

An Exotic, Erotic Tale

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

Aureole is a book for the brave ones. What is done here is simply not done. It is like a many-tiered tiramisu wedding cake, delicious and rich, each layer revealing something new, lush, sensuous. It is not a novel exactly, nor really a book of short stories. It is more a series of erotic etudes, each one powerful and beautiful like a very first kiss.

Read as a novel, *Aureole* fails utterly. It is easy enough for a writer to say, "Oh I meant to do that," when what they are doing is not entirely successful. *Aureole*

has almost no plot, and the people are flat and pretty. This is especially true of Anju, the beautiful girl from India, who comes as alive as the statue at the Met with which the narrator identifies her. She appears in the section called "Anju Flying Streamers After." She seems based on, or at least suggested by, a real person, Bhanu Kapil, a friend of Maso's. Anju is "like the sweet apple, Anju-...Anju grasping beauty/ Anju burning/ Anju swaying, incense, all is sweetness..."

But who exactly is Anju? She has been completely romanticized right out of humanity to the point of petrification, a

statue of an Indian goddess found in the Met. If this is the whole experience, the narrator's whole understanding of her – she doesn't even get a personality! – what does that say about the narrator? Nothing, because the narrator is bereft of all character and personality as well, so the ruminations on Anju do not reflect on anyone, lover or beloved

Aureole is experimental and sexual. The pieces are formed by the language, by Maso's love of language. The sentences do all the work. They don't describe the feeling or the place or the person; they evoke it, they are it. Language makes a concrete appearance as a dictionary of French slang from which two young women read as they make love. They learn that they live in the Corkscrew House (the lesbian world) and that their breasts are little shock absorbers. Images are given to the reader in close, tight shots in grainy black and white – lentils, a hand, an apricot.

Aureole
By Caroline Maso
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\$12.95

In interviews as well as in her work, Maso embraces her role as an experimental writer without flinching. She deliberately writes to shatter the conventions of fiction such as character, plot and description. "A work of fiction should be a genuine experience," she said in an interview several years ago. *Aureole* is an experience of longing and desire, specifically a woman's desire, which is so often shadowed by the idea that desire in a woman is unseemly, improper, something to be kept hidden.

Parts of *Aureole* are more poetry than prose, other parts are prose-like but never prosaic. One section, "Dreaming Steven Lighthouse Keeper," is written in the style and rhythm of a comic sailor's ditty, about a

solitary man whose children have drowned in the sea, whose wife is gone, and who spends his days masturbating to thoughts of the beautiful women in Provincetown having sex together. The song is dark, hilarious, and heartbreaking.

Aureole is infused with a rosy, golden light and it is this light, the aureole, that Maso explores without ever getting to the heart of the matter. In her preface, which will hopefully be removed should there be any later editions, Maso tells us that that's what she meant to do.

It would be a mistake to read *Aureole* as a novel, let alone in one sitting. It is best taken in small bits, read over the course of time, a month or even a year. And, like a big tiramisu cake, it should be shared in bites, with a lover. ▼

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