

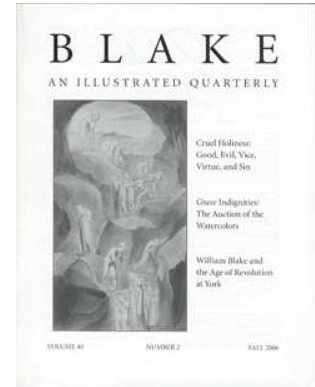
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R E V I E W

Janet Warner, *Other Sorrows, Other Joys: The Marriage of Catherine Sophia Boucher and William Blake: A Novel*

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Janet Warner. *Other Sorrows, Other Joys: The Marriage of Catherine Sophia Boucher and William Blake. A Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. xii + 371 pp., 24 b&w illus. \$25.95/£18.99, hardcover.

Reviewed by Eugenie R. Freed

My bones trembled. I fell outstretchd upon the path
A moment, & my Soul returnd into its mortal state

And my sweet Shadow of Delight stood trembling by my side.

William Blake, *Milton* 42[49]:25-28 (E 143)

It's taken over two centuries, but at last Catherine Blake has emerged from the shadow of her husband's visionary anguish, moved into the light, and stopped trembling.

Janet Warner has written a novel about Catherine and her husband that will charm and beguile any reader—but those who already have some awareness of Blake's works, and of the social and intellectual environment in which they came into being, will especially appreciate what Warner has achieved in her fictionalized account of "the Marriage of Catherine Sophia Boucher and William Blake." Substantial historical and literary scholarship form the solid base upon which this version of their union is constructed, and the structure itself is a bravura performance.

It's a truism that no one outside of the partners involved can ever really get to know what goes on in a relationship. By giving Catherine the principal narrative voice and point of view throughout, Warner gives the reader access to the most intimate aspects of the marriage. Most of the story is told in the first person. We see events largely through the striking black eyes of Kate—as her husband always called her—and walk in her well-worn shoes through many of the landmarks of her fascinating life experience. Occasionally a letter written by Frederick Tatham appears, or an excerpt from his journal; there are many of Blake's own letters, others from Mary Wollstonecraft, William Hayley, Fuseli; there is an extract from the journal of the publisher Joseph Johnson, and some notes made by "Mrs. Sarah Goodhouse," a midwife. Fact, probability, possibility, and fiction, mingle harmoniously and inextricably.

The novel begins two years after William Blake has entered Eternity for the last time. His widow has taken up residence in the home of Frederick Tatham, formerly one of the Ancients¹—the small circle of young artist-disciples who attached

1. "... a tiny but expanding circle of young admirers who called themselves, in mockery of their extreme youth, 'The Ancients' and Blake's humble walk-up flat 'The House of the Interpreter.'" Bentley, *Stranger* 363.

themselves devotedly to Blake in his last years. Kate has become housekeeper to Frederick and his wife Maria, both of whom treat her with respect and affection—though there have already been some serious disputes over the disposition of her husband's works,² and Tatham is showing ominous signs of the religious fanaticism that was later to persuade him that Blake was inspired "by Satan himself."³

Tatham has set himself to compile "a Life of this extraordinary Man, whose Art is as Sublime as his Poetry Obscure" (3), and is determined to obtain whatever information he can from Blake's "devoted Companion in Life" (3).

Kate consults in this matter with William, who comes to her every night, without fail, sits in the chair by her bed, and "tells [her] what to do" (4).⁴ William gives his approval to Tatham's biographical project, but Kate ponders: "shall I tell him about my true struggle, about my Jealousy of William, about my temptations and deceptions?" (6). Though there are "some things I cannot tell Mr. Tatham, things I did not tell even William" (13), she decides to speak out, praying to the Lord to guide her "through the terrors of Memory" (6). And so begins Kate's account of her life. She records in a (fictional) notebook her thoughts, experiences and reminiscences, not all of which will be conveyed to Tatham.

The Catherine Blake who makes herself known in this work is by no means the idealized Miltonic Eve, "[worshipping] God in her Husband,"⁵ whom Crabb Robinson described. Though she consciously dedicates herself to her "Object" of being "William's Helpmate. Handmaid to the Visions" (89), Warner's Kate is a woman of strong character with a will of her own. Catherine is indeed a "sincere believer in all [Blake's] visions,"⁶ but far from being (as Blake's lifelong friend George Cumberland implied) the victim of *folie à deux*,⁷ she herself,

2. Referring to the conflict between Catherine Blake and Frederick Tatham, the art dealer Joseph Hogarth noted in his copy of J. T. Smith's life of Blake that "Mrs Blake was hardly the passive creature here described—at all events Tatham did not find her so" BR 374.

