



# Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems

*Robin Coste Lewis*

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**Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems** Robin Coste Lewis

**A stunning poetry debut: this meditation on the black female figure through time introduces us to a brave and penetrating new voice.**

Robin Coste Lewis's electrifying collection is a triptych that begins and ends with lyric poems meditating on the roles that desire and race play in the construction of the self. In the center of the collection is the title poem, "Voyage of the Sable Venus," an amazing narrative made up entirely of titles of artworks from ancient times to the present--titles that feature or in some way comment on the black female figure in Western art.

Bracketed by Lewis's own autobiographical poems, *Voyage* is a tender and shocking meditation on the fragmentary mysteries of stereotype, juxtaposing our names for things with what we actually see and know. A new understanding of biography and the self, this collection questions just where, historically, do ideas about the black female figure truly begin--five hundred years ago, five thousand, or even longer? And what role did art play in this ancient, often heinous story?

Here we meet a poet who adores her culture and the beauty to be found within it. Yet she is also a cultural critic alert to the nuances of race and desire--how they define us all, including her own sometimes painful history. Lewis's book is a thrilling aesthetic anthem to the complexity of race--a full embrace of its pleasure and horror, in equal parts.

*From the Hardcover edition.*

## Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems Details

Date : Published September 29th 2015 by Knopf

ISBN : 9781101875438

Author : Robin Coste Lewis

Format : Hardcover 142 pages

Genre : Poetry, Feminism, Race, Womens

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# From Reader Review *Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* for online ebook

## Roxane says

This is one of the best books I have ever read. It is outstanding, an achievement. Good on Knopf for publishing this book and so beautifully. The poems are so moving, powerful, unapologetically black. On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari is outstanding. Also, Frame. And Lure. I mean, my god. This is a book of poetry. I will write an actual review soon for somewhere, I am still processing. *Sable of Venus* is an absolutely essential read.

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## Danny Kneustaut says

Reading this book is like walking through a museum. The poems are exquisite, well-crafted, and impressive. But they are also a bit sterile, like museum pieces. I understand the context in which these poems are presented to me, but it feels like a theme in an exhibit. This book is a brilliant show of post-modern poetry, but there is a distance between the poems and the reader, a velvet rope that separates the reader from experience and relegates one to appreciation.

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## Neil R. Coulter says

I didn't *love* this collection, but I certainly affirm that Robin Coste Lewis is very skillful at communicating the pain she's lived through and sees all around her. This is most acute in her poem "Lure," which describes everything perfectly by denying all of it. Lewis's poems aren't all bleak hopelessness by any means, but that undercurrent is strong throughout the book. One of my favorite poems in the collection, "From: To:," about a moment of triumph for black servicemen in WWII, is followed immediately by "Beauty's Nest," showing the trauma those men returned to after the war.

The centerpiece of the book, the title poem, didn't really work for me. It's a sequence of poems made up entirely from words found in the titles and descriptions of museum artworks about black women. Or by black women. Or about anything by anyone who is black and queer. Or, it seems, whatever Lewis wanted to use for this poetry sequence. The result is constructions that are sometimes quite clever—such as the litany of body parts in "Catalogue 1: Ancient Greece & Ancient Rome"—but more often seem to me like nonsense.

What this most reminds me of is academic writing in the humanities, which by the 1990s, under the influence of postmodernism, had become a clutter of "cleverness"—adding hyphens or parentheses in common words to draw out some unexpected or subversive meaning, or adding capitalization to highlight different perspectives. This practice peaked in the 90s, and I think the main reason that it's declined ever since is that it grew really annoying. Whatever value there was initially in that impulse to novelty was quickly lost in its own "cute-ness."

Reading many parts of "*Voyage of the Sable Venus*" is a lot like this, for me anyway. The reading is less about connecting to Lewis's intended meaning, and more about trying to piece together what the original titles were, where one title ends and another begins. The conclusion of one poem, for example:

Bronzeville Inn Cabins for Coloreds. Here lies  
Jim Crow drink Coca-Cola white.

*Customers  
Only!*

This strikes me as just cutesy. It's an impressive effort, pulling together all these words from different places. But to what effect, ultimately? When everything is brought together completely out of context, the effect seems gimmicky and unfair. The word "relief," for example, means something specific in an art museum context; when you read it in a poem, it takes on a different meaning. But when I read it, my brain is stuck on the fact that this is way out of context, and it doesn't feel right.

Skimming through other reviews here, I see I'm in the minority, and most readers connected with this collection much more than I did. I'm glad the right audience is finding this book, and even though it wasn't especially for me at this moment, I am glad that I read it.

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### **Michaela Raschilla says**

Now I don't want you to look at the one star missing here and think that this wasn't a mind mindbogglingly good book. It was crazy good. In fact it was so good, I had trouble understanding it. I think the problem here was that I took out a library copy and therefor could not highlight, underline, and otherwise scribble manically in the margins. Is this always necessary with poetry? No, but I have noticed that it tends to be necessary with the good stuff.

