A Reader’s Companion

for

Jenny Molberg’s

Marvels of the Invisible

(Tupelo Press, 2017)

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Biographical notes

Jenny Molberg, a Texas native, earned her B.A. at Louisiana State University, her M.F.A. at American University, and her Ph.D. at the University of North Texas.

She was a teaching fellow at the University of North Texas, and served as managing editor and production editor for American Literary Review. During her time in Denton, Texas, she also taught creative writing at Texas Woman’s University. Her poems have appeared in The Missouri Review, North American Review, Copper Nickel, Third Coast, The New Guard, The Rattling Wall, Mississippi Review, Ploughshares, and other journals.

Her poem “Narrative” was chosen by Jane Hirshfield as winner of the 2013 Third Coast Poetry Prize, and the title poem of her first collection, “Marvels of the Invisible,” was featured in Best New Poets 2014.

She lives in Warrensburg, Missouri, where she is assistant professor at the University of Central Missouri and co-editor for the journal Pleiades.
Advance praise for *Marvels of the Invisible*

“Jenny Molberg’s *Marvels of the Invisible* is that rare, compelling thing: a collection that feels as though it has arisen out of an actual life, celebrating and struggling with the issues and events of that life, and making of them a beautiful, fraught sense. These poems bring together vastly different ways of seeing the world — scientific, spiritual, personal, historical, oneiric — through a synthesizing and transformative imagination attuned to the details of the physical world while seeking realms beyond the visible, beyond what can be said but is well worth trying to say, ‘spreading / a strange, unutterable music’ onto the page.”

— Jeffrey Harrison, author of *Into Daylight* and final judge for the Berkshire Prize, Tupelo Press’s annual award for first or second books of poems

“...In her brilliant debut book *Marvels of the Invisible*, it becomes Jenny Molberg’s task to give the invisible — including the visible yet unseen, the seen yet unspeakable—a presence that is, through the workings of her extraordinary imagination, palpable and pungent, what Wallace Stevens obliquely called ‘the pressure of the real.’ She is a poet of intimacies, of the body, the family, the natural world, and emblematic of her difficult yet clarifying vision of those intimacies is the remarkable poem, ‘Superficial Heart,’ about a child born with its heart external to its body. The human heart exposed: the ultimate intimacy, marvelous and terrible, and in Molberg's surgically precise hands, unforgettable.”

— B. H. Fairchild, author of *The Blue Buick: New and Selected Poems*

“...With the vigilance of the microscope, Jenny Molberg’s stunning debut volume *Marvels of the Invisible* takes us out by going in, deep into the sacramental vessel where the once invisible—the ravaged womb, the father’s grief, the mother’s cancer—comes, by beauty and horror in equal measure, into focus. Somewhere a pianist plays a nocturne for the animals, and the music raises the elephant from his instrument, anoints the ashen hide, and, like the cry of its occasion, ripples the water in its wake. ‘The endangered syntax descends.’ Such is this book’s formidable gift, the door of the body that swings into this world and back, and we find ourselves in two worlds, one barren, the other baptized in blood. Born and born again. A phenomenal book.”

— Bruce Bond, author of *Blackout Starlight: New and Selected Poems, 1997–2015*
Commentary by Jenny Molberg on the poem “Marvels of the invisible”

In the middle of writing this book, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and chose to have a double mastectomy. I was staying at my parents’ house while she was undergoing surgery, traveling back and forth to the hospital, where my father also works as a pathologist.

In many ways, I am like my father—a person who is eternally curious, who marvels quietly at the world around him. He is not emotionally open, but I have come to realize that his attention to detail is a way of enacting empathy, a way of expressing care. During my mother’s surgery, he constantly paced the hospital’s hallways, and though he didn’t say much, I realized this was his way of working through worry: to know all the facts, to understand what was happening to my mother on a scientific level.

One night, at their house, I came across my father’s toy microscope set, with an instruction manual that read, “With your new Microset Model I, you will discover marvels of the invisible.”