3. Anne Gilchrist, quoted in BR 418. Gilchrist reported that after Catherine's death Tatham, by then "a zealous Irvingite" (BR 418), "enacted [a] holocaust of Blake manuscripts" (BR 417n3). The son of Edward Calvert, another of the former "Ancients," recorded his father's plea to Tatham to spare Blake's "precious work," adding that Tatham nevertheless destroyed "blocks, plates, drawings, and MSS. ..." (BR 417n3).

4. An article published in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1833, about eighteen months after Catherine's death, records her assertion that her late husband "used to come and sit with her two or three hours every day." BR 373.

5. After visiting the Blakes in December 1825, Robinson noted that Catherine possessed "that virtue of virtues in a wife[,] an implicit reverence of her husband. ... She was formed on the Miltonic model—And like the first Wife Eve worshipped God in her Husband—He being to her what God was to him." BR 542-43.

6. Seymour Kirkup, letter to Lord Houghton, 25 March 1870. Kirkup met the Blakes periodically at the home of Thomas Butts between about 1810 and 1816. BR 221. Robinson made the same observation (BR 542).

7. Commenting laconically on his son's account of a visit to Blake and his wife in 1815, during which, young Cumberland wrote, both husband and wife had expressed inflammatory political sentiments, George Cumberland replied: "... [Blake] is a little Cracked, but very honest—as to his wife she is the maddest of the Two" Bentley, *Stranger* 355-56.

like the man she marries, has always had an easy intercourse with the "Spiritual World" (E 702). "My Voices ... have spoken to me all my life, even before I met William, who had his own Voices and Visions. Later I came to see his Visions, too—but I always had my own" (7).

At the same time, this visionary Kate understands that "it is everyday life that keeps one in good Sense" (221). She is as practical as her husband is otherworldly. Kate cooks, bakes bread, cleans, sews her husband's shirts, tidies his workplace, is pleasant to customers, and handles the couple's finances—when they have money. Her husband teaches her to read, write and draw, and she learns how to print and color his designs, as well as sharing the visions that give rise to them. In this fictional version, as quite evidently in real life, Kate has truly earned her husband's deathbed tribute, "you have ever been an angel to me" (355).⁸

Kate's meeting with William, in the summer of her twentieth year, had been prophesied by her voices. She knows at first sight that she will marry him, for "My Voices are never wrong" (7). Their courtship is brief: Kate "knew instinctively not to play Courtship games with William. I let him see me naked that summer ... [and] I saw him naked, too" (7). They exchange confidences about his visions and her voices. William's parents, "Dissenters, and very pious" (19), are critical of Kate—the daughter of a market gardener—because they believe that their son is "marrying below his station" (24). A special bond exists between William and his ailing youngest brother, Robert, one which is to endure long after Robert's early death.⁹ William says earnestly to Kate: "if you love me, you must love Bob" (20). She promises she will.

That was a time, Kate recalls ruefully, when she "would have promised him the moon" (24). William offers her a quatrain:

He who binds to himself a joy
Doth the winged life destroy
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in Eternity's sun rise. (23, E 474)

Kate accepts, hesitantly, the premise her husband-to-be offers: "Our love is deep enough to include others. We will never be jealous of each other" (23). In her heart, she hopes "never to be put to the test" (24); but tested she is, again and again, after their marriage. William and Catherine are essentially a devoted couple; their sex life (vividly described) is active, varied and exciting, and always a source of inspiration in William's work. Nevertheless, Kate's jealousy of her husband's relationships with other women becomes a significant strand of conflict in the marriage that is never fully resolved.

8. These are given as Blake's actual words in J. T. Smith, *Nollekens and His Times* (1828). BR 471.

9. In a letter of condolence to William Hayley on the death of his son in 1800, Blake wrote: "Thirteen years ago. I lost a brother & with his spirit I converse daily & hourly in the Spirit ... & even now write from his Dictate ..." (E 705). Blake demonstrated this in *Milton*: on plates 29 and 33 "William" and "Robert" simultaneously receive Milton's inspiration, in the form of a falling star, in mirror-imaged poses.

