

On Owning Shame

By Christine Sloan Stoddard

In 2017, I wrote a chapbook about a woman who, as a coping mechanism, mythologized the story behind her ear deformity. As a little girl, she imagined she was a mermaid and called her ear a “clam ear.” This naming act became a means of empowering herself and accepting her body as it was. In 2018, Amanda Earl was kind enough to choose my manuscript for publication. The result was *The Tale of the Clam Ear* (AngelHousePress, Ottawa, 2018).

More than a year later, Jan Conn reviewed the chapbook for *Arc Poetry Magazine*. In July 2019, Amanda forwarded me the advance review via email. The subject was “A Rare Review-The Tale of the Clam Ear.” This piqued my interest. But my heart didn’t dance for long because Amanda’s terse email ended with this line: “It’s not awful, just ableist, methinks.”

Never read the reviews, right? Well, I couldn’t help myself. I braced myself as I opened the attachment.

All was well until I hit this sentence: “The shame, for a malformed ear, seems a bit extravagant.”

I was not pleased, and I can handle criticism. It is harder for me to accept a lack of empathy. If the reviewer had questioned my word choice, sentence structure, or stanza breaks, I would not be writing this response. Instead the reviewer questioned the extent of my protagonist’s bodily shame. As Amanda pointed out in her initial email to me, that critique indicates an ableist mindset. Ableism privileges able-bodied people, including their experiences and perspectives. Logically then, ableism does not favor the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities. To make a judgment call on how someone with a disability should feel is ableist.

This response to the *Arc Poetry* review is not a complaint. It is a note on sensitivity and a call for compassion. Shame is complex. Shame cannot be measured. Shame should not be judged because judgment is part of what produces shame in the first place. People feel self-consciousness and other negative emotions because of societal pressures and additional factors beyond their control. In the case of an ear deformity, someone may suffer from shame for a number of reasons: Peers may tease them about their ear’s appearance or alienate them because of it, especially during childhood or in dating situations as a teen or adult. They may compare their ears to the ears of others or the ears they see portrayed in mass media. They may not hear well (or at all) and have difficulty participating in most social and professional activities. If the individual is a woman or non-binary person, they probably have an even harder time confronting shame. After all, those of us who aren’t men face exacting beauty standards, where any detraction is considered a defect. We also are not given equality in the workplace or most other areas of life, so a difference in ability only increases our challenges.

The *Arc Poetry* review also states that the protagonist ending up with the merman in *The Tale of the Clam Ear* is a predictable ending. I agree that “happily ever after” is a familiar trope. As a feminist, I have rolled my eyes at such an ending many times before. Yet this reading of the chapbook is ableist because it ignores one important point: The merman has a cleft lip. In other words, the merman *also* has a deformity and can therefore relate to the mermaid in ways that another merman could not. This relatability signifies a special bond and it is ableist not to recognize that bond.

I thank *Arc Poetry Magazine* for their time and effort in putting out this review. It has its positive and smart aspects, and attention paid to chapbooks in general should be commended. Though I hope that in the future, reviewers and editors will be more alert to ableist language and ways of thinking. It was with careful consideration that I chose this dedication for *The Tale of the Clam Ear*: "This is for anyone who was ever been told their body was wrong." We have the right to our shame and the right to learn how to move through and past it at our own pace. May this journey never be judged as too “extravagant.”

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Christine Sloan Stoddard is a Salvadoran-American author, artist, and the founder of Quail Bell Magazine. Her books include *Belladonna Magic: Spells In The Form of Poetry And Photography* (Shanti Arts), *Desert Fox by the Sea* (Hoot 'n' Waddle), *Water for the Cactus Woman* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Hispanic and Latino Heritage in Virginia* (The History Press), and several chapbooks. Her art and writing have appeared in *Ms. Magazine*, *The Feminist Wire*, *Bustle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Native Peoples Magazine*, *Yes! Magazine*, *Teen Vogue*, *The Social Justice Review*, *Marie Claire*, and elsewhere. A graduate of VCUarts and The City College of New York-CUNY, Stoddard lives in Brooklyn with her husband and too many art supplies.