Suddenly, it clicked: the poet, in many ways, is like the scientist. We want to understand the incomprehensible. We want to unfold the world, looking deeper and deeper, until, through language, we try to articulate our experience of a life that is filled with mystery.

In writing “Marvels of the Invisible,” I sought to understand my father’s sight; his way of looking can seem, on the surface, detached—but of course, that is too simple. I thought about the small gestures we make towards understanding that are, in many ways, too large for language, more meaningful than emotional outpourings. I sought to move slowly through details surrounding my mother’s cancer, and the gestures (like the orchid, or the syncopated breathing of two people who have lived decades together) that are closer to a representation of love than the word *love*.

When I realized that this poem was the title poem of the book, I knew this was what I wanted to say with these poems: that we should marvel at the world’s smallest blossomings, that we should celebrate the microscopic resiliencies of the body, that there are times when it is best to stop trying to see, and look.
Commentary by Jenny Molberg on the poem “Narrative”

I wrote this poem after ending an abusive relationship. Whereas some of the poems in this collection consider the scientific eye as a way of explaining the unexplainable, “Narrative” thinks about the ways science falls short.

I was also thinking about memory, and the way a moment can seem as ubiquitous and invisible as dark matter when you continuously replay it in your mind. The poem is concerned with the failure of rhetorical construction—that “this” doesn’t necessarily follow “that,” and two people can write a moment in their memories in two completely different ways.

Thus, the poem is meant to fulfill and confound the title: there is no such thing as a stable narrative between two people, or within memory. When I wrote, “Chaos, or better, / the original emptiness, is always a constant,” I was thinking about what is stable, or constant, in an abusive relationship.

The easy answer would be that nothing is stable, but often times abuse feeds on chaos, the idea that the world isn’t stable and thus love cannot ever be. The horses, who “know only the old ways,” who “toss the reins from their necks” are meant to represent a person in a seemingly inescapable cycle of abuse, who wants to break free, but has forgotten what freedom means.

When Jane Hirshfield chose this poem for the Third Coast poetry prize, she wrote, “What is the ‘meaning’ of the poem’s conclusion? I can’t say, yet I understand it.” In many ways, I can’t explain why the poem took me out of the scene between the two lovers and into the bedroom of the imagined “stable man” and his wife. Yet, I think this movement of the lens of the poem has to do with the title—that this isn’t just one person’s story, but it’s closer to myth: it’s a story that is told (or untold) over and over. The “old sun” is meant to suggest that this relationship seems to repeat itself forever, to many different people—in a way, it’s the “same old story.” The “hooves that kick against stable doors” beat out the metronomic rhythm of the abusive relationship.

A person who experiences abuse always hears that sound, but also never hears that sound, until it stops. Then, when it quiets, she must relearn life in that space of silence.
An interview with Jenny Molberg

March 29, 2016:
Published on the newsletter-blog of American University’s Creative Writing program

Many graduates of the creative writing MFA program pursue rewarding teaching opportunities to accompany their writing careers. A 2009 American University (AU) graduate, Jenny Molberg is a poet, serves as poetry editor for Pleiades, and works as assistant professor of English at the University of Central Missouri. Jenny’s debut collection, Marvels of the Invisible, won the 2014 Berkshire Prize and is [published by] Tupelo Press. . . . Her poems appear in The Missouri Review, North American Review, Copper Nickel, Mississippi Review, The Adroit Journal, Poetry International, and other journals. Her awards and honors include the 2013 Third Coast poetry prize, and she was featured in the anthology Best New Poets 2014.

After receiving her creative writing MFA from AU, Jenny pursued a PhD from the University of North Texas. She currently teaches creative writing and literature courses. We [interviewed] Jenny over e-mail about her experiences at AU and how she balances life as a writer and a teacher.

Q: What led you to choose American University for your MFA?

