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The Dream of the Black Topaze Chamber (Skylight Press, Great Britain, England)

www.skylightpress.co.uk

By Hugh Fox

review by Pam Rosenblatt

In 2011, the late Hugh Bernard Fox published *The Dream of the Black Topaze Chamber* (Skylight Press, Great Britain). Also, in 2011 – September 4, 2011 – Fox sadly passed away. This short 110 page book reflects Fox's writing, poetic, and anthropological finesse.

Also, in 2011, Mr. Fox published three other books: *e Lord Said Unto Satan* (Post Mortem Press, Cincinnati, Spring), *Reunion* (Luminis Books, Summer), and *The Year Book* (Ravenna Press, Summer).

Mr. Fox was a writer, a poet, a reviewer, an anthropologist, and, perhaps most importantly, a friend to people. He had friends all over the place. And he often wrote about his friends under different names in his books.

Along with Paul Bowles, Ralph Ellison, Anaïs Nin, Joyce Carol Oates, Mr. Fox co-founded the Pushcart Prize for literature.

He was published in the Small Press arena prolifically. Even though he had been very ill for years, Fox kept up writing reviews and books. Over the years, his book reviews could be seen in the late Len Fulton's *Small Press Review*. From time to time, Mr. Fox would visit with the Bagel Bards on Saturday mornings at Au Bon Pain, Somerville.

In 2006, Fox's *Way, Way Off the Road: The Memoirs of an Invisible Man* was published by Ibbetson Street Press.

I personally didn't know Mr. Fox very well. I did often read his reviews in *Small Press Review*. I became indirectly acquainted with Mr. Fox after he wrote a review of my first chapbook published on *The Boston Area Small Press and Poetry Scene*. His review showed his love of word economy. And then I actually met him at the Bagel Bards one Saturday morning shortly afterwards. But I had never read any of Mr. Fox's books. So when Doug Holder asked me to review *The Dream of the Black Topaze Chamber* last Saturday, February 11, I said "Okay!" I didn't know what to expect...

What I discovered is that Mr. Fox's *The Dream of the Black Topaze Chamber* is a short book about three women – Magda, Nona, and Berna-



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dette – who are in Brazil. They are lovers. Inseparable. Sometimes intellectual. Often times sexual. Often various serious political, health, and social issues are raised and challenged. Here are a few paragraphs from the book that explains the three women's relationship:

xv.

Sonia took the message, scrawled on a pad on Magda's desk:

Quero falar com voce urgentemente/I urgently want to talk to you.

Bernadette

It must be Boss Bernadette (who else?) so she calls her office.

"No, I didn't leave any message, it must be Bernadette Lundardelli, she's doing an article for Jornal da Semana about 'foreigners' in Santa Catarina..."

"OK."

So maybe I oughta call her Magda thinks, but she doesn't, the next evening this almost-middle-aged moonface appears at the door.

"I just took a chance you might be home ..."

And in she comes, the other Bernadette, and Nona is on Magda's bed reading (English lesson) *Wuthering Heights*, toasty (heater) warm, all three of them in black tights and ponchos as if they were a uniform, all these black-veiled thighs.

"How do you like it down here?" Bernadette reporter asks Bernadette and Nona.

"OK, except for the bichos/bugs," answers Nona.

"We can talk in the living room," says Magda slightly ... the word in Portuguese is 'exltada'/hysterical-happy."

"You three live together?"

"Bernadette, the little one, she's not really 'living' with us yet full-time, but she will be ... after she leaves Medicine ..."

"Oh, she's a doctor going to leave Medicine? Another American?"

"No, Brazilian ..."

"But you and the ..."

"We've been together for more than ten years now ..."

"Together?" She's shamelessly (reportorially) curious.

"Off the record," says Magda pointing to Bernadette's notepad/pen, "I mean really off the record. I don't want my job jeopardized."

"Of course, of course," she answers, her face all solicitously contorted with 'secrecy', 'discretion.' (p. 31)

A former professor at Michigan State University, Mr. Fox has taken on

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the job of educating his readers about a different lesbian lifestyle amidst the social and professional conventions of Brazil and the United States.

Mr. Fox has written a book that's not a passive read. Some people may get uncomfortable with his honesty, his off-the-cuff humor, and his direct approach to relationships that don't conform to social norms. But the book is well-written, descriptive, and has impact. His poetic muse is often apparent. A darker side is often spoke of by the characters, and Death is often a subject of conversation by these three intelligent woman whose female personas are so realistic that it's hard to believe that a man could create them, as seen when Magda speaks to Bernadette near the conclusion of the book:

"I don't want to die slowly. I mean when I do die, I don't want to face it slowly like peeling an artichoke, becoming less and less inside the awareness that I'm really becoming nothing at all. I can't stand the idea of consciously unraveling and dissolving. Or being like Hubert Humphrey, you hang on, become transparent, all tubes and sacks, and the bichos/bugs are still inside you like termites in an old house ... you know, being gay, you're outside, crazy ... and you see it more fully ... visão global/global vision ... I mean I never for a moment think that exercise or diet or surgery are going to make any real difference ... the only reality is the diss-olving" (p. 101)

The Dream of the Black Topaze Chamber is an unusual book, one that has an impact on the reader – positive or negative. And, by the way, Skylight Press has informed us that more books by the late Hugh Fox will soon follow!

Bibliography:

Holder, Doug. "Hugh Fox: Way, Way Off On His Final Road". Ibbetson Street #30, Ibbetson Street Press, June 2011. p. 22 – 23.

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