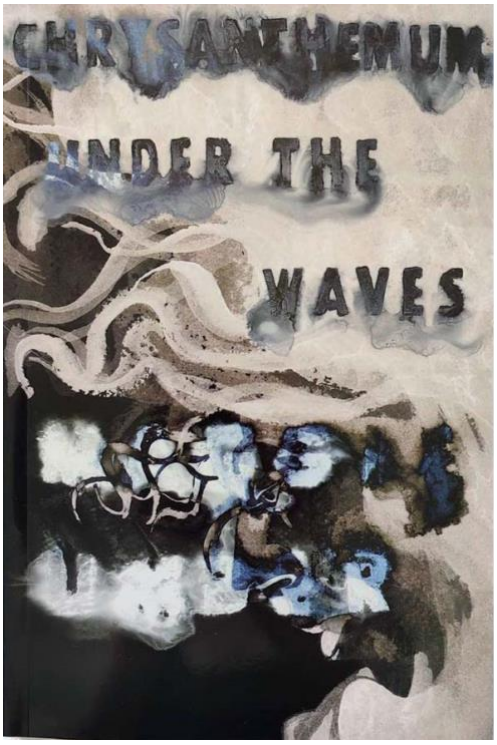

BOOK REVIEW

Chrysanthemum Under the Waves

By Maggie Umber
Self-published
2024

284 pp., $35 USD (pbk.)

Maggie Umber's *Chrysanthemum Under the Waves*, is a collection of nine comics that draw inspiration from several of Shirley Jackson's short stories, though none more so than the 1948 "The Daemon Lover." Six years in the making, Umber's book opens with a short autobiographical text about the ending of a relationship, setting the tone for the illustrations that follow and, in an explicit reference to the nefarious presence in Jackson's collection *The Lottery and Other Stories* (1948) (Mr. Harris, the man in the blue suit, or, daemon lover), giving the reader a key with which to unlock the illustrations that follow. The book is part memoir, part homage, and part elusive dream. Making your way through Umber's images is like swimming through Victorian parlors, to mid-century-modern sitting rooms, to New York City diners, floating like the chrysanthemums that move apparition-like through each comic. Patterns from wallpaper and dresses carry us from drawing to drawing, even as the bodies through which they move unravel or disappear. Those familiar with Jackson's work will recognize her stories in Umber's titles and imagery. Some of Umber's comics closely follow Jackson's stories, like "The Tooth" and "Chrysanthemum" (adapted from Jackson's "The Daemon Lover"), while others are more impressionistic—snippets of Jackson's writing like bits of remembered dream, dissolving at the edges of wakefulness.

The book opens with "Those Fucking Eyes." Rawer in its abstraction than others, the comic begins with an illustration of a woman waking, evoking the opening sentence of "The Daemon Lover," which reads, "she had slept fitfully, stirring awake to open her eyes and look into the half-darkness,

remembering over and over, slipping again into a feverish dream" (2005, 11). This feverishness is also an apt descriptor of the frenetic energy that runs through these first images. What begins as rough finger painting moves to something more figurative, and then back again. These abstract blots and smudges are urgent and visceral, giving "Those Fucking Eyes" an embodied feel, particularly in those images that see women clutching their faces, or clawing at their own eyes. The comic ends with a composed portrait—a stern face with one arched eyebrow in front of a parlor mirror. A self-portrait of the artist? A young Shirley Jackson? Or an amalgam of the two? "Rine," one of the longer comics in the collection, is the most gothic. A combination of looser sketches of figures with no faces, and dark, dramatic blotches, it begins with a drive in the country (is this Eleanor first making her way up to Hill House?), brings us to a broken bridge, and ends in a Victorian sitting room, chrysanthemums in the vase. There is something particularly Hitchcockian about these images—the black and white palette, period rooms, femmes fatales, shadows, and mysterious silhouettes; a note in the afterword tells us that Umber was listening to the *Vertigo* soundtrack when she was drawing the comics, and the piece shares that film's sinister, moral murkiness around what is possibly a dangerously ill-fated intimate relationship. Though its visual style differs, "The Witch" is equally as gothic—with shades of Stoker's *Dracula* and Murnau's *Nosferatu*—with dark forests, horse-drawn carriages, cloaked figures, and mysterious castles. The comic opens with abstract watercolors transforming into a ghostly female figure slowly consumed by fire. Could this be the witch the small boy sees from the train in Jackson's story of the same name? A dramatic tryst follows between this figure and the darker figure of a man who often blends into the intense blackness. In one image (190), his hand on her face suggests both a caress and a stranglehold. In "The Devil is a Hell of a Dancer," snippets of text from the traditional seventeenth century ballad "Daemon Lover" (from which Jackson took inspiration for several of the stories in *The Lottery and Other Stories*) are matched with illustrations: ships on stormy seas, fields of flowers, a woman gazing out to sea, waiting for the return of her lover. Other images from this comic are made up of abstract shapes and black smudges, like smoke from a steam ship.

