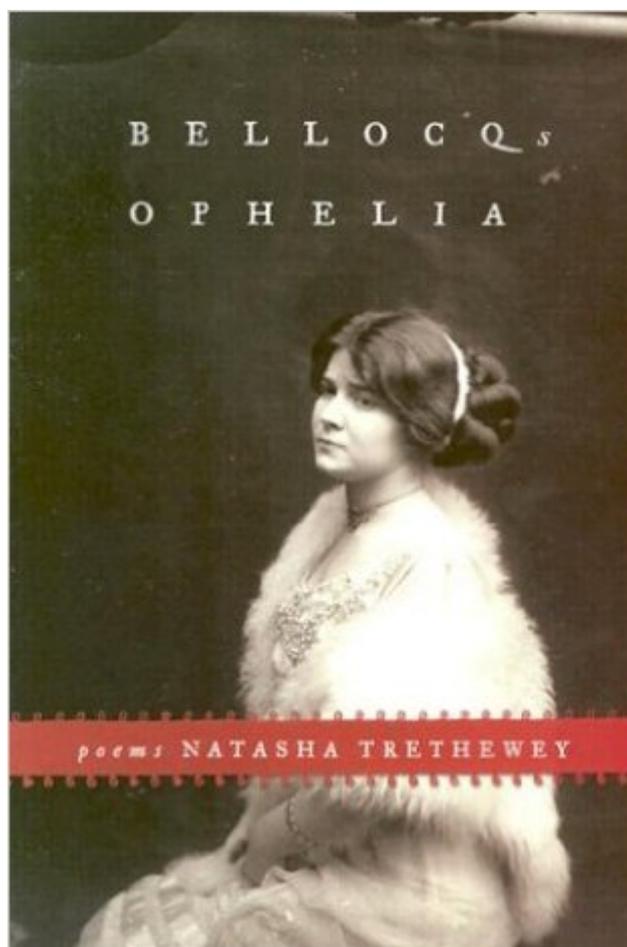


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# Bellocq's Ophelia: Poems



## Synopsis

Selected as a "2003 Notable Book" by the American Library Association In the early 1900s, E.J. Bellocq photographed prostitutes in the red-light district of New Orleans. His remarkable, candid photos inspired Natasha Trethewey to imagine the life of Ophelia, the subject of Bellocq's Ophelia, her stunning second collection of poems. With elegant precision, Ophelia tells of her life on display: her white father whose approval she earns by standing very still; the brothel Madame who tells her to act like a statue while the gentlemen callers choose; and finally the camera, which not only captures her body, but also offers a glimpse into her soul.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As has already been stated this book of poems is based off of photographs of light skinned African American women working as prostitutes in New Orleans around 1912. These photographs were taken by a man named Bellocq. Each poem connects to the same woman, Ophelia, and tells a story. Although each poem could stand alone they read beautifully together. Trethewey makes us ask what we can really get from a photograph. Can we know a person from pictures of them? Or is it a false front always put forward in a photo? Whatever conclusion you come to you will want to read and re-read this brief book of poems over and over again. The narrative voice Trethewey uses is first person through a series of letters. These are so beautiful and moving I simply cannot express it here in this review. Below is a sample of what I'm talking about: At last we are nearbreaking the season, shedding our coats, the gray husk of winter. Each tree trembles with new leaves, tiny blossoms, the

flashy dress of spring. I am aware now of its coming as I've never been - the wet grass throbbing with crickets, insistent, keen as desire. Now, I feel what trees must - budding, green sheaths splitting - skin that no longer fits. It is obvious from this book of poetry why Trethewey was Poet Laureate. The South Florida Sun-Sentinel said it best, "More than mere photographs, these are love letters that open like windows onto the temple of Aphrodite. Women are free to step into and out of the picture frame to learn firsthand from these religious adepts."

Great book of poems told from the point of view of a Storyville prostitute at the turn of last century New Orleans. "Ophelia," a country girl who is part black, has fled her backwater small town to find work as a schoolteacher in NOLA. Failing that (she can't get hired because she is part black), she falls into prostitution. Eventually she runs into the fabled photographer E. J. Bellocq (Storyville Portraits, MOMA, 1973 - Bellocq's c. 1900 8x10 glass plate negs were discovered in NOLA and bought and published by photographer Lee Friedlander). Natasha Trethewey is very, very good. You feel you are there. Describes NOLA and life in a "house of ill repute" very believably.

Bellocq's Ophelia by Natasha Trethewey is a complete novel told in a series of verses inspired by the early 1900 E. J. Bellocq photographs of prostitutes in the red-light district of New Orleans. Bellocq's Ophelia is the imaginative and original tale of a woman whose brothel Madame tells her to act like statue on display for the male patrons of the establishment. Bellocq - April 1911: There comes a quiet man now to my room--/Papa Bellocq, his camera on his back./He wants nothing, he says, but to take me/as I would arrange myself, fully clothed--/a brooch at my throat, my white hat angled/just so--or not, the smooth map of my flesh/awash in afternoon light. In my room/everything's a prop for his composition--/brass spittoon in the corner, the silver/mirror, brush and comb of my toilette./I try to pose as I think he would like--shy/at first, then bolder. I'm not so foolish/that I don't know this photograph we make/will bear the stamp of his name, not mine.

I love anything written by Natasha Trethewey. She is a former U.S. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner in poetry. Her poetry is so 'real' and speaks so heavily to me. I always recommend her writing to anyone exploring poetry.

Natasha Trethewey's poetry is always earthy and sophisticated all at once. In Bellocq's Ophelia she gives voice to the imagery of a New Orleans prostitute, a collage of the women seen in Bellocq's remarkable early twentieth century photographs. Telling a complex story in poetry, Ms Trethewey

transcends Ophelia's specific situation and makes us look at the sad trajectory of a life that, like so many, took a different course than intended. Her skill as a poet makes it easy to understand why she was chosen as US Poet Laureate. Easily one of my favorite books of poetry. Highly recommended. The Last of the Pascagoula

These are remarkable poems...they tell a story without seeming too. Sophisticated without being pretentious; insightful without being ponderous; heart expanding without being sentimental.

Hauntingly beautiful!

Fascinating

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