

Patricia Schultheis

The Rediscovery of Nancy Hale, an American Master

Nancy Hale on the Life & Work of a Lost American Master. Pleiades Press. Dan Chaon, Norah Hardin Lind, & Phong Nguyen, editors. 217 pp. \$12.99 (paperback).

Congratulations to Pleiades Press for rescuing the writer Nancy Hale from the brink of oblivion. And just in the nick of time.

Today, stories by Hale are all but completely absent from collections of outstanding twentieth-century American writers, **a grievous omission** given that Hale once ranked among such notables as Eudora Welty and William Faulkner. Some 80 stories of hers have been published in the *New Yorker*, and she holds the record – twelve – for the most published by that magazine in a single year. In addition, Hale’s novel *The Prodigal Women* has sold more than two million copies, and four of her stories have appeared in *The Best American Short Stories* plus ten in the *O. Henry* anthology.

So, kudos to Pleiades for publishing *Nancy Hale on the life & work of a lost American master*. Following the *Unsung Masters* series’ format, this collection contains writing by Hale as well as commentary from writers such as Ann Beattie and Dan Chaon, all of the pieces working to articulate not only Hale’s brilliance but her lasting, if not subtle, impact. In its attempt to analyze the particulars of Hale’s craft, as well as to reintroduce her to a new generation of readers, this book is perhaps overly ambitious. Still, the effort is commendable in as much as it restores Hale to her appropriate place in American letters.

In a sense, Hale's near total absence from the literary canon is understandable. She wrote what she knew and what she knew was the world of Boston Brahmin society, the jejune glamour of speakeasy-era New York, and the genteel languor of Virginia horse country. The only child of the artists Philip Leslie Hale and Lilian Clark Wescott, Anna Wescott Hale moved easily among Harvard-educated men and guarded women whose family roots reached deep into America's colonial past. But in today's literary landscape, Hales' world of assumptive privilege has been eclipsed by new and fresh universes of originality and insight into socio-economic complexities and geo-political ferment.

Who nowadays cares about a lost piece of jewelry, the subject of Hale's "The Empress's Ring"? Or about a mother taking her son to prep school as in "Slow Boat to China"? Or about a child's listening to dinner party laughter rising through the floor of her bedroom, as in "The Earliest Dreams"? No matter what problems they may have, Hale's characters remain articulate, financially secure, and socially sophisticated, so much so they might appear almost cartoon-like, and deserving of dismissal, especially when viewed through today's postmodernism and attendant irony.

But lost rings, prep schools and dinner parties are only the situational circumstances of Hale's narratives. The true meat of her stories is what lies beneath – the inchoate anxiety that cripples her characters, the internalized foreboding that haunts them expressed beautifully in "Entrance into Life," the story of a young widow with a consumptive child. "Now she was looking for a young man's face, a college boy's, one facing a grownup world, of whatever kind. She shut her eyes because she could not find such a face; inside her eyes everything was dark gray and cold, and all at once it might have been the middle of winter. She did not know where to begin to look for spring."

(43) This sense of menace is most evident in “Who Lived and Died Believing,” where Hale alternates between the story of a young nurse and that of her patient on a psychiatric ward. “She was walking through the jungle of the world, and she was lost. She did not know where she was. It was an utterly strange, green jungle. Only the nurse, Miss Percy, was there beside her, and so she continued to walk through this land” (79)

For Hale, the past is always operative – of the seven stories in the Pleiades’s volume, three are essentially lengthy flashbacks. Nowhere is the pull of the past more evident than in “The Earliest Dreams,” a haunting tour de force. Told in second- person, “The Earliest Dreams” relates the experience of a child in her bed as she listens to a party’s predictable progression below: the maids bustling back and forth, the laughter of the guests, the inevitable singing, and, at last, the quiet. As Ann Beattie says, “All that laughter from downstairs, the mysterious laughter emanating from the adults, is also the Cosmic Laugh, the big joke on all of us. We’re all in our little beds, vulnerable, uncomprehending. (95)

“The child addressed in the narrator’s younger self,” Beattie continues “ which explains the intimacy, the sporadically still-questioning mind, the necessity of remembering precisely, vividly, because in those sounds and images of the past, some clue might be found about the meaning of the present.” (96)

Among this collection’s commentators, Beattie and Chaon are the most successful in balancing personal anecdote and well-considered commentary. Beattie’s essay, because it addresses one of the included stories, is especially pertinent and instructive.

As for others, although learned and well-written, they seem somewhat constrained – almost as if they’d been targeted at an audience of footnote-counting English professors

and not aficionados of literature outside the academy. In content, they range from a discussion of the impact of her parents' attenuated visual sensibilities on Hale to her female characters and the rise of feminism.

To be sure, Hale's central characters frequently are woman – she once commented that she wrote about women because women “puzzled” her, whereas she felt she understood men. But her stories transcend any polemic. “Nancy hale broke with the Victorian constructs of her mother's generation to write frankly about women as sexual beings with desires for satisfaction previously associated with males alone,” writes Norah Hardin Lind, Hale's daughter-in-law. “. . . But she never acted as part of a movement. Hale felt that she acted as an individual, but she described behaviors which reflected the cultural constructs of her rebellious period in history.” (168,169)

The thin tissue of normalcy, the shifting nature of identity, these are the subjects of Hale's stories, and readers should be grateful to Pleiades for preserving the work of a writer of consummate craftsmanship and unflinching courage. Rings and prep schools and parties aside, Nancy Hale's stories are about the search for life's universal but elusive truths, subjects that never go out of style and which are just as applicable to men as they are to women.