

## Too Much to Swallow

*The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey.* By Taisha Abelar. Viking Penguin, New York, 1992. 252 pp. Hardcover, \$21.00.

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If someone deliberately set out to write a mocking parody of mystical-journey literature, to make fun of popular trumpery like that of Carlos Castaneda or Lynn Andrews, that someone could hardly create a book any sillier than *The Sorcerers' Crossing*. Taisha Abelar would have you believe that a stranger named Clara came up to her one day in the Arizona desert and invited Abelar to follow her car for 400 miles into a remote Mexican wilderness to live in Clara's house, and that this our author immediately did.

On arrival at Clara's improbably huge and well-appointed house, Abelar is absolutely forbidden to enter any of the left side of the house, or any of the bedrooms except her own. She is also told that many other people live in the house, but at the moment they are all traveling in India, except for Clara herself.

Abelar swallows all this and goes on living in Clara's house for more than a year without ever looking into those forbidden areas; nor does she wonder much about the mysterious ways in which the house is kept clean and tidy and meals regularly appear, apparently without human intervention. Clara herself seems to do little about the house. Often she disappears for days or weeks at a time, leaving her guest alone. No one ever seems to do laundry or drive a car or shop for anything; no service people come or go; no housekeepers or grounds attendants are to be seen. Abelar sometimes hears voicelike sounds in

remote corridors, but she assumes it is only the wind.

What occupies Abelar through the long months in this unlikely situation is the sort of activity often described as a shamanic initiation. Under the decidedly ungentle guidance of self-appointed guru Clara, she is subjected to a kind of "teaching" consisting mostly of trickery, humiliation, and befuddlement. She gets a series of incomprehensible nonexplanations accompanied by scolding and insults; she is given pointless exercises to test endurance or induce ennui; she spends many hours daily sitting still and "recapitulating," which means remembering every event in her life up to this point. She says that she often falls asleep. In fact, she is so frequently either sleeping or fainting into extended periods of unconsciousness that the reader might well assume that she was routinely drugged into zombie-like passivity. Certainly her incurious acquiescence is not the behavior of a normal human being. Her attitude is so generally limp and wimpy that her book will surely fail to engage the feminist audience it seems to aim for.

Other "teachers" finally show up, including a Mr. Abelar, a woman named Nelida, and another man, who first describes himself as a caretaker but turns out to be another shaman, named Emilito. These people take turns subjecting Abelar to various bizarre "training" routines, including an episode during which she is left for three days, strapped unconscious into a leather harness and hanging from

a tree. Eventually she wakes up and figures out how to let herself down, only to find a note telling her that everyone has gone away on an extended trip and that she is to stay alone, sleeping only in her hanging harness or in the tree house, which she fears. Her reaction to this abandonment is indifference, "as if something inside me had been turned off."

Her circuits aren't working any better when she looks for some diversion, and for the first time in a year and a half she decides to browse through the books in the library. Professing to have been "always fascinated" by astronomy, she tries "a thin book with plenty of pictures" on this subject; but as she begins to leaf through it, it soon puts her to sleep. On another occasion she describes herself as "not fond of books." Yet this unlettered person purports to be scholarly enough, according to her preface, to have acquired a Ph.D. in anthropology. No credentials are given anywhere in the book, nor any biographical information, not even her real name. The dustjacket describes her as an anonymous "member of an informal society of sorcerers."

By the end of the book, however, the reader has found no reason to think that Abelar will ever become a sorcerer, an anthropologist, or anything else. Though some hope is offered by her most recent teacher/

tormentor, who promises that she will soon "cross over," she remains enveloped by "a cloud of fatigue and desperation" and overcome by "the strain of trying to understand the inconceivable." By this time the reader knows all too well how she feels.

What is really inconceivable is what profit anyone other than its publishers can derive from this book. Apparently, it was published only to feed the insatiable shamanic-journey genre market, where much wonder-tale fiction masquerades as autobiography and tries to convince us all that irrationality is a Higher Truth. Since the book is a product of the Castaneda school, with a foreword by Carlos himself, a cynic might even suppose that it really comes from Castaneda's prolific pen, with a female pseudonym to lure back feminine readers who have been defecting to the ranks of Lynn Andrews fans. Since metaphysical types are notoriously fickle in their allegiances, the author (Carlos or non-Carlos) of *The Sorcerers' Crossing* may hope to gain more followers from that ever-shifting group. This book, however, won't do it. Even the most credulous among us must have some limit to the amount of guff they can digest.

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