I never would think that the judges of the National Book Award would pick a dud, but I didn't realize just how earth shattering this would be. I really loved the opening and closing sections, the area I had a bit of trouble with was the one in the middle. It was almost entirely comprised of what looked like catalog entries, and while I started to understand how it was objectifying people, I am not sure that I will wholly understand what she was trying to do without reading it through several more times and practically covering the pages with annotations.

This I think is one that I will add to the coveted list of books worth rereading. Maybe once I have read more poetry and have come to understand it better I will read this and suddenly be all knowing and understanding, but maybe I just am not the target audience, I cannot understand because I have not experienced what is captured in these pages. With a book dedicated primarily to the objectification of African People and women in particular, this is understandable. As a young white women I experience a fraction of the injustices that are displayed within here. Even I could understand how harrowing this collection is. One to get for the shelves of my own I think.

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### **Shaun says**

Four and one-half (4 1/2) stars; not four (4) stars.

While I personally favored Terrance Hayes' smart collection of poetry in "How to be Drawn" this book by Robin Coste Lewis tenderly traces her journey of self-discovery toward racial identity and enlightenment

that is both thrilling, erudite and tragic. Written in three parts with Part Two containing her intellectual "Voyage" examining the female black figure throughout the history of Western Art. Part One and Part Three make elegant "bookends" to the body of work in Part Two and help the poet firmly establish her place in the firmament of poetic lexiconography and the human experience.

Favorites from Part One that begin her "Voyage" and set the tone for the inspired Part Two are "Plantation," "On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari," "The Mothers" and "Summer." Robin Coste Lewis finishes this little masterpiece with seven beautiful poems of which I count "Frame," "Art & Craft," "Lure," "The Body in August," "Pleasure & Understanding" and, finally, the tragic and ironic "Felicite" as sheer genius.

No question that Robin Coste Lewis is a learned and brilliant poet deserving of the National Book Award in Poetry for 2015. Her poem "Lure" alone shows what richly imaginative arc lies between the words in the verse, "I am not there ... any longer." Great stuff!

For an additional glimpse into the brilliant mind of Robin Coste Lewis, I strongly urge you the reader to watch her incredibly moving acceptance speech at the NBA dinner this last November which can be found at [www.nationalbook.org](http://www.nationalbook.org) spoken days after the Paris attacks. Poets are the parakeets in the soul-killing mine we work and toil in called "life" and "the human experience." Great poets wake us to the gathering noxious fumes of such "life," inspire us to keep reaching for ever higher levels of consciousness and remind us to never lose focus on what is eternal and most important: art and the soul. As such Robin Coste Lewis, Claudia Rankine and Terrance Hayes are but a few of those voices that are so incredibly worthy of our collective attention and consideration.

DO read this book and DO watch this poet's acceptance speech at [www.nationalbook.org](http://www.nationalbook.org). Trust me on this one. You will not only be amazed and glad you did but may even be inspired to share your own personal journey of self-enlightenment to the chorus of our collective human experience.

Happy New Year my fellow "good readers." May your books be plentiful and reading rich and joyful in 2016.

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## David says

"Is there a street that can anticipate  
our tenderness? A corner or curb  
that stands still waiting for me?

Where is the road - gilded and broad -  
which can foresee our vast inability

not to love?"

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## Jason says

" *All is suffering* is a bad modernist translation.  
What the Buddha really said is: It's all a mixed bag. Shit

is complicated. Everything's fucked up. Everything's gorgeous. Even Death contains pleasure - six feet below understanding."

- from "Pleasure & Understanding," one of my favorite poems in this astonishing collection that explores and tests our cultural definitions of beauty; history and those who would like to sanitize or erase it; and the power, joy, and pain of personal memory. The title poem is a tour de force that is at once a haunting lyric/found poem and blistering, brilliant art history/criticism.

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### **Eunice Moral says**

3.5!

A powerful read!

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### **André Habet says**

Read most of the second section's extended collage section out loud in the cemetery today, and I felt the power of what Lewis was doing here throughout.

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### **Craig Werner says**

Amazing first book of poetry. It would be amazing at any point in a career. The title poem, which forms the central panel of a triptych of historical memory, consists solely of the titles and descriptions of works of art involving black women; I'm not going to try to summarize the rules Lewis established for herself, but that captures the idea. It could have felt gimmicky, but it doesn't. The montage makes a complicated set of points about the interaction of representation and experience, the politics of art, and the evasive confrontations of language. And it sings, radiating the kind of lyricism I look for in poetry, the magic that happens when words and rhythms open up perception--not exactly understanding--that hadn't been there before. It's structured more or less chronologically, but by the time you reach the end, the sense of time looping and doubling obviates any simple notion of progress or declension.

