



The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life

By Fanny Howe

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In times of great uncertainty, the urgency of the artist's task is only surpassed by its difficulty. Ours is such a time, and rising to the challenge, novelist and poet Fanny Howe suggests new and fruitful ways of thinking about both the artist's role and the condition of doubt. In these original meditations on bewilderment, motherhood, imagination, and art-making, Howe takes on conventional systems of belief and argues for another, brave way of proceeding. In the essays "Immanence" and "Work and Love" and those on writers such as Carmelite nun Edith Stein, French mystic Simone Weil, Thomas Hardy, and Ilona Karmel—who were particularly affected by political, philosophical, and existential events in the twentieth century--she directly engages questions of race, gender, religion, faith, language, and political thought and, in doing so, expands the field of the literary essay. A richly evocative memoir, "Seeing Is Believing," situates Howe's own domestic and political life in Boston in the late '60s and early '70s within the broader movement for survival and social justice in the face of that city's racism.

Whether discussing Weil, Stein, Meister Eckhart, Saint Teresa, Samuel Beckett, or Lady Wilde, Howe writes with consummate authority and grace, turning bewilderment into a lens and a light for finding our way.

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The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life By Fanny Howe Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #228104 in Books
- Published on: 2003-11-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .42" w x 5.51" l, .58 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 181 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Novelist and poet Howe approaches this spare yet cerebral collection of literary essays with a sense of "bewilderment": "What I have been thinking about, lately, is bewilderment as a way of entering the day as much as the work. Bewilderment as a poetics and a politics," like a dream that "hesitates, stands back, makes itself scared, circles and fizzles." Poetically challenging conventional structure and fixed ways of thinking, she divulges deeply personal battles with race and gender in the 60s and 70s; she ruminates on metaphorical fairies, which she considers the art within us; purgatory, the censoring, symbolic space that holds our hidden "true" selves in abeyance; and faith, which she has found through the Catholic church. Her prose shimmers and spins, weaving in stories of writers whose philosophies and struggles have informed her own, such as Simone Weil, Ilona Karmel, Thomas Hardy and Edith Stein, a Carmelite nun murdered by the Nazis despite her conversion from Judaism. Throughout, Howe poses key questions ("Can you wish a new world into being?"; "How does a change in vocabulary save your life?"; "What does it mean to finish writing a book?"), embracing doubt without sacrificing control. What does all this have to do with a wedding dress? The title refers to the Carmelite ceremony where nuns mark their spiritual transformation by abdicating their physical shells and pledging their eternal marriage to the invisible, the interior, the great empty future, which is unnameable-in effect God-and represents Howe's own conversion to Catholicism. Her faith confronts and shapes the larger issues addressed here-politics and justice, language and words, and the role of the artist in our increasingly itinerant world-and results in a thoughtful and inspired meditation.

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Review

"The Wedding Dress is an important book for anyone interested in contemporary literature and the role of the artist in the present. These essays on the art enact a vital intervention with race, gender, faith, motherhood, and poetry. Fanny Howe uses Doubt to smash conventional systems of belief and Bewilderment to investigate political injustice and to shape a humane response, displaying an embodied wisdom that is both brilliantly articulate and precariously lived."

From the Inside Flap

"Fanny Howe draws the reader into her meditations on spiritual illuminations with a simplicity and an originality of vision and style that I find in no other contemporary work dealing with mysticism."—Etel Adnan, poet and author of *The Spring Flowers Own & the Manifestation of the Voyage*

"Here we reach the quick: the cutting edge between faith and fiction. These are not sentences, they are surgical incisions; the whole book a signpost for the new century."—Mark Patrick Hederman, Irish Benedictine monk and author of *Tarot, Talisman or Taboo*

"*The Wedding Dress* is the precious end product of an unique sensibility that combines faith, wisdom, experience and an uncompromising pursuit of beauty and truth."—Piers Paul Read, author of *The Templars and Alive: The Story of the Andes Survivors*

"This is an ax of a book, like Kafka's, breaking through the ice of received wisdom, fake attitudes, piety. An unflinching but exhilarating look at real religion, the American desolation, a woman's life, and, always, the redemption of literature. The sharpened edge is Fanny Howe's love of the truth, which (after cutting) does indeed set free."—James Carroll, author of *Constantine's Sword* and *Secret Father*

"Fanny Howe's latest book is a primer for the mind America does not know it has. Her prose is utterly simple and truthful yet rings with the formal elegance of past centuries. These pages are a dazzling handbook on the riddles of language, breath and speech. At every moment in the book Fanny is present, precise, mischievous, awesome, a companion in arms to her readers. When she turns with us to address the Unknown, she brings us face to face as no other writer I know can do."—Mark Jay Mirsky, editor of the journal *Fiction*

"This is, without exaggeration, an extraordinary book. The essays have the concentration and obliquity and suggestiveness of prose poems. The sentences are characteristically short and direct, grammatically simple and seemingly to the point. But so much thinking and responding and feeling have been distilled into these deceptively straightforward statements that they often have the tantalizing and paradoxical witchery of runes. There is no one else like Fanny Howe on the contemporary literary scene."—Albert Gelpi, Stanford University

"An important book for anyone interested in contemporary literature and the role of the artist in the present. These essays on the art enact a vital intervention with race, gender, faith, motherhood, and poetry. Fanny Howe uses *Doubt* to smash conventional systems of belief and *Bewilderment* to investigate political injustice and to shape a humane response, displaying an embodied wisdom that is both brilliantly articulate and precariously lived."—Peter Gizzi, author of *Artificial Heart*

"I have never before had such a physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual experience while reading one book. Fanny Howe makes words reality, thought beauty, and learning meditation. I went with her from 'Bewilderment' to agreeing that this book is 'a path' and 'like a plot--once formed, it seems to welcome and pull you into it.' And I am grateful."—Frances Smith Foster, author of *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892*

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Antoinette Holdren:

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James Rutledge:

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