Kate becomes insanely jealous of Nancy Flaxman, wife of Blake's great friend, the sculptor John Flaxman. Later, she "[watches] with a sick heart" (108) whenever she sees William in conversation with the writer Mary Wollstonecraft. In the latter situation, Kate eventually resolves her jealousy by unselfishly announcing to William, in the presence of Mary and her (married) lover Fuseli, "You must take [Mary] to be your Wife ... and I will be Housekeeper to you both" (123). The fortunate outcome is that "Just the idea that I would not stand in his way should he want to was enough to keep him from doing it" (125). Thereafter harmony is restored between the Blakes; Kate and Mary become close friends, and Kate is as profoundly affected as William by Mary's sad life and her tragic death of "childbed fever": "What a terrible waste, I thought. A beautiful, brilliant woman ... whose whole life has been devoted to the improvement of the lot of women, and she is dying of a disease only women can get" (234).

Kate herself, barren for the first five years of their marriage, falls pregnant at last, but the longed-for baby girl dies during a breech delivery. Kate turns her face to the wall in sorrow and does not speak for over two months. She looks at her reflection in the glass, and thinks: "I see a woman ... flat as earth Her face is smooth, even pretty. No one knows she died" (115). William's grief expresses itself by transforming the loss of their infant daughter into *The Book of Thel*.¹⁰ It is only when William takes ill that Kate, out of her concern for him, speaks to him and returns to the stream of life.

Most of all Kate resents her husband's obvious interest in the singer Elizabeth Billington, their neighbor in Poland Street.¹¹ In the novel, it seems that Blake actually does have an affair with "the Poland Street Man-Trap" (106), a voluptuous golden-haired siren who dresses in sprigged muslin "with a neckline so low you could see her pink nipples" (131). The situation becomes farcical when Elizabeth's husband challenges William to a duel (fortunately averted). In response to Kate's bitter recriminations, William groans: "When I first married you ... I thought that you would love my loves and joy in my delights Now you are terrible in jealousy and unlovely in my sight!" (187).¹² At one point she is angry enough to "[banish] him from my bed" (145), though their productive working collaboration during the day continues unabated.

It is during this period of marital standoff, in the summer of 1792, that Mary Wollstonecraft invites Kate to travel with her

10. There is no record of Catherine's having had a child, but S. Foster Damon suggested that *The Book of Thel* might have been composed after Catherine had given birth to a stillborn girl, and may be "an elegy to the Blakes' dead daughter, their only offspring" (401).

11. The Blakes lived at 28 Poland Street from 1785 until their move to Lambeth in 1790. BR 558-60. Commentators have surmised, from the internal evidence of Blake's poetry of the later 1780s and/or 1790s, that he had an extramarital affair at some time during that period, but no external evidence has appeared. Elizabeth Billington lived (with her husband James) at 54 Poland Street, but—Warner explains—"There is no record that she ever met the Blakes, though they did live on the same street" (366).

12. Blake, *Milton* 33[36]:2-7 (E 132).

to France. Kate resolves to go. William, like any conventional husband, is "aghast" (150) at her decision to leave him, even for a short time, but Kate is determined. As it turns out, the (fictional) journey has to be aborted just prior to the party's planned departure from England, but before that happens, Kate has a significant encounter at the inn at Dover where they spend the night. She meets Paul-Marc Philipon, a handsome young Parisian engraver who is on his way to London to seek employment there and to raise funds for the Girondins in France. He is attracted to Kate, and she to him—but in her bedroom at the inn, at *le moment critique*, her husband appears to her in a vision, and she turns the would-be lover away. *Le moment* has passed, but the affair is not over. Paul-Marc finds employment with William in London, and Kate has to face up to certain facts. First, what she feels for Paul-Marc is a "real Affection" (174); and then, "I had become lonely in my marriage. William spent much of his time in the company of his Imagination, or hard at work. ... Paul-Marc provided me with the companionship that had faded from my marriage" (177).¹³ This intense, sensitive young Frenchman (with whom William's spinster sister is also in love) takes a convoluted course through the novel. At first Kate holds off from yielding herself to him, but eventually, when William has infuriated her by resuming his affair with Elizabeth Billington after that lady's return from a sojourn in Italy, Kate and Paul-Marc do become lovers.

