

The Blue Chip City Book of the Dead
Words by Stephen Winhusen, Artwork by Joseph Winhusen
ID8 Design, Cincinnati, 2014
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Review by David P. Miller

This book is a rare find, a gem quietly concealed in the slush pile of review copies. The Blue Chip City Book of the Dead, by brothers Stephen and Joseph Winhusen, is a deeply conceived text/visual work, with layers of imagery and association waiting to be unearthed by the curious reader. The title refers to the Egyptian Book of the Dead – sometimes known as Going Forth by Day – a collective title for a shifting, unstable set of writings, including prayers, instructions, supplications, and rituals to aid the newly deceased in its negotiations through the after-life. Instances of the Egyptian book were produced for specific individuals, and so the contents varied from one instance to another. In addition, the book was copied multiple times over many centuries, in some cases by scribes who did not understand the original documents. Errors were introduced and propagated, older texts survived sometimes in fragments, and accompanying visual elements could be mismatched.



The dust jacket text suggests that the Egyptian book is the overall model for the Winhusens' production, and that is true to an extent. It provides a good place to begin. This volume respects the model by featuring a composite collision of different types of writing in juxtaposition with the visual art – primarily reproductions of digital prints and watercolor paintings. There is lyric poetry, prose poetry, narrative prose (interrupted once by haiku), shape poems, preexisting texts brought together in dialogs, at least one sonnet, incantations, and more. Many of the writings are titled as fragments, inviting the reader to imagine what has not survived or is buried elsewhere. These multiple types of diction are consistently handled by Stephen Winhusen with skill and intriguing lucidity, although the reader is not always easily indulged. (I already want to know more about his poetry, and have ordered his book, *The Wonderful World and Other Poems*.) The variety of writing presented, however, makes it difficult to present quotations that are in fact representative. This is the main reason that this review will feature fewer quotations than most reviews do.

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I go back to the dust jacket because, as is the case with these texts, it intends to provide direction to the prospective reader – to manage expectations, in fact. It says that the book's narrator (implying that there is a narrator) "profess(es) to navigate the byzantine rules and regulations of post-modern life ... in his search for promotion." Although I do not find a single narrator or a stable speaking voice, this stance does exist, and is the source for the most humorous passages. For example, a parody of ritual addresses to deities begins with:

*O Wide strider, I am not unemployed
O Fire Embracer, I am fully ensured
O Nosey, I have no credit card debt
O Terrible of Face, I have an employer sponsored HSA
O Double Lion, I am in a hedge fund
O He-whose-eyes-are-in-flames, I saw us through the business cycle
(p. 10)*

This relation of arcane ritual to career survival returns at several points, as in this text which opens a sequence of passage through seven gates:

*The first gate is called HR. Its guardian is she-of-many-forms-and-faces.
Your hours and the way in which you kept them stand naked before her. She
holds the knot-amulet of red jasper, the heart-amulet of Seheret-stone, and the
Djed-pillar of gold. (p. 30)*

But there are other senses in which this is a book of the dead. The frontispiece presents a watercolor portrait of the artists' late mother, Elaine Winhusen. It shows her holding a camera, with the text, "She is now part of the mystery which she once hunted." (Her relationship with the brothers is not stated in the book, but is confirmed via an online obituary.) The final double-page watercolor shows her facing away from us into an autumn landscape and makes a visual closing bracket. One of the poems, "Ghost Address (For Elaine)," occurs about two-thirds of the way through the book. It occurs to me that this volume is in part hunting the mystery she has entered, and in part extends the quest beyond Corporate Life as Underworld to navigating the labyrinth of individual lives. Another set of texts and images presents what seems to be an earlier part of the brothers' lives in London, in relation to their home town of Cincinnati and a now-decayed original neighborhood – a journey among shadows. The first and penultimate poems are titled "Homesickness," but are set in London, with this stanza present in each (quotation marks in the original):

*"Home"
A Handel Street address
Mid-way Russell Square
And King's Cross
In the London
Of High Finance (p. 6 & 58)*

The scare quotes are apt, because the second text, "Cincinnati," brings us sharply into an alienated past and present, interlocked:

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Growing up, you thought "I live in the best street in the best part of the best city, and now you hear about a guy who answers his door and gets shot in the face." We date to the time when industrialists built this hill in the Italianate. Later, they made the best crack houses because of all the carved woodwork and copper ripe for gutting. (p. 8)

This alienation suggests that perhaps there is a narrator after all, assembling and compulsively reviewing the words and images, with the hope of finding a way through a night passage of dissociation.

