

Chagrin Falls poet releases historic collection chronicling abuse

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A Chagrin Falls poet has penned a historic collection of poems that she believes is illustrative of how women everywhere are oppressed – and suppressed.

In her book, *Death of an Unvirtuous Woman*, scholar, educator, and award-winning poet Dr. Suzanne Ondrus uses her poetry to take a deep dive into the life of Mary Bach, a German immigrant who found her way to Ohio and was murdered in 1881 by her husband, Carl.

The highly-educated poet earned her undergraduate degree from Wells College and was pursuing a master's of fine arts degree in poetry at Bowling Green State University when she first heard about the woman's story.

“The news accounts at the time framed her as being responsible for her own death, and I found that egregious,” she said. “I wanted to tell her story.”

Dr. Ondrus, who also holds a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut, said she used the opportunity to tell the woman's story to also take a closer look at various social, gender, and economic pressures that existed then as well as today.

And her efforts are already being noticed.

In his review of her collection, former Canadian Poet Laureate George Elliott Clarke said Dr. Ondrus's “accessible, plain-spoken, honest, and convincing poetry will horrify you with a story of murder and execution but thrill you with the fact that even domestic spaces are not immune to American ‘revolution.’”

Karen Craigo, who was the state of Missouri's poet laureate from 2019 to 2021, said Dr. Ondrus's book “breathes life back into Mary Bach with her loving attention and her well-honed poetic craft.”

Dr. Ondrus' works often delve into history, racism, body image, sexuality, and other related topics.

Her first book, *Passion Seeds*, won the 2013 Vernice Quebodeaux Prize and she has been honored for her other writings numerous times in the years since.

She was recently named a runner-up in the Gordon Square Review 2022 Prose Contest for Ohio Writers for her piece “Darning the Space of Our Memory.”

Most recently, she was a Fulbright Scholar at the Department of Anglophone Studies at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, West Africa.

In addition to being an accomplished author, she is also an educator and has also taught at John Carroll University, Lakeland Community College, and Kent State University.

For this project, Dr. Ondrus said she objects to the way many domestic violence incidents have been framed throughout history and the Bach woman’s story is no exception.

Although the story is set more than 100 years ago, she said many of the same problems continue today.

In Bach’s case in particular, Dr. Ondrus said a number of factors were to blame including media coverage of the time, the response by townspeople, the couple’s German culture (and their difficulty adapting to American culture), and even the way artifacts from the case were put on display and glorified.

There are many lessons that can be learned, she said.

“Being aware of the pressures that can lead to domestic violence can help others who are in dangerous situations,” she insisted. It might also help someone that is not in a similar situation avoid it in the future, she said.

Often, Dr. Ondrus said the media’s coverage of domestic violence cases – including Bach’s – is often responsible for “killing women a second time,” through their skewed reporting of domestic abuse crimes.

Lack of protection for domestic violence victims is also an ongoing problem.

“How can we empower victims to be able to protect themselves?” Dr. Ondrus asked.

On average, she said it can take as many as seven incidents of abuse before a domestic violence victim will leave an abusive relationship.

“I wonder if it would help if we were able to give better social support in communities and financial support?”

Fortunately, Dr. Ondrus said there are organizations like WomenSafe who work tirelessly to help women in need.

“I think we have certainly made some improvements,” she said. “But we need to continue to work on gender issues involving men and women.”

Later this month, Dr. Ondrus will give a presentation about her research at the Geauga West Library beginning at 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 22. An online talk and reading is also scheduled for 7:15 p.m. Tuesday, June 28. Sign up for the free programs at geaugalibrary.libcal.com

The collection is being released by Finishing Line Press of Kentucky and can be ordered at the publisher’s website, finishinglinepress.com