Like the fellowship that develops in the novel between Kate and Mary Wollstonecraft, the "imagined" (370) affair with Paul-Marc rings true as a possibility for the strong and passionate Catherine of this novel. So, too, do other potential entanglements. The historical Kate was beautiful as a young woman—Crabb Robinson, meeting her when she was in her sixties, commented on her "dark eye ... [and the] remains of beauty in her youth."¹⁴ In the novel, several of Blake's male acquaintances take a more or less prurient interest in her. William Hayley is among them.

In a fit of paranoia Blake accused Hayley of trying to "act upon my wife."¹⁵ As Warner depicts the complicated relationship, this is literally enacted. When Kate first meets Hayley in 1785, she finds him attractive: "a handsome, fair man ... [speaking] in the accent of a Gentleman" (61). Hayley "really liked and respected Women. He had ... no fear of female power" (284). She realizes that her husband—like his friend Fuseli—does fear this threat. "Female Love is a terrible thing" (151), William had cried, when confronted with his wife's determination to travel to France with Mary Wollstonecraft's party.

Hayley admires Blake's art, and returns periodically to buy prints. His behavior towards Kate on these occasions verges on overfamiliarity. Hayley compliments Kate openly on her

beauty, and suggests that she model for the artist George Romney: "I felt Mr. Hayley's deep-set eyes on my bosom and waist, and divined his thought" (133). Years later, when the Blakes make their epochal move to Felpham to live and work under Hayley's patronage, his familiarity towards Kate becomes blatant.

The historical Hayley described Catherine as "an excellent Wife ... who shares [Blake's] Labours and his Talents,"¹⁶ "perhaps the only female on Earth, who could have suited Him exactly,"¹⁷ and rhapsodized to his friend Lady Hesketh that William and Catherine "are as fond of each other, as if their Honey Moon were still shining ... [she is] so truly the Half of her good Man, that they seem animated by one Soul."¹⁸

This fictional Kate admits to herself that she is "rather flattered" (275) by Hayley's attentions, "at my age" (289), though aware that his overtures are becoming "reckless, too familiar" (285). The inevitable dénouement comes when Hayley decides to "try his hand at drawing" (288), and persuades Kate to model for him.

Reflecting "on [her] behaviour with Hayley and William's response" (289), Kate concludes that "it marked an important milestone in our Marriage. It was as if we acknowledged the Struggle between us" (289). Kate admits to herself that by flirting with Hayley she had wanted to make William jealous, as he had made her in the past. But now she seems to hear the ghost of the departed Mary Wollstonecraft, whispering "You are a Person in your own right, Catherine Blake ... is that really the way to make him respect your mind and Female Being? Is Lust the only Weapon you have?" (290).

The marriage is put to the test again shortly after this when Paul-Marc resurfaces, cast adrift in nearby Chichester. He begs Kate to leave her husband and come away with him. To her own surprise, she refuses. "I am William Blake's wife, and can belong to no one else after all these years" (297).

An even more severe trial looms ahead for both the Blakes when the drunken trooper Schofield blunders into their garden in Felpham. In the celebrated aftermath to this encounter, William and Catherine Blake return to London, sick at heart, with the prospect of a court case before them. When the time comes for William's court appearance in Chichester, Kate is too ill to travel with him. Receiving the joyful news that William has been acquitted, Kate reflects upon her own feelings in the matter:

In every marriage, there is one who plays the Martyr ... the one who slaves away to please the other, who tries to cater to every whim, and then resents it ... and ever so often does something destructive to lash out. ... Even my Illness, preventing me from attending the Trial, was a way of punishing William. (323)

13. Seymour Kirkup noted one of Catherine's very few recorded utterances: her complaint that she had "very little of Mr. Blake's company; he is always in Paradise." BR 221.

14. BR 542.

15. "On H—ys Friendship" 5 (E 506).

16. Hayley in a letter to Lady Hesketh, 22 July 1800. BR 71.

17. Hayley to Lady Hesketh, 15 July 1802. BR 106.

18. Hayley to Lady Hesketh, 15 July 1802. BR 106.

While tidying William's worktable in readiness for his return, she finds and reads a fair copy of *Auguries of Innocence*. This poem, "full of wisdom and feeling and brilliance" (326), leaves her with the hope that she and William may "overcome our difficulties, and forgive each other as Human Beings" (326). Her relationship with Hayley, "a pillar of strength to us both" (302) throughout their ordeal, is now resolved into friendship.

