

The Book of Mev by Mark Chmiel (*Xlibris 2005*) reviewed by Andrew Wimmer

This book contains multitudes.
Among other things,
some beautiful faces, a spear through the heart,
Chomsky transformed,
and a bunch of hearts and minds wrapped in a tumor.

This is a book about the untimely death
of Mev Puleo, a promising photojournalist,
theologian, and seeker of the truth.
"Blessed are those who mourn."
And mourn they do.

If you want hagiography, the life of the smiling girl
with the camera who goes to Latin America and
saves everybody, forget it.
Mev calls home to Mark (so embarrassed),
"I'm worn out and can't make this,
I'm coming back."
She didn't expect that. She could do everything.

As later Mark will call friends (worn out),
"Mev has a brain tumor."
We didn't expect this.
Our broken hearts.

The seeing eyes.
In the end they're all we've got.
It seems we just don't have the intellectual
or physical stamina
to pull this off!
We are not going to make it, and precisely
in that lies the resurrection.

If you want hagiography, forget it.

Read something else. A fairy tale, perhaps.
("They drove a lance through his side, and out flowed
blood and water.")

Here's the real story.
Mark was on a high one sunny California day,
mentors were lauding him for his intellectual abilities.
A PhD, life in academia, full steam ahead.
But the morning of Chomsky's visit to Berkeley
Mark's brain (and Mev's brain and Chomsky's brain) get
all mixed up with a tumor.
The Mark brain, the brain that would love nothing more
than to sit down and read and think
and then read some more,
finds itself holding a tumor,
and is at a loss.

Mark's earlier work on Elie Wiesel is here radically redone.
It's tumorized.
And Mark's life work is here radically redone.
The worthy and unworthy victims that he learned about
from Chomsky are all tossed into a cocked hat and
dragged through a (literally) shitty death.

"A young husband shouldn't have to write
his wife's obituary," he says.

"Human beings shouldn't have to endure
terrible poverty and live in misery," she says.

*The worthy and unworthy victims are one.
We are all in this together.*

A notion first grasped by the intellect
and now felt by the heart.

And thanks to Mark's beautiful Kaddish
we all emerge full of light and with clearer eyes.

"Blessed are those who mourn."
("Why does he dwell on his dead wife?"
"He needs to move on," they say.)
But the Dangerous Memory has taken root.
It's all about seeing clearly
and where it leads you.
Pet names, goo-goo eyes, passionate lovemaking, and
brain tumors.
Dead—and not so dead—bodies piled at the edge of a
feeding camp.
What does it mean to move on?

Well, of course Mev was extraordinary.
(OK, let's indulge in just a little hagiography.)
She was beautiful and funny and smart and sexy and wild
and a whole bunch of other great things.

She was also relentless. She had the bone in her mouth
and wouldn't let go.
Not everyone knows what to do with the bone.
Mev had more than a few ideas.
That's what the boy from Louisville fell in love with,
the clear eyes and the bone.
His Hound of Heaven.
(There was hardly any time to sleep.)

And then his beloved rebbe Noam Chomsky
comes to town, and what a day it's going to be.
How can life get any better?
Sex in the morning,
Chomsky in the evening.
All but for the strange alarm that day.
Rolling over in bed, Mev's tumor speaks:
"I belong to Chomsky."

It's as if the cock has crowed.
(I'd like to wring that goddammed cock's neck.)
A massive betrayal?
The heart yanked up into the head and back
into the guts.
And then the guts are on the floor.
The bodies pile up.
(We're not going to make it.)

Mev's passionate, tumored heart had uttered a truth
that Mark had long been struggling to understand.
"I belong to Chomsky."
No longer a contest but a unity,
the intellect finds its true home and takes flight.

"Blessed are those who mourn."
It comes first.
It's that first baby step (ha!)
in a wickedly logical progression.
(There goes that zany Nazarene
with his Borscht Belt humor.)
"Blessed are those who mourn."
It's the first in an ordered series.
All those other blessed things can only *follow*.
Hunger and thirst for righteousness,
merciful, pure of heart, peacemaker, whatever.

And thus we can, and do, move on.

So, if you want hagiography,
read something else.
If you want clear eyes
and want to struggle to know the one thing that matters,
read the *Book of Mev*.
It's got a blue cover and a lot of nifty photographs.

I think you'll like it.