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A Healthy Sense of Wonder

Barbara Crooker. *The Book of Kells*. Cascade Books (2019).

Medievalists are rarely asked to review collections of contemporary poetry, so it was a rare treat for me—an instructor of medieval literature—to explore Barbara Crooker’s eighth collection of poetry, *The Book of Kells*. Divided into four sections, this collection first considers the Book of Kells, a ninth-century Irish manuscript of the four gospels famed for its elaborately ornate text and illustrations. Subsequent sections capture Crooker’s impressions as an American visiting the Irish countryside with its fields “clotted with sheep” (“Ireland”), swans floating downstream like “gardenias in a bowl” (“Swans”), and sweeping lawns that burn with “green fire, can’t be any greener” (“Small Song for October”). However, Crooker’s poetry shines brightest in the first section on the medieval manuscript. As any scholar of the Middle Ages will tell you, every part of a medieval book was crafted with intent because books were tremendously expensive in terms of resources, time, and expertise. Through her poetry, Crooker helps the modern reader make sense of manuscript features like illuminations, punctuation, and calligraphy so that even the untrained reader can appreciate the beauty and significance of one of Ireland’s greatest medieval treasures.

In modern texts, whether print or digital, readers have come to expect a simple, minimalistic layout with clear separation of text and image. Because of this conditioning, approaching a medieval manuscript can be a disorienting experience due to the profusion of decoration. The Book of Kells is famous for being one of the most highly decorated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, and Crooker’s poetry helps the reader slow their reading process and concentrate on the meaning of these decorations. For example, in “The Alphabet,” Crooker lists examples of decorated initials (the fancy capital letters that often introduce segments of text) such as two peacocks “pressed face-to-face / for eternity, twined inside the letter U, while two hungry lions / become R and D, yoga for felines.” Just as the decoration in a medieval manuscript can delight the viewer, Crooker’s apt and witty descriptions charm the reader, but her commentary also provides the modern reader with a path to deeper appreciation: “each initial / coils and curls, retraces the world in vegetal wonder.”

Crooker provides similar guidance for the wealth of

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illuminations scattered throughout the manuscript. In her sonnet “Interlinear,” she catalogs the tiny illustrations that “flit here and there in the Vulgate text”:

[T]he monk on his horse, trotting right off the page.
Look, there’s an otter, his mouth full a fish, and here,
a blue cat sits watchfully by. A gorgeous green lizard
slithers in the text, 72r, while a wolf pads his way
through 76v. It’s a whole barnyard.

At the turn, Crooker gives all these illuminations meaning by comparing these seemingly insignificant miniatures to individual Christians—both medieval and modern—in the scope of God’s plan: “So let us praise all of God’s creatures, / including the small and inconsequential, all of us, / interlinear, part of the larger design.” Of course, sometimes a cat is just a cat, and Crooker’s meditations on faith are delightfully interspersed with poems like “Cat in Folio 280R,” in which the speaker is the self-important tabby who

sit[s] in green and gold splendor,
outlined in red dots, fitting decoration
for a royal design...
four lines from the top, the best part of the page.

As a result of Crooker’s careful image selection, readers feel that they are viewing the manuscript with an insightful guide attuned to both history and modernity, who anticipates their questions and points out features that may have gone unnoticed.

Perhaps the most prevalent theme of poems exploring the manuscript is that of wonder: admiration for the beauty of the Book of Kells certainly, but also awe directed at the makers of the manuscript and the power of the crafted word both in the Middle Ages and also today. Several of the poems imagine the lives of the medieval monks, who “labored in hives of stone, / producing pages that glistened like honey / sweetening the word of God” (“The Book of Kells: Chi Rho”). The monks endure harsh conditions—including Viking attacks—in “Schilig Mhichil” to preserve Christianity “on an island / in the icy sea, water-swirled and rock-haunted, / the ragged edge of the West.” In other poems, Crooker marvels at the act of writing that connects the modern poet with these medieval scribes, even identifying with an illumination of the author of John: “He’s my tribe, a scribe, / notebook in one hand, pen in the other” (“Trinity College, the Book of Kells”).

In these and other poems in *The Book of Kells*, Crooker’s collection encourages readers to appreciate the world around them. As

she writes in “Books,”

In our time, it’s a rush of too much: pixelated images,
the blather of television, the constant stream of the internet.
With such a torrent, nothing is important; all of it blends
and whirls.

To resist this torrent, Crooker’s poems invite contemplation: “On this new day, may I walk out singing, open / to what’s never happened before. Let me be grateful. / Let me pay attention” (“Small Prayer”). To encourage this contemplation, Crooker positions several of her poems alongside other authors who have “paid attention” to the minutiae of life: the epigraphs for her seven glosa poems come from Irish poets like Seamus Heaney and Dennis O’Driscoll, and other lyrics like “Easter Sunday, 2016” evoke earlier authors like William Butler Yeats who take note of their natural and political landscapes and memorialize them in words. Whether her subject matter is a ninth-century manuscript or an email bringing the sorrowful news of a friend’s death (“For Geri”), Crooker’s poems urge readers to look at the world with clear eyes and a healthy sense of wonder.

Barabara Crooker’s work appears in *Kestrel* 31.