The Blakes' visit together to the art exhibition at the gallery of Count Truchsess, in October 1804, is a landmark in the slow healing process in their marriage. On their return to the apartment in South Molton Street, Kate shares with William a transcendent vision in which his Spectre appears to him—and he is able heroically to embrace this "dark self" (332). Then, looking at his wife "with awe and love" (332), he embraces her.

O Glory! And O Delight! I have entirely reduced that specious Fiend to his station, whose annoyance has been the ruin of my labours for the last past twenty years of my life. He is the enemy of conjugal love I was a slave bound in a mill among beasts and devils ... [but now] my feet and my wife's feet are free from fetters. (332; E 756)

The exultation that bursts out in William's letter to Hayley spills over into Kate's mind as well. She experiences a parallel vision, in which she confronts her own "malevolent Spirit" (336). Like William, Catherine is finally able to detach herself from the struggle between her two selves. "And I forgave myself for the Envy which had been my besetting Sin all my life" (337).

William's inspiration has returned. He engraves the title pages of both *Milton*, already almost complete, and *Jerusalem*, on which he is about to embark. Now at last he and Kate are able to open their hearts to one another, to speak with frankness of their marriage. "He confessed to me his anger at my Jealousies, and I to him my Resentment of his talent and how I sometimes felt like a slave to it. ... So we forgave each other" (338).

Every part of this novel reveals that its author, whose scholarly credentials include *Blake and the Language of Art* (1984), is steeped in the milieu of William and Catherine Blake. The reader gains an unobtrusive awareness of how they adapt themselves to their successive residences, and a detailed knowledge of their workplaces, working materials, techniques of production. The events of their lives and the processes of creating their works play out against the background of friends, acquaintances, professional connections. The settings are the city of London and the countryside round about, at a time when Catherine could look out from a window of Hercules Buildings in Lambeth towards cornfields and hedges just to the south of the city; and Felpham, where from the bedroom of their cottage they could see windmills and the endless sea. Outside this whitewashed "Palace" (E 711) of flint and cobbles, "the smell of the sea mingled with the wild purple thyme that grew under our feet and in the meadow" (263)—lightly

foreshadowing the transcendent vision of "Los's Messenger to Eden" that Blake was to record in *Milton* (E 136). Warner's easy familiarity with the whole corpus of Blake's writings as well as the finer details of his visual art enables her, without any undue sense of affectation, to use this vast body of work as the novel's raw material.

It is a tribute to Janet Warner's skill as a writer that all this scholarship does not weigh down the narrative. The effect of the richness of detail is often like the texture of a finely worked tapestry—as in Kate's account of painting the images of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

We had pigments of Prussian blue, gamboge, yellow ochre, rose madder, vermilion, and others, which we mixed with gum arabic, or more often carpenter's glue for body and adhesiveness, and then a mix of glycerine, honey and a drop of ox gall. William said that the sacred Carpenter, Joseph, had revealed that secret to him.

We would choose a wash for the print, and then gradually layer on the colours until the pages glowed like jewels. (138)

But this is, after all, a novel about a marriage. Warner subtly conveys a sense of the "bottom line," the mind-blowingly mundane needs and life events that, in the end, actually do sustain a marriage partnership. There are moments when Kate is embittered by what she sees as the limitations of her role: "I cook your meals, and sew your shirts, and make our candles, and help with the printing press—but it isn't enough for you" (117). A glimpse "from the outside" of a similar situation appears in the form of Mary Wollstonecraft's disillusioned comment on the perfidy of the (married) man she loves at that time, Blake's friend Henry Fuseli: "He has taught me to scorn convention ... but he retreats into it with Sophia [Fuseli's wife] at every opportunity" (139). Kate observes Fuseli and his wife one evening, when "something about [Sophia's] shrewd expression reminded me suddenly of the women in Henry's erotic drawings" (142). She recalls how Sophia is depicted in these works of her husband's—"the Cruelty of her expression ... the bare breasts like orbs of power above elaborate corsets ..." (153)—and realizes that the power of the shrewd, conventional Sophia over her husband is "based on her dominating eroticism on the one hand, and her obedient submission in the eyes of the world" (153). Sophia is to Fuseli neither more nor less than the essential complement to his true nature that Kate is to her own husband. "Poor Mary" (142), Kate thinks: idealist that she is, Mary will never understand this paradox.

