



Waking the Witch: A Review by Alaina DiSalvo

Author Pam Grossman begins her book, *Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power*, by confronting the reader head-on. The first page is a dabbling in historical context, a couple of sparse anecdotes, a splash of revealing personal history. But very soon, she gets to the point: What do you think of when you imagine a witch? She presents a startlingly comprehensive list that makes the reader confront their own internalized misogyny. It's summed up quite succinctly in the quotation in the preface of the book, said by Helen Adam in *At Mortlake Manor*: "I fear, and I love, I love, and I fear, The Far Away Ladies now hovering near." Our society loves witches. This is easily shown in figures such as Joan of Arc, Glinda, Hermione Granger, and Samantha from *Bewitched*. But at the same time, witches are scorned, hated, and turned away. Just think of the Wicked Witch of the West, the three sisters in *Hocus Pocus*, Snow White's Evil Queen, or the thousands of women lurking in the shadows in fairy tales and ancient stories, intent on luring your children away and harnessing the powers of the devil to perform unspeakable acts. Grossman presents all of these examples without fear and without hesitation. But the point she makes is essential to our understanding of society today. Witches are evil and good, beautiful and hideous, seductive and repulsive, benevolent and wicked, all at the same time. And so are women.

If you think back to all the ways society has treated witches, you'll have a pretty comprehensive list of how it has treated women. They are placed on a pedestal, yet turned away from conversations for their lack of intellect. They are idolized, worshipped, but it is the height of impropriety to worship a female god. Men eagerly wait for women to show a bit of skin, but once a woman reveals herself, she is called horrible names and shunned. Grossman tells many stories of witches throughout the ages in her book, but one that stuck with me the most is that of Margaret Hamilton, better known as the actress who played the Wicked Witch of the West. Grossman doesn't talk about the Wizard of Oz, though. Instead, she provides a transcript of an episode of *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood*. In this exchange, Hamilton points out that "[the Wicked Witch] is very unhappy because she never gets what she wants, Mister Rogers...mainly she just wanted those ruby slippers. Because they had lots of power, and she wanted more power. And I just think that sometimes we think she's just a mean and very bad person, but actually you have to think about it from

her point of view. That it wasn't as happy a time as she wanted it to be, because she just never got what she wanted." (p. 29) Grossman sums up this exchange in a very simple sentence: "We call 'witch' any woman who wants." (p. 29) The most striking part of Hamilton's appearance on the *Mr. Rogers* show doesn't happen until the very end. Hamilton gets dressed up in her old costume, complete with the pointy black hat and cape. As she gets ready to leave *Mr. Rogers' house*, *Mr. Rogers* asks if she would like to change back into her regular clothes. She laughs, a real laugh, a far cry from her cackle in Oz. And she remarks that she'd like to walk the streets just as she is. "Oh, that'd be fine for the neighborhood," says *Mr. Rogers* (p. 33).

I've read a lot of articles about how women are trying to reclaim the word "bitch." It's something that has been hurled at them, spat at their feet, used to degrade and humiliate them for years. Others believe that words like "bitch" should be abandoned altogether. Have you ever noticed that nearly all curse words insult a woman? There is no male equivalent to "bitch." You can call a man a "bastard," meaning the son of a woman who wasn't married, or a "son of a bitch," meaning the son of a woman who was "bitchy." But how can we leave all of these words behind? They're such an ingrained part of who we are as women. This concept of shaming women for being assertive transcends cultures, class, creed, and even time itself. Grossman acknowledges this, digests this, and then says that the only way out is through. Grossman's entire book is a written exploration of this fact. It is a good thing to be a bitch. It is a good thing to be true to ourselves, and to bow to no one. Only then will women be able to reclaim what was rightfully theirs from the start: respect, opportunity, and happiness.

Grossman cites many books written throughout history that talk about the evil nature of witches. What's striking, if not surprising, is that these books were almost entirely written by men, and all quickly devolve into condemnations of the innate evil nature of women. But the dichotomy of simultaneously reaching out to witches and forcing them away (in a reflection of how we treat all women) is prevalent everywhere, even in these books, and even in the Bible. One story Grossman tells is that of King Saul of the Israelites. In the book of Samuel, Saul outlaws witchcraft throughout his entire kingdom. But unfortunately for him, he is feeling ignored by God, and needs to ask the advice of a medium about how to handle the invading Philistine army. So, Saul dresses up in a disguise and seeks out a woman who's secretly still practicing her craft. She is reluctant, to say the least: "Behold, thou knowest

