



*What Hands Can Hold* by Ami Kaye

Reviewed by [Karen Bowles](#)

I recently received Ami Kaye's new book, *What Hands Can Hold*, and immediately noted how soft the book itself felt, as though the beating heart in its words contained good will and kindness that could be felt on the outside. Once I delved deeper into the book, drinking in the rich phrases and lyrical artistry, I was drawn into her symbology and repeated use of imagery. Kaye's writing is fertile ground for a deeply sensory experience in which the reader absorbs the "constant stories in (her) eloquent language," the curves of the letters "yielding a voluptuous sound." Kaye is not afraid to tackle any phase of life. The wistfulness of a grandmother whose swelling heart knows both pride and anguish as she poses with her brand new grandchild for a photo, aware it is the only tangible evidence this child will have left of her (*Through the Lens*), is contrasted with the ravages of illnesses and broken hearts (and bodies) so many of us will deal with at some point in our mortal travels. In fact, Kaye's work is a deft and subtle portrait of humanity in all its various incarnations, back dropped through different cultural ventures. She treats us to a gorgeous, sumptuous piece that ties in the entire book and anchors its endpoint, in *Henna Stories*. "Her dusky face and large liquid eyes/ were bright with anticipation/ as she turned out a hand,/ palm up." Kaye's insider details of Indian cultural tradition bring all readers of any background into a meeting place of human connection as we witness a young bride preparing for her wedding ceremony. As the henna is applied to her hands, "They teased her and sang wedding songs,/ combed her long black hair and entwined/ a strand of jasmynes in her braid." Her groom is supposed to find his name written in the intricate design painted on her hands; the bride ponders this exercise, whilst wondering what future stories will write themselves upon her hands.

Kaye takes us into ancient Egypt in *Papyrus*: "Born of primeval waters/ a blue lotus erupts/ from circles of chaos... My hot eyes/ are all that is left/ in my mouth you taste the Nile." The reader witnesses ancient Japanese tradition come to life in *The Art of Making Onigiri*: "...then she thought of the whirl of a jade leaf/ and the pink clouds of blossoms, how the/ sky wrapped itself around the earth." An accompanying glossary defining the meanings of notable words and phrases will assist all readers in grasping the full meaning of the pieces.

Kaye loves to throw in references to her bountiful love of all things related to arts and culture, as we see especially in *November Rose*: "Lorca's book lies open at its spine/... The mezzo-soprano on *iTunes*/ belts out Carmen's "Habanera."

I personally loved unraveling threads of thoughts, making connections between the symbols and repetition of sensual phrases, such as "smell of life," "tangled mouths," "touch petal skin," "blood flows,/ tumbling, spurting/ warm urgent/ ready to feed life's hunger." She mentions star light and ruby fires lit within, merging with the inner light of the soul and the endurance of love, as seen

through both physical and metaphysical landscapes. In fact, it is quite fun to see how creatively a concept is presented from many different perspectives. Hands, which are the focal point of the book's title, are represented as both a means to help and hinder, to hold histories or catch the draining lifeblood of a fallen child who once held dreams in his now missing hand. "Fading hands" of the elderly are interspersed with fists that can catch dreams.

I think Kaye is perhaps one of the most accomplished authors at presenting a vivid portrait of illness and the trials of those who are caring for sick, elderly loved ones. These tales are tucked amongst vivid portraits of burning youth, bright hopes, tactile enjoyment of physicality, sad lost loves, and hopeful treks into fantastical realms (*Heart of a Dragon*).

As I am personally dealing with some of the issues of caring for a loved one who is in the latter stages of her life, I am especially struck by Kaye's unflinching yet tender and understanding portrayal of those who are in both roles of caregiver and sufferer. Readers are not dragged into a depressed state in reading these pieces, rather finding the threads of hope and strength that Kaye interweaves with her truthful accounting of unwinding days. In *Senescence*, we see the dedication of love at work as a caregiver experiences hurt and pain, but carries on regardless. Again, hands are at work here, with fingers that once curled in a gesture of love and comfort no longer able to grasp the caregiver's lonely hands. In *Still Life*, an older woman's "Brittle memories/ crumble powder-fine/... A withered still-life,/ her only movement/ the fluttering of hands/ like stubborn birds trying/ to fly with broken wings."

And yet, there is always hope, such as in *November Rose*, which is one of my favorites. My mother is named Rosetta, and was born in November, so this poem resonates on many levels for me. "It's the kind of rose that/ radiates fragrance from its core./ Your mind sings, fully grasping/ the intricacies of the minor miracle,/ born from frost, a late-blooming/ rose, deep in whose petals/ burns a hot heart."

All of Kaye's poems stand on their own merits, and work together to weave a glorious depiction of what it means to be engaged in life. She writes, "as you grow accustomed to the dark, much that was hidden becomes visible... What can we see/ from such a tiny aperture?/ The image is sharpest/ when the pinhole is small." Kaye sharpens the readers' focus, leading them to a point of entry into a world saturated with both reality and revelry, reminding us to love all who need us while cherishing the gifts that come from truly committing to the wonders of living.