

This Thread of Gold

Catherine Joy White (Dialogue Books, 2023)

Disobedient Bodies

Emma Dabiri (Profile Books, 2023)

Review by Shara Atashi

Catherine Joy White has created an exceptional system of storytelling mingled with memoir and social observation: *This Thread of Gold*, an imaginary tapestry made of true stories about brazen women, begins with two true accounts, one about a 'Bible quilt', the other about sea silk. Together, they enable the reader to see the interconnectedness of womanhood through symbols.

A fascinating allegory frames the book. Sea silk is a rare golden thread obtained from an endangered giant mussel called *Pinna nobilis* found on the bed of the Mediterranean Sea. White's account begins with Chiara Vigo, the only woman who

still dives into the depths to collect the thread for fine textile and embroidery. This craft has been passed down by 28 generations of women within her family. The Bible quilt was the creation of Harriet Powers, a freed woman, who formed her favourite Bible stories with 229 separate pieces of fabric sewed together.

White handpicks her stories as delicately as Chiara Vigo collects sea silk and connects them as passionately as Harriet Powers threads her Bible quilt. Although the pulse here is African, the women addressed, through the ages, are of all ethnicities.

Women from White's family are woven into her tapestry along with the characters she celebrates. Nancy Green, formerly enslaved, nanny, activist, and model who 'burst into the public eye in 1893' as Aunt Jemima on the American pancake box was freed from the 'Mammy' racial stereotype when the Black Lives Matter movement forced the manufacturers to change the product design. Also invoked is Hattie McDaniel, the inspiring first African American winner of the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

White breaks the trope of 'strong women' attached to female survivors overcoming severe hardship. She writes particularly of black women: 'It is time to shift away from

the narrative that prohibits black women from being able to experience the full range of their feelings.'

White breaks down the boundaries between serious literature and popular music, which 'has woven its way through each word'. The naming of chapters after songs from a soundtrack shape her narrative. Listening to the music while reading adds a rewarding texture to the book. The chapter 'Reinvention', for instance, is accompanied by Hattie McDaniel's passionate voice singing *I Thought I'd Do It*, and the story of her burden rises into a new light.

If this innovative work finds its way into schools, universities, and society generally then it will, to use a Persian phrase, send the fragrant breath of its message from house to house.

On the same scroll of reinvented womanhood, Emma Dabiri moves female defiance to a theoretical level in a nimble navigation through the complexities of today's beauty debates. In *Disobedient Bodies*, Dabiri attempts to redefine female disobedience by deconstructing existing opinions about 'the forces of social control that shape our relationship to beauty'.

Analysing Naomi Wolf's seminal text *The Beauty Myth* (1990), Dabiri reflects on how the debate has evolved with women facing additional challenges today. Wolf observes an 'obsession with physical perfection that traps modern women in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness and self-hatred' in their attempt to satisfy society. Dabiri, however, explores modern day challenges that are just as demobilising as opposed to leading an authentic, healthy lifestyle: 'Our bodies [are now] constantly under surveillance' as the smartphone supersedes adverts and glamour magazines, intruding into women's life, along with images of unhealthy beauty procedures such as Botox, fillers, or fat removal. Dabiri criticises the deceitfulness of female-centred neoliberal capitalism as a hindrance to feminism.

Referring to genuinely defiant women, she quotes from, among others, Audre Lorde, to support her thesis: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.' There can be no disobedience without reaching towards authenticity and finding pleasure in defiance. Such strength seems vital as Dabiri illustrates the flip side of the privilege: beauty 'urges the desire to punish and destroy', as was the case with Sinéad O'Connor, whose 'other-worldly beauty' mingled with her 'steely determination' led to her cancellation.

Disobedience means to reclaim and to celebrate female knowledge. Having observed a 'representational revolution' in recent years, inclusive of all types of people of all ethnicities, complexions, and physical features, Dabiri argues that 'representation does little to challenge the complicated relationship we have with bodies in the Western culture.' But surely any new diversion from the sick system of racism and discrimination helps to heal society. It's inspiring, for example, to observe the efforts of Edward Enninful, a black man and leading advocate for diversity and inclusivity, using British Vogue as his platform 'to make the world a better place.'

These two books complete each other like warp and weft; Dabiri's philosophical observations are woven into the tapestry of White's characters. Both are meticulously researched and provide valuable resources for exploration.

Shara Atashi

Shara Atashi is an Iranian writer and translator, now based in Aberystwyth, Wales. In 1979, at the age of twelve, she travelled to West Germany with her mother in the hope that the new cleric regime in Iran wouldn't last long. Shara later attended Goethe University where she read law. After working in the Hague, she relocated to London and settled down as a translator. Shara is now dedicated to writing and literary translation. Her first work published by *WritersMosaic* was 'Large Glass' in 2021 and since then she has written regularly for the site. Shara is among the winners of the 2022 Stephen Spender Prize for poetry translation.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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