomes a subject of “Taboo-Girl,” inspired by Ellis’s comments on sex during menstruation. The poem is a hymn of triumph a young girl sings to herself in defiance of what her elders are muttering in the background. You’ll like the ending.

Some of the poems are voluptuous canvases. “The Great Peasant Girls,” which reminds me of Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, depicts a whole village engaged in a great orgy of lovemaking between the peasant girls and “The clodhopper in wooden clogs / The boy who sharpened the knives / The blacksmith’s son / The earl / The idiot boy / Why: / Because our lives were tallow candles / Because a chunk of stale bread and raw onion / Because hooks / unhooked themselves and light drained from the sky” (24–25). Ellis likens these peasant girls to “ardent . . . mares in heat” (24). Young takes away nothing away from the fun they might be having as she quietly directs our attention to the other kinds of hunger present.

Ellis’s women are powerfully sensual beings in a world where power rest in the hands of men; Young’s women engage in subversions. I love her use of hyperbole. In the pungently erotic “Fruiting Bodies,” Christian asceticism is juxtaposed against the power of desire. “Dear Lord,” prays a desperate practitioner of abstinence,

... let me not love the pungent mornings
she tromps through wet salal, hunting honeycomb

morels at the base of tree trunks . . .
let me not

love her pail of fruiting bodies, or fall on my knees
for the hens of the woods . . .

... let me
unlove the wavy-capped one whom I love with a
fecund and overlapping joy. For even a glimpse
of her, muddy-kneed and bearing a sack of peppery
chanterelles, I would crawl though humus and dung
the length of three score and ten worlds. (58–59)

Young does not ignore the dark side, yet she presents it from the perspective of a distant God
watching children play “pa and ma” (18) with the ferocity of adults. Incest is the theme of “Devil
Lover.” In “Conversation,” a nobleman’s lyrical paean to his favourite concubine’s tiny foot is
followed by her matter-of-fact account of how she broke her feet herself as a child because her
mother was dead. I can almost see her shrugging her shoulders as she speaks.

Young uses no fixed form but the poem’s shape invariably enhances the content. Most of the
poems are written in free verse, some march or boogie down the page in tercets or quatrains, some
look like a question and answer form used by a researcher. The delicious title poem is a compilation
of ways women have used swings, a list poem. “Night-Running,” one of my many favourites, is an
excellent example of Young’s ear for rhythm.

The book is divided into three sections. Quotations from Ellis’s work serve as springboards to all
the poems in the first section, and Young reaches across the globe and time for her narrators and
images. In the second, quieter section, we find ourselves mostly in the present. Language changes
markedly to reflect the power shift and today’s rituals of courtship, marriage, sex for fun. Still, even as
women can openly enjoy the flesh, they are subject to the same heartbreaks: unwanted pregnancy,
divorce, and death, with the added environmental problems.

The third section is one long poem, the wistful “In God’s Last Words.” It’s a good example of
how to avoid being preachy while preaching a sermon on the importance of love. Young has God use
boating language to bless and to warn before leaving us. “And I said, Let / there be choice. Let the
choices multiply and fill the earth. / Let sex occur in humble vessels with or without oars, / and let the
oars carved with simple tools (saw, axe, chisel) / feather the coastal waters . . . / Let every gaff-rigged //
ketch sail to and from the green islands . . .”(107) Unrhymed couplets allow even more light and
breathing space on the page.

As in every collection, there are a few poems that don’t quite rise to the occasion, but that does
not affect the quality of the whole. Buy this lovely book. It’s a steal at $14.95. 

Anna Mióduchowska’s poems, translations, stories, essays and book reviews have appeared in
anthologies, journals, newspapers, on buses, and have aired on the radio. In-Between Season, a poetry
collection, was published by Rowan Books. Eyeing the Magpie, a collection of poetry and art, was
published in collaboration with four fellow poets.

Buy An Auto-Erotic History of Swings at McNally Robinson Booksellers (click on the line below):