

# First Person Plural

## *Bough Down*

By Karen Green

New York, NY; Siglio Press, 2013,

188 pp., \$36.00, hardcover

## *Frail Sister*

By Karen Green

New York, NY; Siglio Press, 2018,

164 pp., \$39.95, hardcover

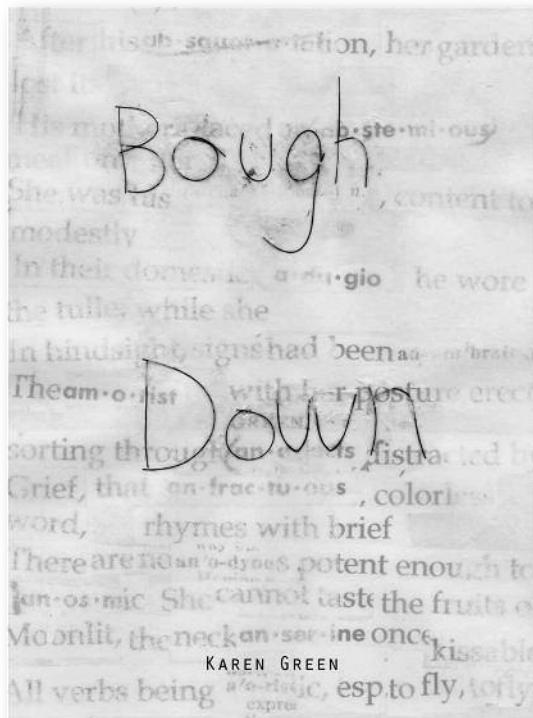
Reviewed by Noelle McManus

The differences between Karen Green and most other authors was made apparent as soon as I skimmed the pages of *Bough Down*. She writes dreamlike prose poetry, divided into tight stanzas or rolling paragraphs, intercut with colored images and typewritten notes. The presence of mixed media was multiplied in her second book, *Frail Sister*, every single word printed on old photographs, crumpled envelopes, or yellowed documents. Clearly, Green is no traditional novelist, and she seems to have no intention to ever be one. An artist in the clearest sense of the word, she leaps effortlessly between mediums to create whole works. To call her books *books* seems remiss; *pieces* might be more apt. Reading through them felt voyeuristic, as if I were crouching somewhere in an attic or a dusty bedroom, each page a new paper I found hidden away in a drawer. Though exquisite, Green's words hide nothing. They're as confessional as they are lyrical, as brutally honest as they are dreamlike.

My first encounter of her work was *Bough Down*, published in 2013 five years after her husband's death. Admittedly, I hadn't known who Green had been married to until Googling it. Afterwards, I wrestled a bit with how to include such a detail, at the risk of assessing a woman, an artist, based on the accomplishments of her spouse. But her husband's identity is a fact not easily ignored because Green was married to David Foster Wallace. Yes, *Bough Down* deals with the disastrous impact his suicide has had on her life, but she doesn't allow the reader to relax into the sensationalism that surrounded her husband after his passing. She doesn't recount the details of his death, one that has been highly publicized and discussed almost as if he had made an artistic decision rather than succumb to a horrific illness.

Green knows his mythos well. She knows what it's like to deal with it. "Strangers feel free to email: *Nobody knew you before your husband took his life*," she writes. "Nobody knew me, nobody knew me. I think this may be true." The only intimate perspective we have into the event is from the couple's two dogs who are frantically circling the scene, worrying over what has changed. What we see and feel is anxious, confused, and childlike—utterly helpless.

This theme of defenselessness pervades the book. *What can we do about the horrors life throws at us? Nothing but live with them.* Green moves through her life like a ghost, distantly observing the events around her. Her journeys through the most mundane of tasks—doctors' visits, walking down the sidewalk, going to bed—are more harrowing than anything previous she's ever had to do. "Can I



feel the floor here," she asks herself, coming home to an empty house, "when there is a body out there, a body whose soul has made haste, a body who was my body to like and look at ..." She finds herself at a disconnect with the friends and family she sees at the funeral, with strangers she notices on the streets, and even with her dogs, who remain as agitated as she is. She writes of this, "The brown one still won't sleep with me even though I lift his velvet ear and tell him, He's not coming back." She's saying it to the dog, and (whether she realizes it or not) she's saying it to herself.