Both "Chrysanthemum" and "The Tooth" follow Jackson's narratives more closely than these other evocations. With "Chrysanthemum," we follow the protagonist of Jackson's "The Daemon Lover" as she awaits a lover who never comes. What may seem to be a minor point in the story—should she wear the blue dress or the patterned?—comes alive in Umber's images, just as the chrysanthemums she is told her lover purchased on his way to meet her carry

over from frame to frame. A flower associated with fidelity and joy, but also with death and mourning, the chrysanthemum is a complex figure of the sinister ghosting of the story's protagonist by her lover. And thus we also have the darker implication of the romantic twists and trysts in Umber's images. "The Tooth" closely follows Jackson's tale of a lone woman headed to New York to have a painful tooth removed. Umber pictures the woman isolated on buses, in cafes, and in women's powder rooms, the woman's reflected image fading as reality disintegrates around her.

A note on Umber's style: the visual style changes from comic to comic—abstract watercolors in one, harried cross-hatching in another, charcoal pencil lines both fine and thick, in others. Some images are rich in detail, while others look like Rorschach ink blots, making some comics a Freudian exercise. Is it the man in the blue suit we are seeing hovering at the edges of the image, exiting through doorways, face always obscured, or a projection of our own dark shadow? Many of the images also gesture to nineteenth and twentieth century art—hints of Goya, Friedrich, and Bacon—but the visual style is wholly Umber's own. The decision to use a black-and-white palette, rendering some images into x-rays and others into photo negatives, makes it so that you are not so much looking at, as looking through them.

Though the style and content change from comic to comic, and sometimes from image to image, there is a thread that keeps the reader tethered to the story—a mysterious presence or aura that hovers at the edge of every drawing, a specter that moves through the pages. This is, in part, the man in the blue suit, mentioned in both Umber's introduction and afterword, and a recurring figure running through Jackson's stories. Even in the more abstract illustrations, there is something vaguely human poised at the edges, the collar of a dress shirt, the hint of a silhouette; yet as you turn the page, expecting some narrative continuity, the image dissolves into nothingness, upending any linear narrative. Figures move from scene to scene, and from style to style, from an abstract shadow in one to a detailed portrait in the other; faces bleed into smudged ink. More than the man in the blue suit, though, we are witness to the specter of grief and loss, both Umber's and our own.

The echoing of imagery and pattern also gestures toward a repetition in movement in Umber's works—figures move through, and across, liminal spaces like windows, mirrors, doorways, empty rooms, waterways, and more. In her lecture, "About the End of the World" (published posthumously in 2016), Jackson discusses a similar pattern in her writing, "a symbolic set," which features a separation between the inside and outside, with the inside containing some "forbidden, lovely secret" (252, 2015). Umber's book has a similar

movement, beginning mostly in closed rooms, with hemmed-in, claustrophobic décor, moving to more open scenes of nature—valleys, mountains, the sea—until she ends the collection with "The Rock," depicting a woman rowing out to sea, set to meet her demon lover. Jackson's own story of the same title does not feature Mr. Harris, but Umber draws its ill-fated group of travelers into her own vision of loss and spreading gloom.

Chrysanthemum Under the Waves is not so much a book to flip through as it is a dream to insert yourself into—you are the passenger in the seat of the car, you are the figure perched on the parlour chair, or the woman rowing out to sea. Umber's book is a mood, a dream, a memory, a (collective) unconscious. From both the introduction and afterword, it is clear that *Chrysanthemum Under the Waves* is both an act of sublimation on Umber's part, and a love letter to Shirley Jackson. While the book is in dialogue with Jackson's stories, it remains a work wholly unto itself, with its own themes and visual language. Through the images, we feel loss, grief, the slippage of time and hints of violence just outside the frame; these are women losing themselves, slipping off the pages, until there is nothing left but a woman's shoe on a sand-swept walkway, with sea grass swaying in the breeze.

— Mikaela Bobiy

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