A Woman Clothed in Words
by Anne Szumigalski, selected and edited by Mark Abley

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Embodied in a wonderful cover illustration, the title A Woman Clothed in Words is a phrase twice abducted, from a Szumigalski poem which, like a shaman’s robe, is itself woven from sacred flotsam, favourite lines from Patrick Friesen, into an homage to him, “The Thin Pale Man” (91). The duality is most appropriate. The late Anne Szumigalski (1922–1999), winner of a Governor General’s Award for poetry, lauded for many publications, is remembered also most fondly by writers in prairie communities for the groundbreaking work she did in supporting and promoting (dare I say, even birthing) other great art and artists. She participated in the founding of organizations such as the Saskatchewan Writers Guild and publications such as Grain and Prairie Fire, which continue to enable and encourage workers of the spoken and written word.

“Why in the world, you might be wondering, would Coteau want to publish yet another [a fourth] posthumous book?” editor Mark Abley, Szumigalski’s literary executor, asks in his introduction (i). In his acknowledgements he thanks Andris Taskans, executor of the estate, and family members, Kate Bitney and Frances Bitney (156). The reasons Abley lists for the publication of this volume include: to offer an overview of four decades of a writing life; to show Anne Szumigalski’s “[struggle] to find and fine-tune her voice” (i), including the range of names under which she wrote, submitted, and published – Nancy Davis, Anne Howard Davis, Howard Davis, A. Szumigalski; to celebrate the variety of forms she employed; and as a “celebration of the excellence of her work.”

A Woman Clothed in Words is another answer to the late Robert Kroetsch’s seminal question, How do you grow a poet? (Seed Catalogue, 1977). Abley discusses Szumigalski’s struggle with her roles as housewife and poet, her artistic isolation, her continued determination to submit work for publication, and the value she placed on workshopping her writing, for affirmation and editorial input. “She thrived on both friendship and contention” (ii), he says; Szumigalski talks about “that sacred family, the closely knit poetry group,” in “Poetry Workshops – Some Practical Advice” (41).

Abley’s organization of the volume helps show how an English girl, a volunteer during World War II, a young immigrant bride, becomes a “prairie poet,” and the difficulty of the transition. We can see in the selections how she starts out with a kind of translation, picking an English form and adding Canadian content, a familiar strategy in the work of many first-generation Canadians. Longing for history “on a wide river that has never run with blood” (“Three Facets of the Poet’s Dilemma” (6), suggests how becoming a prairie poet means learning to see what is here rather than what is not here. “I still miss the sea though,” she confesses in “Beginnings” (22), where she also says, “I write mostly about people, their tragedies and loves and quirks.” She could have added, about their dreams; their migrated mythologies, Old World stories enacted in a new landscape, ancient heroines in the fields and streets of today; and stories inspired by headlines, such as the bog bodies being resurrected (“People of the Bog,” 30); and reactions to other poets – “To Mr. L., a Puritan” (7) and “The Thin Pale Man” (85–91).

Abley also highlights the “rich and perhaps surprising proof of the variety of forms in which Anne worked” (iii). He includes prose poems, children’s stories, plays written for church or stage.
Although Szumigalski won the Governor General’s Award for poetry, Abley writes that “Anne was, in short, not just a poet but a writer who tried her hand at a variety of genres” (iii). He stresses her fearlessness, her imagination. “Words were among her passions, and the interplay between language and the female body shapes much of her work” (iii). Recurring images of dance also make this link between sound, rhythm, movement, and body. He points out her major influences – William Blake, the King James Bible, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, Samuel Beckett (in her dialogues “reimagined by a woman,” iv). I would suggest, as she says in “The Child as Mother to the Woman” (79), that they also include Mother Goose and, with absolutely no hard evidence, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. She seems to have appropriated from Blake the angels as her muses, sources of divine inspiration.

The organization of this volume is chronological, divided into three sections based on the estimated years in which the works were written. It seems somehow encouraging that this great poet was not born fully formed out of the head of Zeus; rather that she developed in the fertile soil of a somewhat eccentric family obsessed with words and word play, as she describes in “The Whitwalk” in her memoir The Word, The Voice, The Text: The Life of a Writer. Anne was a young woman emerging during years of war in Europe, the wife of an outsider, living the life of a stranger in a strange land. We can see the link between biography and art, how sensory, lived experiences become prompts for a flight of word-based imagination. We are reminded of how she loved to use rhyme the way Shakespeare does, as a signal, but also as a little bow, tying, finishing off the parcel, the gift.

This volume, as Abley suggests is one of his goals, makes me turn to the half-dozen Szumigalski volumes on my bookshelves that I treasure, to reread the books published during her lifetime. Longing to recapture the sounds, the rhythms. Still unable to decide on a favourite. Woman Reading in Bath. The Word, The Voice, The Text. Journey/journey. My only fear is whether A Woman Clothed in Words would do that for readers unfamiliar with her voice, her fifteen previous publications. Are the selections here strong enough to convince new readers of the value of her published works?

A Woman Clothed in Words has planted an image in my brain of a one-woman show, a dramatic monologue. It would be called some goddess name, perhaps Anna, or “not just a poet,” and it would celebrate, through costume changes, text, and dance, the body of her work.

Anne Szumigalski’s is a voice one wants to hear again and again. 

J.M. Bridgeman writes from British Columbia’s Fraser Valley. jmbridgeman@telus.net

Buy A Woman Clothed in Words at McNally Robinson Booksellers: