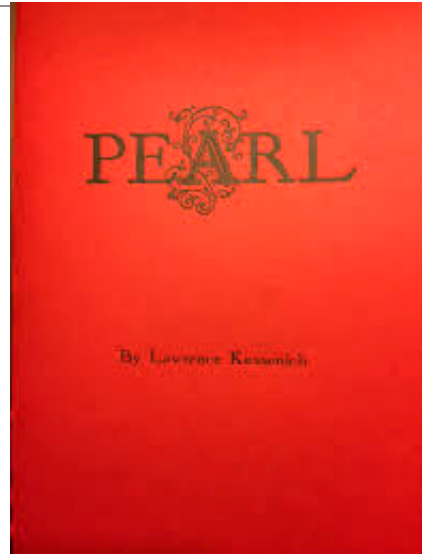


Pearl
By Lawrence Kessenich
Letterpress Book Publishing, \$18.00
www.lawrence-writer.com



Review by Mignon Ariel King

To begin with, the physical book itself--a hand-stitched, limited-edition poetry chapbook--evokes Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the story of Hester Prynne the seamstress. "Pearl" is the daughter produced from Hester Prynne's adulterous love affair with her Puritan settlement's hypocritical Minister Arthur Dimmesdale. Pearl's birth lands her mother in prison in addition to being shamed in the town square. Kessenich re-imagines Pearl, now an adult, and furnishes her with narratives reflecting on her beloved mother and scorned father.

Hester's passion is channeled in Pearl's first poem, first line: "They scoff when I claim to remember it...but I swear.../I can feel...the wild embroidered letter on my face" (1). Pearl is proud of the fiery spirit that fought tauntings of other children against her sinful lineage; however, she also expresses the freedom of imagination and joy of love resulting from her ostracism. "The scarlet letter set me apart, saved me from the stifling/cloak of conformity..." (1).

Pearl asserts that her biological father obviously failed her by refusing to publicly acknowledge the paternity. But, in an interesting turn, Kessenich's Pearl also berates her mother's husband, Chillingworth, who could have chosen to become Pearl's father, to raise her as his own. Instead, Chillingworth expended only negative energy, emotionally torturing Dimmesdale until his death. Had he used his energy in a positive fashion, Chillingworth, a "Kindred Spirit," might have seen: "Like me, he had wildness in him..." (3); and he was "dressed like me, too colorfully" (3). Pearl's daughterly love "could have saved/his wretched life..." (3).

There are poems sprinkled through the collection in Hawthorne's voice. These "Interludes" sharpen the setting. Pearl's voice is modernized in comparison, as one might expect from the now-adult Pearl, a successful London playwright. (5) Single, she is kept company by the stage characters she creates. "Born into drama...how could I not/ become a playwright?" (7). Having grown up with a creative mother who read her the Bible; taught her mythology via the names of constellations; made the forest her playground; and longed for her faithless father's company, Pearl believes that writing, the world of imagination, is her "Destiny."

Pearl discusses her bachelor-woman life briefly: "Beauty and boldness are my blessing and curse"; men "wilt in the fire of my spirit" (10). Half of this collection focuses on Pearl's "Solitude" and discordant "Inheritance,"

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i.e. mainstream society's judgmental "Silence." Yet, Kessenich gives his Pearl "Redemption." She "grew up indifferent/to the judgment of men" (21), but she has an unusual community of Quaker women who tolerate her blazing nonconformity in that they pass many hours in reverent silence, "waiting for God to speak...or move them to speak" (19). After all, Pearl cannot bear to waste words, not even one letter.