There is a third sense in which this is a book of the dead. Two sequences, presented as plays on the canonical hours of the Catholic Church, are composed to a great extent of juxtaposed texts about or from the writings of historical figures, and thus refer to the genre of "dialogs of the dead." "The Hours of the Virgin," the longest sequence in the book (p. 20-27), puts the voices of Emily Dickinson and St. Theresa of Lisieux in combination, with St. Joan of Arc entering the conversation later. Many of the poems here are difficult to quote here, as the abutment of voices is often bound up with layout in columns, sometimes irregular and interweaving—particularly in the opening poem "Matins." By contrast, "Nones" plays on the name of the canonical hour by being laid out in a 3X3 grid of nine-line stanzas (as "Terce" consists of three tercets). The most striking fusion of text and art in this volume is "Vespers," laid out on two facing pages. The right-hand page suggests a half-disc like a blinding sun, with the burning, sparse poem set inside it. This is echoed in the left-hand page, darkened like an eclipse. The disc itself is set against a the background of a longer but obscured text, overprinted and blurred. It is as though the poem we can read is what burned through from the background.

The second sequence is titled "Hours of the Zeitgeist" (p. 40-43), which takes its basis from an encounter between atomic physicist Edward Teller and theologian Paul Tillich, centered on the development and detonation of the first nuclear bomb, and the "the shaking of these foundations and the crumbling of the world ... This is no longer a vision; it has become physics" (Tillich). These pairs of pages are designed with thick parenthesis-like texts quoting the two men and reflecting on the Manhattan project, enclosing briefer reverse-curved poem texts meditating on atomic structures as images for music or the structure of the universe itself.

In beginning to bring this review to a conclusion – and in the process, skipping over a remarkable wealth of details, allusions, and images, all the more striking for being contained in not more than 62 pages – I have to note yet a fourth level of reference: the resonances between this book and the work presented on the Winhusen brothers' web site. There we discover, for example, that the "Hours of the Virgin" material presented here is derived from a collaborative 4x8-foot light box of the same name (<http://www.winhusen.com/manuscripts.php?pieceNumber=1>). Each panel of this visual artwork can be viewed separately, so it's possible to read the entire set of Hours poems, not all of which are presented in the book. They have also provided an extensive commentary on the artwork, which can be "read back" in a sense into the book in hand. This depth also applies to an entire set of writings and images not yet mentioned in this review, referring to the British architect John Soane, his design of the Bank of

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England, and its envisioned destruction in a watercolor by Joseph Gandy titled "The Bank in Ruins" (a painting exhibited by Soane himself). The three paintings by Joseph Winhusen on this theme, again with deep background material, are shown at <http://www.winhusen.com/manuscripts.php?pieceNumber=3> and included, without captions or explanation, in the book. The painting "Breakfast Room", as shown on the web site, includes as part of the image a poem by Stephen not included in its reproduction on page 14.

And there is more.

It should go without saying that this hardbound book, slender and in a moderately large format, is beautifully produced. It may be modeled on an ancient prototype produced to guide souls through the underworld, which in the course of repeated generations falls to fragments and allows cul-de-sacs to become lodged in its structure. But this is really, of course, a book for the living, and our wrong turns, persistent blind alleys, and the sometimes sense that reality must lie somewhere other than this confusing series of perpetual negotiations with one shadow after another. Perhaps we can conclude with the opening of the final poem, "The Palace of Nowhere":

*The first few leaves
Winging down
Define curves,
Implicate
Empty space,
And fill it
With description.*

Turn the page and there is the final painting, a two-page watercolor of Elaine Winhusen, facing away from us into that space, an autumn landscape just before the leaves begin to fall.