

# The Kiss of Peace

A review of Afterimage

by Peter Brown

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## **Book Info:**

Afterimage

Helen Humphreys

Metropolitan Books

Henry Holt and Company

New York, New York

2000, 240pps.

Afterimage is a light filled book, and the eye that Helen Humphreys brings to her writing is warmly photographic. A poet as well as a novelist, she imagines the quietly thrumming world of the English countryside in the 1860's. It's a world that in this sympathetic, clear-eyed novel seems self-contained and complete.

The book takes on a variety of issues: domestic relationships involving both class and gender; the pre-Raphaelite painting of the time and photography's struggle for recognition in its wake; map-making and 19<sup>th</sup> century British exploration; a young woman's journey from class entrapment to self-definition, and a childless couple's dogged attempts to produce lasting work. The novel was sparked by Humphreys' visit to a Julia Margaret Cameron exhibition (Cameron being the celebrated British portrait photographer), and in the book she builds a world that Cameron might well have inhabited. While names and events are changed, the parallels to Cameron's life are unmistakable.

The book is set in Sussex, in the countryside near Tunbridge Wells, and the action takes place largely inside and around a modest, rundown estate which Isabelle Dashell has inherited from her disapproving father. Like Cameron, Dashell is consumed with photography, and she poses those around her with great energy. She lives with her geographer husband Eldon, who is a lost and kindly soul - a bright man, reduced to pattering and Arctic reveries. He dreams of heroic exploration as he plots his maps. The household is kept by a cook who longs for America, a lazy but photogenic gardener, a petulant young laundress, and the new chambermaid, the remarkable Annie Phelan who opens the novel Jane Eyreishly (and with the pluck of another Orphan Annie) by appearing at the front gate, ready for employment. Annie, Irish (though raised in London), and who, as an infant, lost her family in the potato famine, has recently been let go from a strict, religiously bound house in London where she has been taught to read, to fear a judgmental God and to keep an eye out for her very unpleasant mistress. Afterimage is the story of Annie's integration into the Dashell household, her increasing closeness to both Dashells, her growing sense of self; and a look at a potentially good marriage as it begins to

drift apart. After a devastating series of miscarriages (the discovery of which is chillingly described), a rift has grown between two otherwise likable people. And while the reader quietly roots for each of the characters, Isabelle goes her way, Eldon his and Annie bounces back and forth between them, caught in an upstairs/downstairs net of work expectations and private need.

Isabelle is obsessed with photography: from the grand ideas at play in the painting of the time (many of which Humphreys transposes out of Cameron), to her dependence on and choice of models, to her directive costuming, to the nitty gritty of the photographic process itself. She has come to the medium in mid-life and her intense involvement with transcendent themes (which generally describe a religious virtue she has rejected) has a ragged edge. Photography has come to save her and she grabs hold with the tenacity of a woman drowning.

Eldon, on the other hand, retreats to his study to work, and to the city or the outdoors for air. He has found himself rejected by publishers, and plunged into boyhood dreams. He wants something heroic, as Isabelle wants recognition, as Annie wants her family.

And here's Annie, a sounding board for two driven souls. She's the intellectual companion that Eldon craves - a confidant who despite class differences he recognizes as a potential equal. For Isabelle, Annie is the model and collaborator who understands at times, better than she, what the content of a picture should be. She's also wished for remake of the one passionate friendship of Isabelle's life. Out of these tensions, two relationships develop and clash, one charged, the other, an intellectual expansion. And the combination helps to set Annie free.

The photograph Julia Margaret Cameron felt to be her most successful was entitled The Kiss of Peace. In it, a woman and a young girl are shown in profile. On the right of the image, hair streaming behind her, the woman leans into the frame, swaddled in cloth and draped in a particularly pre-Raphaelite melancholy. She breathes a kiss onto the forehead of a beautiful young girl, who leans in her direction, wrapped similarly in soft cloth. The girl seems lost, the woman - caring and knowledgeable, and the photograph projects a mood of great intimacy. It is not clear who the young girl was (perhaps Florence Anson say the Cameron scholars); the woman who is doing the kissing however, is Cameron's maid and often photographed model, Mary Hillier. And it's an image that, if revised, could stand at the center of this novel.