At a later time, Mary attempts (unsuccessfully) to drown herself when forced eventually to recognize that her American lover Gilbert Imlay has deceived and abandoned her. There was a time when Kate had envied Mary's "brilliant wit" and deplored her own lack of it: "When the world treated me ill, I had to use cunning" (104). Now, comparing Mary to herself, she reflects on the life-preserving value of "ordinariness" and the hidden benefits of menial daily chores:

I could never be like her, so ready to abandon myself to Feeling, to cast myself into a cold river for love. But of course, I was no Genius. I had no maid named Marguerite to help with the tasks of everyday life as Mary did. I had no Wife to mend my clothes and empty my chamber-pot as William had. (221)

Warner's characterizations, especially of those in the Blakes' circle, are sharp and convincing. Fuseli—"monkey-like and energetic, with a large head of hair powdered white and combed back from his face" (89); Mary Wollstonecraft, who "drew people to her like a Magnet ... her pale oval face and prominent hazel eyes radiated intelligence" (102); even the "skinny little bare-headed boy of about nine years" who cleaned the Blakes' chimney, "all black with soot, his eyes staring hugely out of his darkened face, sores on his knees and elbows" (166): each is luminously individualized.

I do have reservations about certain of Janet Warner's inventions. Kate's lover Paul-Marc Philippon is a feasible creation, well realized, but after Kate has learned of his death in France, his mysterious reappearance in Chichester has for me unfortunate overtones of the revival of *Dallas's* Bobby Ewing. The séance-like meetings to which Kate is taken by her sister Sarah Banes: these rather precious gatherings of a group of Wise Women who give themselves flowery names—Sister Violet, Sister Gentian, and so on—may provide Kate with an opportunity to analyze her own life situation through the medium of tarot cards, but nevertheless seem somewhat unnecessarily contrived.

Other fictional additions do seem to me plausible. William and Catherine's dabbling in the use of hallucinogenic drugs—laudanum and "Jimson weed" (obtained through Blake's sister Cathy, a herbalist)—parallels the documented drug-induced visions of other artists and writers of this period (Coleridge and Thomas De Quincey come to mind). Kate's experimentation with automatic writing, when early drafts of passages from *The Four Zoas* are dictated to her by disembodied voices (though she realizes that she is actually "reading William's mind" [184]), suggests experiences recorded by one of Blake's most ardent admirers, W. B. Yeats, and his wife.¹⁹ Kate's other experiments, in art forgery, would have been eminently possible. She was quite capable of making drawings in a style almost indistinguishable from that of her husband.²⁰ Warner has Kate making credible drawings also in the styles of Flaxman and Fuseli. When the Blakes are financially pressed (as in real life they so often were), she passes her drawings off as originals, and sells them to the dealer Paul Colnaghi, who, "eyes wide open, paid me very well ..." (184). Did the real Catherine Blake ever try that, I wonder? If she did, she might easily have got away with it.

19. Richard Ellmann writes: "Nothing that had happened to [Yeats] before was more dramatically exciting than the automatic writing of his wife, which he felt put wisdom at last within his reach" (224).

20. Three surviving drawings have been authenticated as the work of Catherine Blake: Butlin 1: 625-26; 2: plates 348, 1191, 1192.

In terms of hard facts, we may never know much more about the historical Catherine Blake than we do now, which is little enough. The Kate who emerges from Warner's novel is tough-minded, yet loving and loyal; resourceful and practical, and at the same time sensitively percipient. Admittedly, she is a personage in a work of fiction, but to me she seems a credible approximation to the woman who sustained the daily life of William Blake for forty-five years, inspired and supported his work, and collaborated with him in producing it.

In reviewing Barbara Lachman's *Voices for Catherine Blake* some years ago, I wrote

To fictionalize the biography or autobiography of an historical personage is a perilous undertaking, the more so when the person concerned lived in such intimate propinquity as Catherine did to a milieu continuously raked over, mined, and sifted through by scholars with diverse special interests.²¹

Janet Warner has confronted these perils and emerged triumphant, for two very basic reasons: the breadth and depth of her scholarship, and the soundness of her literary craftsmanship.

21. Freed 149.

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