what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land; wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die?" (1 Samuel 28:9 KJV) Despite her misgivings, she helps Saul. She summons the ghost of the prophet Samuel, who portends that Saul's armies will be crushed by the Philistines. This is, of course, exactly what happens. Grossman wastes no time in forcing the reader to confront the hypocrisy of this story. What is the difference, Grossman asks, between Saul and "congressmen who purport to be against Roe v. Wade yet who have paid for their mistresses' abortions?" (p. 140) Why does this hypocrisy continue to happen throughout history? You know the answer. So do I. We just don't want to admit it. The answer is simple: men love to punish and restrict the rights of women in the name of righteousness, but only until they need something from them.

There's a reason why Grossman's book is called "Waking the Witch." It's all about reclaiming that word, "witch," in all ways. A big part of it is allowing ourselves to want. In a review of Grossman's book, Neko Case said that "Grossman reminds us that witches are not monsters so much as possibilities." For some, this is as far as the concept goes. And that's fine. But for others like Grossman, the idea of becoming a witch goes even further. Grossman spends her book alternating between historical biographies and personal anecdotes, starting in her early childhood. She talks about getting into the idea of witchcraft as a desperate hope to aid her bipolar sister, and later cooking up love spells for her friends and even hexing a bully at school. This idea might make us, at first, roll our eyes, or feel desperately unnerved and uneasy.

A high school teacher of mine once said that "the word 'cult' is simply a word that modern English speakers use to refer to 'a religion that I disapprove of.'" At its most basic level, what is the difference between magic and prayer? Grossman points this out in a way that doesn't condemn any other religion or spirituality. Prayer usually involves acknowledging your own futility, your own uselessness, and begging a higher power for something that you have no intention of seeking out yourself. Magic, on the other hand, is both empowering and effective. At its core, magic is just a wish. Magic is allowing yourself to remain open to any communications that nature or the universe is trying to send you. "When you send out a great call, how do you know if it is Spirit or nature that answers? Maybe there's no difference at all. Maybe grace is green." (p. 194) Magic is acknowledging that you don't know everything, but that at the same time, you

are in no way useless. You are powerful, worthy, and strong. And through magic, through directing your thoughts into an intention and taking decisive action, you can make your wishes a reality. Magic is prayer without the patriarchy.

One other anecdote that Grossman shares is the first time she sought other people who shared her spirituality. She explains that she used to tell herself that she was better off alone, and that others would surely not share her beliefs. But she is forced to admit, eventually, that she is terrified of exposing her "soft spiritual underbelly" (p. 151). One of the key traits of being in an abusive relationship is being terrified that once you expose something you like, the other person will take it away from you. Therefore, those being abused often keep their likes and dislikes secret, sheltered, and in a place where no one can get at them. Women living in a patriarchal society are in an abusive relationship. I related deeply to Grossman when she told this story. But I am happy to say that hers ends well. She found other women like her to befriend, to support, and to exchange love with as they express their spirituality together.

If you look for witches in the cracks and crevices of the internet, nearly all of them recommend Grossman's book for "baby witches," or new seekers. There is a very good reason for this. Grossman's book is all-encompassing and liberating to the seeker. To others, it is enlightening and shaming; people realize their own hypocrisy and oppression when they read Grossman's matter-of-fact, carefully laid out words that still brim with emotion and heartfelt passion. The last line of this book reads as follows: "She took the hallowed dark and formed a hearth" (p. 278). I know I speak for many when I say this line put a lump in my throat. So many of us feel inadequate for being dissatisfied with our patriarchal, capitalist, Christian-dominated society. But Grossman, and through her, witchcraft, shows us that it's okay. We're going to be alright. If we embrace the witch within us, we will all find what we have been looking for.

El Apagón (The Blackout) by Elijah Matos

“Residents of southern areas of Puerto Rico are advised to evacuate immediately. Hurricane Bimini is expected to make landfall in Ponce by 8 p.m. this evening. Once again residents are advised to evacuate imm—”

I had to turn it off. Every time, they warn island Puerto Ricans to leave their homes, leave their lives behind. Leaving is a luxury many of them don't have. It's also one they don't want.