In Afterimage, such a revision is imagined - a kiss more passionate than the spiritual touch described, and one that involves Annie Phelan as a stand-in for Hillier. Its occurrence breaks the conventions that circumscribe the characters, and the events that lead to the kiss and those that follow, form the arc of Humphreys' story. Humphreys, while clearly fascinated by photography, is also interested in its limitations. As a novelist, her main concern is for what, quite literally, comes "after an image", or, for that matter before. While a photograph is incapable of sustaining a narrative, its transience has always been its strength as well as its burden. Even Cameron herself, in her mix of dead-on portraiture and odd stagy allegory embraced the best of the

moment and at times, took on too much. Here, Humphreys seems to imply, that while painting and photography may have their moments, narrative leaves the unvoiced implications of the single image behind, quietly spinning in wash water, as it were, stuck in time. While photography's power comes from its ability to clearly define a visual reality (something that words can only conjure), its lack of context is both its mystery and its fill in the blank idiocy - this blank space being the point at which narrative reflection can begin.

Throughout the book, the cross currents between lives actually lived (Cameron and her family) and fictionally depicted (the Dashells), and the on-upsmanship at work between the arts involved: fiction, photography and painting, resonate, forming a backdrop for the story.

Annie is a remarkable creation. She is good, just, kind, brilliant beyond her own knowledge and ultimately heroic. She has recurrent dreams, an unending appetite for reading of all sorts - and is startlingly beautiful. All the stuff of 19<sup>th</sup> century romance. (Annie has in fact read Jane Eyre and recognizes the parallels to her own life.) Afterimage (a nicely descriptive, but antiseptic title given the beauty of the book) is written around her. Yet as she is pulled into the Dashell's struggle, other tensions keep the narrative moving: unsettling sparks between the maid and gardener; a condescending neighboring painter (a George Frederick Watts stand-in) and his awful wife; the cook and her blustery world; a climactic disaster... Given the domestic setting, Afterimage might well have been a claustrophobic book. It is anything but.

As a photographer, I was relieved by the role that photography was given. Novels incorporating the medium inevitably portray an odd creepiness (murder, incest, strange seductions, paranormal experience etc.) and this book is a lyrical delight. Humphreys' pan-sensual observations are transporting and her writing is direct and unpretentious. She describes the natural world in buzzing, wafting detail. And if she has not photographed, she might give it some thought. The depth of imagination that she applies to Isabelle's portrait process alone could have come directly from a photographer's mind - as could Isabelle's attempts to deal with, and surmount the issues afloat in her small art community.

There were a few moments that did not ring true photographically. The smell of black and white chemicals is strong, and the only aroma noted by an otherwise omniscient narrator in Isabelle's darkroom (repeatedly), is that of coal. And while much is made of Isabelle's perpetually black fingers (from developer), a more formidable presence, and a particularly unusual one for a woman of her time, would be the smell of chemicals in her clothing and hair. The view camera process is described a little awkwardly as well: you can't see an image through the ground glass while you're making a photograph, because the film is in the way - something we find Isabelle doing at a particularly important point in the book; and I can't imagine anyone's eyes, after a four and a half minute exposure by candle light appearing in a photograph, as "sharp as stars". Even catch lights would be blurred.

The pettiness of these points makes a better one: that this book rarely slips from assuredness. Annie is perhaps a little too good to be as interesting

as she might have been, had there been some small streak of nastiness - though people like Annie do exist (and she does at one glorious point glue a coin to the floor to the consternation of her London mistress); and to me, the ending of the book, while dramatic, seems to have sprung as much from story termination needs, as from issues organic to the plot...

But Afterimage is a gift, a novel that seems to remain locked in one's mind more as real memory than as book. It's a story vital enough to feel like one's own.