



**Salem State University**

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**From the Selected Works of Nancy Lusignan Schultz**

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## Review of Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, And Other Airborne Females by Serinity Young

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*Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females.* By Serinity Young. Oxford University Press, 2018. 376 pages. \$29.95 cloth; ebook available.

Serinity Young's *Women Who Fly* soars through place and time to survey the surprisingly ubiquitous trope of airborne women. Interdisciplinary and global in scope, this book covers a typology of flying females flourishing throughout the millennia in myth, literature, and art. Flying operates as a prism through which Young—a Research Associate at New York's American Museum of Natural History—examines female power and subjection in cultures spread across varied geographical locations and periods. *Women Who Fly* begins with a meditation on the Louvre's "Victory of Samothrace," the awe-inspiring statue of Nike, Greek goddess of victory, with her powerful wings and thighs extending from a headless torso. For Young, aerial women offer a unifying lens through which to examine unexpected similarities in what would otherwise appear to be diverse world religions and cultures.

For example, Young writes that in ancient China, more four thousand years ago, two daughters of the Emperor Yao were gifted with the art of flying and bestowed supernatural powers on their new husband, whom they shared, thereby enhancing his power as future emperor (3). The sisters, she argues, are prototypes for shape-shifting women around the globe who bear children to mortal men, but are always most at home in the sky. These ancient flying women presage the goddesses, fairies, witches, and mystics populating global mythologies. Some fully leave the earth with their bodies, while others take a magical flight of the soul or spirit. Young demonstrates the myriad ways these beings are linked to sexuality, death, and rebirth. The stories told worldwide about flying women often begin with a focus on their power, but subsequently lead to their capture and domestication in order to serve men's ambition and desires.

Young, who also teaches Classical, Middle Eastern, and Asian Languages and Cultures at Queens College, draws liberally from psychology, anthropology, sociology, folklore, and art history to develop her ambitious analysis of aerial women, and this is perhaps the book's greatest contribution. Following an introduction, the book is divided into two parts: "Supernatural Women" and "Human Women." Young is adept at drawing fertile connections between Eastern and Western mythology. In examining the differences between male heroism and female flying heroes, for example, she posits that while male heroes return home from their quests renewed and enriched, the flight of aerial females often serves as an escape from domestic captivity. The book amply illustrates the way women's studies deftly pulls from multiple disciplines for a fresh focus on a single topic across multiple cultures.

Chapters 6 and 7 offer an example of the book's cross-cultural perspective, exploring celestial women shape-shifters of Hindu and Buddhist mythology, the *apsaras*, *dakinis*, and *yoginis*, who illustrate prominent threads in Indian religious thought: the power of bird goddesses; the porous boundaries between humans, animals, and the divine; and the spiritual significance of the ability to fly. In stories emerging from this tradition, many of these demi-gods are employed to assist male gods, or to seduce earthly men. These chapters are followed by one on witches, which focuses on classical Western literature and the European witch hunts. The book ends with a discussion of selected twentieth-century flying women, ranging from Wonder Woman to female aviators.

The strength of *Women Who Fly* is its broad sweep. Young consults sources that span multiple disciplines (approximately 30 percent of the book is devoted to "notes" and "works consulted" with the main text running about 250 pages). These references are a bit dated for a 2018 book, with most published before 2013. And some of Young's juxtapositions of topics seem random rather than thoughtfully considered. This book, however, is a good background resource for women's studies projects, literary interpretations, and for an overview of historical representations of women who fly. Students and general readers will find it a baseline for deeper dives into religious and cultural symbols of women.

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*The Politics of The Headscarf in the United States.* By Bozena C. Welborne, Aubrey L. Westfall, Özge Çelik Russell, and Sarah A. Tobin. Cornell University, 2018. 249 pages. \$95.00 cloth; \$22.95 paperback; ebook available.

While there are countless books on the presumed oppression of Muslim women and the regulation of Muslim bodies in Western society, this book offers an original and significant study of the personal decisions that Muslim American women make to wear the headscarf. Instead of exploring political limitations on religious dress in public spaces, the authors focus on the symbolic boundaries created by the headscarf and assess how the treatment of covered Muslim women in American public spaces might signal the sustainability of democratic pluralism in the United States. Through a survey of nearly two thousand Muslim American women and focus group interviews with more than seventy women, the authors share unprecedented data on the daily experiences of Muslim women in the United States. This multi-method approach allows the authors to present statistical data and substantial quotes about