She is apathetic. She is angry. She no longer trusts psychiatrists, though hers insists she is making "non-linear, inelegant progress." In the mixed-media parts of the book, the tiny photographs and typewritten letters, we see the deepest depth of her mind, phrases like, "His face / His teeth / In the last / Why did he," appearing smudged, scratched out, nearly unreadable across the old scraps of paper. Besides bits of hysteria, most of the book is easily understandable, though abstract. The book is intercut with occasional stories of a maybe-senile woman referred to only as "the jazz lady," who has a strange, foggy memory and a few absent children who never come to visit her in the hospital. Her role in the book, different as it is from Green's weighty grief, is not as random as it may sound. Acknowledging the juxtaposition, Green writes, "I don't know if the jazz lady is in first or third person," and in fact, the passages sometimes switch between the two.



Perhaps the jazz lady is Green, an image she has of her future self. Or perhaps she is, at times, a real someone else. For me, having read *Bough Down* at breakneck speed before picking up Green's second book, *Frail Sister*, jazz lady foreshadows that novel's protagonist. At first glance, *Frail Sister* is more of a visually layered scrapbook than a novel—but it tells a story, and a tragic one at that.

Its main character is Constance "Connie" Gale, an aunt about whom Green knew next to nothing. Using the few old photographs Connie left behind and a slew of other mementos, some real, some altered, some entirely fabricated, Green weaves together a story that may or may not be true. Connie begins the book as a child star who performs songs and dances for soldiers, along with her unnamed sister. Their religious parents appear to favor the sister, a fact that colors all of Connie's childhood. "Sister," she mentions once, the words typed heavily beneath a black-and-white photo of a young girl, "You float & I fall." To break away from this life, Connie leaves to become a nurse with World War II brewing on the horizon. Yet, despite her absence, she continues writing letters to her sister, some terse and pragmatic, others frightened and rambling. Not once do we see her sister's replies—if there are any.

The book is built around aesthetics. One page consists of only song lyrics stuffed inside the neck of a violin; some others are messages typed over faded cursive. Connie receives countless postcards from soldiers, young and old, who idolize her, see her as a creature somewhere on the line between sexual object and mother. They attach pictures of themselves and send her cartoons. Any image of Connie's younger brother (referred to interchangeably as Mouse, Brother Mouse, Corporal Mouse, and, once, The Horrible Rodent) has ears, a nose, and a tail drawn over them. The images are expertly compiled, fixed together in such a way that they feel like they were meant to be connected all along—even if Green herself has no idea where they came from.

While *Frail Sister* does have a plot, I found I wasn't often following it. Instead, I was feeling things. Feeling the desperate love and lust of the GIs, the carefully hidden fear of Connie in her messages to her sister, the cocky masculinity of Mouse, and the lurking horror of the war. There are,

of course, bits and pieces of Green in Connie. Connie writes of her dead lover, Erastus, "I've been sniffing necks to find him again, fibbing into crewcuts, telling them they smell like pie crust when they smell like blood and mold and hunter and prey." What I felt most of all when reading about the war from Connie's perspective was the sensation of being lost. Lost women, perhaps, are Green's specialty. As the war ticks on and the time to go home nears, Connie has changed. Her world is hazy, her desires strange. She is an echo of the jazz woman, or an echo of Karen Green.

I worry I haven't conveyed the powerful magic of Green's work. If it were possible, this review would be word-for-word copies of each book. Typing out every quote I underlined or obsessed

over would fill pages, and there would be no room for analysis. I can say for sure that Green knows how to write emotion. Every new line in both books is a fresh punch to the gut. The statements can be simple—as in *Bough Down*, "You've won every argument except the one about my being better off. Nobody laughs at my jokes as hard as you"—or laden with poetry—as in *Frail Sister*, "... every day i grow backwards & fade. you may not believe this, but onceuponatime i was a child feigning sleep. i was a girl." She's a master of the female psyche, a voice for the emotions many feel but cannot (will not) describe.