Jenny Molberg (JM): After living in the South, I wanted to experience something different, and focused my MFA applications in that area of the country. I was drawn to AU by the diversity of courses offered in the program—especially translation—and was impressed by the work of the faculty. Once I visited the campus, I knew AU was right for me. Campus was bustling, it was spring in DC, and I felt I would find a home in the program. When I met David Keplinger, who would be my best teacher and one of my greatest friends, I knew I had made the right choice.

Q: What were some of the highlights of your time in the program?

JM: The people I met at AU were the biggest highlight of my time in DC. To this day, those people are my best friends, even though I moved away when I graduated. My favorite classes were my poetry workshops with David Keplinger and Kyle Dargan, and I also really enjoyed my course in translation with David. Keith Leonard taught a class called Performing the Word that blew my mind, and I did an independent study with Erik Dussere on [Toni] Morrison and [William] Faulkner. My scholarly interest in literature grew immensely with those two courses.

Outside the classroom, two experiences stand out in my mind: I was able to work as an assistant editor for Poet Lore, where I met Ethelbert Miller, from whom I learned a great deal about publishing and contemporary poetry.

Then, in 2008, the Obamas hosted a night of poetry, music, and the spoken word at the White House, and I was able to go with a couple of my peers as a local poetry student. That was an amazing experience. We heard an early rendition of a song from Hamilton, James Earl Jones performed a soliloquy from Othello, and Joshua Bennett performed an unforgettable poem. It was an incredible time to be in DC.

Q: In what ways did you grow as a writer during your time in the MFA program?
JM: I think I grew enormously as a writer because of my teachers and peers who held me to high standards and pushed me to want to be better, to out-write my old self. I learned how to obsess (in a good way) over words, thanks to David and Kyle. I grew as an editor, reading the work of my peers, and I also grew more in my passion for poetry. It’s a love that never stops growing. My friends and I used to sit late into the night, drinking wine, reading poems to each other, falling in love with the words.

Q: Please describe your current teaching position. What courses do you teach?

JM: I am an assistant professor of English at the University of Central Missouri (UCM), where I teach Advanced Poetry, Introduction to Creative Writing, and modern and contemporary American Literature. I also serve as the poetry editor for Pleiades and the assistant director of Pleiades Press here at UCM.

Q: How do you balance your writing life and teaching life?

JM: It’s difficult, especially because I am in my first year of a tenure-track job, but I find that I am constantly challenged and inspired by my students, who make me want to go home to write. Sending work out and applying for grants and residencies becomes difficult with a very busy teaching load—sometimes I just dedicate a Saturday to reading, writing, and sending out poems.

Q: What experiences from your time in the MFA program have been most beneficial in feeding your teaching career?

JM: Watching and learning from good teachers. I often think WWDD: what would David do? One thing I learned from David that was so invaluable was that you can be positive, excited about poetry, and encouraging to your students, and this will help them grow immensely as writers in ways that harsh criticism fails. Criticism is not always bad, but when you help a young writer to see what they are doing right, they will want to keep doing that. . . . I try to help my students to see that. Also, the MFA program helped me to think and talk deeply about literature, to ask the difficult questions, to consider the responsibility of writer to the reader. This kind of thinking helps me (try) to convince my students to fall in love with poetry as I have.

Q: Is there any advice you’d give to prospective or current MFA students about pursuing a teaching career?

JM: Keep reading and writing voraciously. In the job market now, it seems helpful to have a book published, so if you are able to do this soon after you complete your MFA, you will be more competitive on the market. Don’t shy away from sending your work out: rejection is hard, but the validation of seeing your work on the page and joining the creative conversation is worth it. Pay attention to the way your best teachers guide and mentor you. Go to conferences and attend (or participate in) pedagogy panels—this can be extremely helpful, and you will probably pick up great teaching ideas. If you can gain teaching experience while you are at AU through the teaching-track, I’d encourage you to do so, if a future in teaching is one of your goals.
Links

**Jenny Molberg’s website:**
http://www.jennymolberg.com

**Jenny Molberg’s page on the Tupelo Press website:**
https://www.tupelopress.org/product/marvels-of-the-invisible/