I was staying in my Abuelos' house following the viejito's funeral. Everyone else, my mother, my grandmother, my tios and tias, the cousins I hadn't seen since we snuck succulent quenepas and steaming spoonfuls of arroz con gandules from Abuelita, they all left. Most offered to take me with them, assuming I didn't have the money to pay for a plane ticket back to New York, or maybe just worried about me being alone. They must've forgotten how I used to disappear for hours in the fincas or in the pueblo, desperate for a little solitude in my angsty teen years.

So being alone wasn't just fine with me, it was nice. It gave me time to explore the house without having to dodge conversations and feet. I could take the plastic off the couches and no one could tell me a thing. I could rummage through the scrapbooks, stunned by just how well such old cameras captured my Abuelita's poise or my Abuelo's sarcastic grin. I could imagine how their skin developed wrinkles and liver spots through years of laughter, fights, and dreaming. Imagination was all I had now. They were gone.

The crash of thunder woke me up. I'm a world-renowned heavy sleeper, so God's latest batch of showoffiness was both an annoyance, and a reminder that every supposed guarantee, including another hour or two of sleep, is just a hope quickly washed away.

“¡Coño!” In rolling off it, I'd forgotten how low the sofa was, not to mention the nearness of the hardwood table, crashing my body into both. I knew she was dead, had been dead for years, but when I got up and found Abuela's portrait waiting for my acknowledgement, I felt her disapproval

for my curse.

The hurricane had set in. I could hear the neighbors' garbage bins rolling around their fronts, the tapas flying right off and into the streets. Gringitos in the U.S. get scared of this shit, worried that a tree will fall, or worse, the power will go out. Puerto Ricans? The real island ones who take their machetes and slice through coconuts like they were playing real life Fruit Ninja? They ain't scared of nothing. Me, though? I'm a Nuyorican. The ones with the Big Pun and Mrs. Galland Spanish. The kind that sounds like I'm always a syllable behind. So when I went to take a leak and found the light switch was about as useful as Algárin's bicho mongo, I was pissed.

“Damn, LUMA.” Once I finished my business, I walked out of the bathroom hopeful my aim was intact despite my sleepiness. Puerto Rico has blackouts like these constantly, but its only gotten worse since the U.S. gave the contract for the electric grid away like excess chuleta for the street perritos. I knew there was no way any of my neighbors or I had power. So how the hell was the light in the kitchen flickering?

I remember Abuelita like she lived in that kitchen. I know that sounds misogynist, but when can I say, she came from a misogynistic time. For her, I think cooking was a little rebellion against the lonelines of my Abuelito's disappearing act. He'd leave for hours, never telling her where he was going or how soon he'd be back. He did always come back though.

The flickering slowed the closer I drew. But when I put my hands on the counter, the light stayed solid. On the counter was Abuelita's rice pot, coated in years' worth of burnt olive oil. I could've sworn the kitchen was clear before I went to sleep.

The light went out. I yelped, thankful that unlike in my Brooklyn apartment, the folks next door couldn't hear. But now, I heard a rumbling chant emanating from the living room.

Santa Maria, Madre de Dios...

They'd chanted the prayer repeatedly at Abuelita's wake. She claimed Catholicism up until her death, but went from church to church across denomi-

nations. Abuelo was never a churchgoer, but whenever we asked for a “bendición,” he almost always gave the obligatory “Dios te bendiga.” Knowing that I was alone in the house but hearing the chants intensifying, I didn’t feel too blessed. I felt alone.

When I walked back to the living room, it was empty. There were wisps of white smoke floating around. They smelled of empanadillas, New York City slices, and Florida dew. How such a little room in such a little house could hold all of that, I had no idea. The smells had a heaviness to them, like they were a cologne some high school kid doused themselves in. Or like a loved one who has something to say but isn’t ready to get the words out. Like an island, full of people fighting to be heard, but reminded constantly that their voices aren’t worth as much as the schools and projects they occupy, soon to be transformed into luxury apartments and resorts.

When the smoke cleared, I couldn’t contain it, I started crying. Bawling, more like. The emptiness of the house felt like my emptiness. I’d promised my mother I’d be fine on my own, but now, being alone, surrounded by prom, graduation, and wedding photos, was the last thing I wanted. I’d give anything to talk to any of them. I’d give anything to talk to Abuelita.

The phone rang. It shouldn’t have been able to do that. It was a cordless one. It needed electricity. But it rang and rang and rang. I didn’t want to pick it up. Every hair on my body wanted to run away, right into the storm if I had to. But I needed to, and I knew who’d be listening.