As a writer, Green stands on an edge. She is daring and experimental and she is gentle and feeling. She is as much of a poet as she is a storyteller,

and as much a writer as she is an artist. She exists on the border between Karen Green and jazz lady and Connie Gale, and they all lean over her border as well. Nothing in her world is certain, and love is heart wrenching. Most of all, her books acknowledge that, in the realm of emotions, there are no absolutes. It is, as her psychiatrist put it, "non-linear" and "inelegant," and the moments in which we find ourselves caught in it are, as Green herself put it in *Bough Down*, "a time of no time." We are on edge. 📖

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# Armed

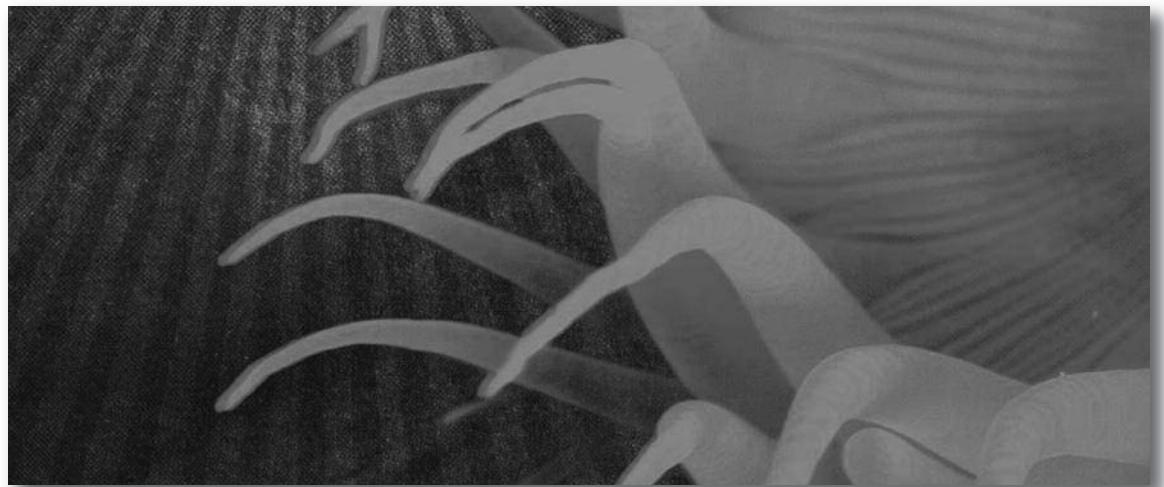
## Tentacle

By Rita Indiana, Translated by Achy Obejas

Sheffield, South Yorkshire; And Other Stories,

2018, 160 pp., \$13.95, paperback

Reviewed by Rachel Hill



With its with many arms outstretched, *Tentacle* is a myriad beast; a time-travel trans-narrative set in the Dominican Republic, using Yoruba fused myth-technologies to undo and prevent the ecological collapse of 2037's oceans, its scope is vast. In a suitably tentacular manner, the past and future, historical and fictive, collapse and re-constitution, all vibrantly conspire to illuminate what is subcutaneous to the everyday. In so doing, *Tentacle* excavates and makes apparent the multiplicity of temporalities, struggles, and entities that compose what technoscience scholar Donna Haraway has termed our "thick present." Navigating this thickness, *Tentacle* thinks and dances with complexity, to a wild merengue beat.