The poems in the sections that frame *Voyage of the Sable Vision* meet the challenge of standing next to something unique. The opening and closing poems, "Plantation" and "Felicite," descend into Lewis's family history--the black female side of her family once owned slaves--fingering the jagged grain of the way that history echoes in the present. "Frame" and "Lure," a harrowing poem about family complicities in the sexual abuse of children, hit me particularly hard, but I'm guessing that re-readings will add to that list.

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### **Abby says**

"Art hurts. Art urges voyages—" (Gwendolyn Brooks)

Oh, so many chills! A beautiful, heart-rending, inventive book of poems. (Those breathtaking line breaks!) Highly, highly recommended. The best poems I've read this year. With many thanks to Wei for giving us a

copy.

The titular collection (a survey of the history of art featuring black women) is amazing, but also, my favorite poems in the book:

“On the Road to Sri Bhuvaneshwari”

“From: To:”

“Let Me Live in a House by the Side of the Road and Be a Friend to Man”

“Summer”

“Frame”

From “Frame”:

Our textbooks stuttered over the same four pictures every year: that girl  
in the foreground, on the balcony: black loafers, white bobby socks, black skirt,  
cardigan, white collar. Her hand pointing. The others—all men—looking  
so smart, shirt-and-tied, like the gentle men on my street, pointing

as well, toward the air—  
the blank page, the well-worn hollow space—  
from which the answer was always  
that same hoary thud.

Every year these four photographs  
taught us how English was really a type of trick math:  
like the naked Emperor, you could be a King  
capable of imagining just one single dream;

or there could be a body, bloody  
at your feet—then you could point at the sky;  
or you could be a hunched-over cotton-picking shame;  
or you could swing from a tree by your neck into the frame.

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### **Katie Karnehm-Esh says**

Gorgeous, thought-provoking, surprising.

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### **Anna Springer says**

This is one of the best collections of poetry written in English, period. Lyricism, conceptual praxis, spiritual theory, socio-political double-twists, and aesthetics criticism blend elegantly in this collection. The body of the goddess, the steppe, the poetic I/ We, and history is no longer fractured - it's sutured. This body hurts and it also feels good, and neither experience of being alive is more important - it's not a series about transcendence, but about descending - walking into the demon's mouth with love and rage, tattered and

reconfigured, but not monastic - rather, wearing unexpectedly gorgeous shoes. The title poem is a work of fierce appropriation, remixing, reframing and criticism of artworks and art institutions' depictions or descriptions of black women's bodies - it is a very fine work of art history, as are many other pieces in the book, including "Frame," the poem that is so brilliantly played, it may well be a spell or a very strong prayer.

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## Ari says

IQ "Knowing  
taught me-quickly-to spell community  
more honestly: l-o-n-e-l-y.  
During Arts and Crafts, when Miss Larson allowed

the scissors out, I'd sneak a pair, then cut  
my hair to stop me from growing too long" (121) Art & Craft  
^Raise your head if you've felt like this before when mocked for being a bookworm, being the only one in accelerated learning classes, etc.

I have never taken a poetry course, we covered the basics my freshman year in high school but I barely remember what we learned. Thus I am not the best audience for poetry because I rarely understand the deeper meaning behind it, nor can I easily identify the style or form the poet wrote. All that being said I found the writing to be absolutely marvelous, even if some of the deeper meanings went way over my head. Shoutout to the New Yorker for breaking down most of these poems and terms for me (poems about art are called ekphrasis) so I move behind simple awe <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/201...>

Of course I loved the titular poem and am beyond impressed by its scope, it packs a punch and will stay with me. I don't think I can describe the punch to the gut this book produces when you read about all the horrid ways Black women have been referred to/used in Western art over the course of 38,000 years. However it does get better (naturally) as we progress into more modern works of art, the poems and art included tend to be feminist and LGBT friendly. The nerd in me also appreciates that she includes the museums and academic collections that she drew her inspiration from although I wish she had matched each art object with the place it can be viewed. "Frame", "Felicite" and "From: To: " were my favorite poems, "Lure" is too devastating and sickening to be a favorite but it was phenomenal in its delivery and sudden impact. "Felicite" wrestles with the emotional baggage of learning that a side of your family owned slaves, "From: To: gives agency to Black WWII soldiers, giving them a fleeting moment of glee in a war that frequently tried to strip them of their dignity; "At last, a dark murderous lunatic  
to whom they are allowed to respond.  
Here, no one expects them to be strung  
up by their necks-dangled-and then left

to be cut down from a tall tree-and not cry" (20).

Also the cover is a solid A although I have no clue what the deeper meaning might be except that she probably isn't allowed into the store she's staring at and/or if she is allowed in she will be treated poorly (or plot twist it's a Black store and there my theories end).

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## **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

Fantastic, absolutely deserving of the National Book Award this past year, an exploration of identity from internal and external perspectives. The title poem, a long one in sections composed entirely of names of works of art containing a black female figure, is astounding in how it morphs and changes just by arranging the words of others.

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