“Bendición, Abuelita,” I paused. No response. “Abuelita, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you when you’d call grandma. I’m sorry I was ashamed. I’m sorry I didn’t learn Spanish before you died. I’m sorry that when I said goodbye, it was ‘thank you for everything’ and not ‘gracias por todo.’ I’m sorry that I wanted Wendy’s instead of bacalaitos when I was a kid and we’d come to visit. I’m sorry I called the police on you for not giving me ice cream before dinner. I’m sorry that I’m talking to your ghost instead of talking to you. A million times over, I am so sorry.”

Silence. I’d gone insane. I really thought I was talking to my great-grandmother’s ghost in a telephone receiver. I needed to go back to sleep.

I hung up the phone, walked back to the sofa, and sat, giving myself a second. When I laid back down, just before closing my eyes, the light in

the living room flickered three times, and then went out.

Scratch, Scratch by Tzippi Applebaum

It was so cold and foggy outside that Katy ran the last few blocks home, eager to get out of the chilly weather. She slid her silver key into the front door lock and entered her house. It was all dark inside. No one was home except her and she would be home alone for the entire weekend. Her parents were away on a trip and her younger brother, Sam, was staying at a friend's house.

After a long week of school, Katy just wanted to relax. She dropped her knapsack on her bedroom floor and put the key into the silver box where she always kept it. Then, she headed downstairs to heat up the leftover tuna casserole from last night's dinner and poured herself a glass of milk. After eating dinner, she left the food and glass on the table, and headed to the den to watch a movie.

About twenty minutes into the movie, she heard noises coming from the living room. It sounded like wood creaking, so she ignored it, turning the movie back on. Five minutes later, the creaking sound came again and it was getting louder. Pausing the movie, she walked to the living room. She heard the sound, but now it didn't sound like a creak, but more like a scratching noise. It stopped but then it started again. She stood still but it came again. It was soft then loud and then soft again. Katy looked around the room. Nothing was out of place. Strange, she thought.

She went back to her movie, but it was not five minutes before she heard a loud crash in the dining room. Running in, she saw that her glass cup of milk had fallen onto the floor, shattering into hundreds of pieces while the milk was splattered across the table and floor. She sighed and tried to kick the pieces into a pile. All she wanted was to relax tonight, not clean up a mess she didn't make. But that thought scared her- if she didn't make the glass cup fall then who did?

Nah, no, no, don't think like that she told herself. Maybe she had left it too close to the edge of the table. But she knew she hadn't, she had left it right in the middle. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she headed back to the den to finish watching the movie. But no sooner than she sat down, she heard a sound at the front door. She froze in place. The sound

was very quiet at first but then it grew louder. It wasn't a knock but more like a scratching sound. A very rough scratching sound like someone was trying to claw through the door. Too scared to check the peephole at the door, Katy ran upstairs to her bedroom and opened the window, peering into the night and down at the front door. Try as she might, she could not see anything. It was so dark and foggy that she could barely see a few feet in front of her. Katy shut the window, but the noises did not stop. They even seemed to be getting closer to her as they grew louder and louder.

By now, Katy was very afraid. She tried to calm herself by taking in her surroundings. There was her chair, her desk, her purse, and the silver box where she had placed the front door key. Katy eyed the silver box. There was something wrong with it. It looked like someone had scratched it or had tried to tear it. Slowly, she took it in her hands and opened it. Her heart stopped- the key was gone!

The noises and creaking sounds suddenly became louder and louder.

Shaking from head to toe, Katy slowly left her bedroom and walked down the hallway. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it would burst from her chest. She barely breathed as she heard the scratching noises coming from her brother's bedroom. The door was open and when she looked inside, two small green eyes were gazing right at her. Katy froze and then screamed as the two green eyes pounced on her and she fell to the ground.

"Stop, please, someone save me!!" she yelled.

But the green eyes gave her a small scratch on her hand then moved away, slinking down the hallway.

It was her brother's black cat, Comet, holding the front door key in his mouth. She lay there on the floor, still shaking. Comet slithered down the stairs. She got up, following him past the smashed glass of milk to the area in the living room where the creaking sounds were coming from. Katy's eyes widened- there were mice running around in a hole by the corner of the room, and Comet was trying to use the key in his mouth to reach the mice where his claws would not fit in the small hole.

Katy grabbed the key from Comet and headed upstairs, ignoring the many cat scratches at the front door that Comet must have made earlier that night. She locked her bedroom door and turned on a movie on her laptop, saying to herself, "I had never really liked cats."