Queer icon Rita Indiana first rose to fame in her native Dominican Republic (D.R.) as a rock-infused merengue musician. Indiana's punk sensibility saturates her prose, imbuing it with a distinctive musicality and rhythm. The rapid flow of songs such as *La Hora de Volve* or *El Blu del Ping Pong* by her band *Rita Indiana y los Misterios* ("Rita Indiana and the Mysteries"), made their way into Indiana's first novel to be translated into English, *PAPI* (2004). A semi-autobiographical novel, *PAPI* uses a seemingly extemporaneous, lyrical barrage to chart a young girl's disenchantment with, and increasing independence from, her formerly idolized father.

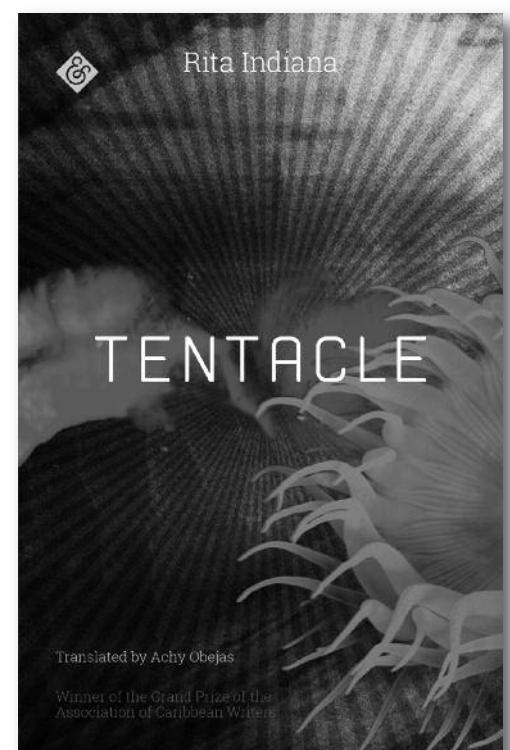
With its skilful amalgamation of science fiction, surrealism, and queer aesthetics, *Tentacle*—originally published as *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015)—became the first Spanish language work to win the Grand Prize of the Association of Caribbean Writers in 2017. Her fourth book, *Tentacle* shows a clear progression in Indiana's mastery of

multiple plotlines, with tighter control of a hectic prose, dense with allusion. Indiana's writing is known for its use of local D.R. slang and idioms, so any translation is bound to lose some of these nuances. Nevertheless, translator Achy Obejas has managed to maintain a compelling beat, making for a sophisticated yet compulsively readable novel.

*Tentacle* begins in 2037 with our main protagonist Acilde Figueroa working as a maid for political power-player Esther Escudero, who, as a Santeria priestess, is also known as Omicunlé. Santeria—an Afro-Caribbean syncretic religion which blends Yoruba traditions with Catholic icons—is the spiritual reservoir at the center of the novel. The sea, in particular, becomes the primary locus of power and worship, as emblemized by the sacred and near-extinct anemone which adorns Esther's altar, a creature she is bound to protect.

Acilde conspires to sell Esther's priceless anemone on the black market, in order to afford "Rainbow Brite," an unofficial drug which is reputed to trigger a near-instant sex transition in the imbiber. Finally obtaining Rainbow Brite, and accompanied by various Yoruba rituals, Acilde undergoes this transition. Anemones are the novel's central symbolic touchstone and a spiritual force majeure; hence, during his transition, the touch of the stolen anemone's tentacles initiates Acilde into Santeria, to be renamed; "Omo Olokun: one who knows what lies at the bottom of the sea ... save the sea."

Assigned female at birth (AFAB), Acilde is aware of his status as a transman (rather than a more non-binary trans-masculine identity), from his early years; his gender dysphoria is established at the beginning of the novel, as we are told he has



been saving money from sex work in order to afford top surgery. However, there is a puzzling, even problematic, authorial choice when apportioning Acilde's pronouns. At first, Acilde is specifically referred to as she, even though his position as a trans man is equally emphasized throughout. The use of she/her pronouns only switches to he/his after he has taken Rainbow Brite and biologically transitioned to a male-sexed body. Covertly then, this representation of trans-identity seems to insist upon the essentialist assertion that gender and sex