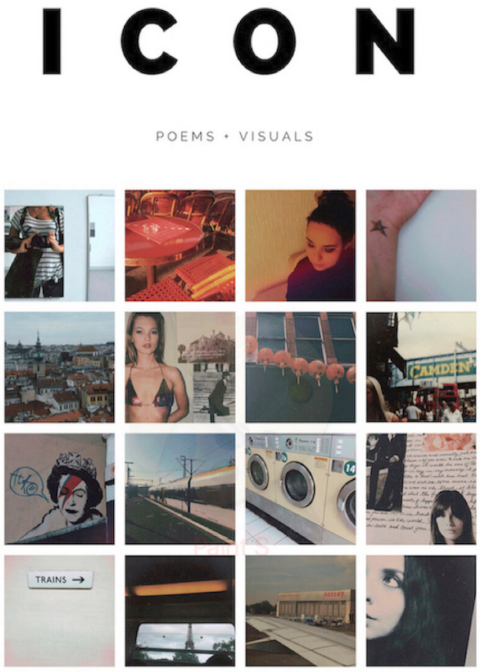
REVIEW

Through the Lens of a Traveller: A Review of "Icon" by Chiara Maxia

by Joselle Ali



‘Icon’ by Chiara Maxia

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For this review, our volunteer Joselle had the pleasure of interviewing actress and author Chiara Maxia. As she unravels the text, she sets out to explore some of the inner workings that produced Chiara's collection, *Icon* (2020). With a magnetic personality that is nothing short of charming, but laced with a hint of mystery and the teasings of a wilder side, this talented poet and avid lover of black coffee explains that, "poetry doesn't start. It is not an overnight decision but a practice and love that develops overtime."

It happens as one's mind is triggered by an unnoticed detail until one has half a dozen notebooks full of words with the power to hurt and heal, to make and break, to love and hate, to create and destroy. They can crystallize perceptions that can shape beliefs and drive behaviours. Alone, their capabilities are endless. When they intersect with thought and emotion the resultant maelstrom yields a rhythmic creation of beauty, boned with ideas, nerved and blooded with emotions, as described by Paul Engle in "Poetry Is Ordinary Language Raised to the Nth Power" (*The New York Times*, 1957). Maxia embodies this description in her collection, *Icon*: a visual experience of being lost on the road, with uncertainty and confusion as constant companions. It contains small moments suspended in time that, in their simplicity, are impactful enough to embed for a lifetime. Set within the often glamourized and coveted context of travelling, *Icon* showcases the peaks and valleys of rootless, short, but enriching experiences one is subject to when on the move.

The Bridge of the Human Experience

‘Icon’ by Chiara Maxia

"Icon" by Chiara Maxia

As someone who inhabits a small Caribbean Island, these poems were initially foreign and confusing to me. Travel is a luxury not many can afford, and these recollections of lessons learnt and a life lived were not my own. The places were unfamiliar and the language differed greatly from the poems I read growing up, which were rife with historical and socio-political issues compared to the simple ones of *Icon*. Yet, that was precisely the point. *Icon* placed emphasis on the little things that may seem trivial to some but hold profound significance for another, such as a cab ride home or a train ride to nowhere. Upon reading, you feel as though you are allowed to independently perceive, think, and reflect without consequence as you are not being fed an experience, but are a part of it. While it revolves around travel, the journeys it describes are not stereotypically adventurous, with endless freedom from responsibilities. Rather it sheds that outer glamour to reveal what lies beneath; the struggles that come with

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self-identity as one ping-pongs between love and heartbreak, unfilled dreams and lost opportunities, reality, illusion, humour, and depression.

The Good, the Bad… and the In-Between

With this collection involving journeys, it seems quite fitting that the poems take you on one. Maxia enthuses that, “travelling is food for the soul, a mind opener, and a coping mechanism where geographic solutions meet emotional problems.” Interspersed throughout the collection some poems effused the freedom and welcome confusion of detachment and the euphoria of being uncaring for a moment. One is given a glimpse of the stardom and power one feels when at the centre of attention, or a muse for creative works. There is also a reminder that simple livelihoods exist, apart from the usual fast paced environments filled with anger, discord, contempt, and division. One has the pleasure of learning, and perhaps reminiscing, that this simplicity incubates love in its purest form, adopting a childlike innocence free from outside interference.

Yet, peaks have no meaning without valleys as one is reminded that the innocence of love has its destructive counterpart in lust and heartbreak. The magnitude of that impact can vary from person to person through the aftermath of substance abuse or emerging disorders as one’s sense of self is shattered. The confusion, no longer welcome, as one tries to reassemble the pieces is never-ending, and meaning is found in cities with tumultuous pasts, as their ability to give becomes a source of inspiration. According to Maxia, the plethora of cities peppered throughout the collection, while different, retain a common thread of movement and a continuous change of light and perspective.

Maxia notes that, while mentally the journey never ends, balance is key; a notion that *Icon* realistically understands as it can take one by surprise in the most unexpected of moments.



Chiara Maxia © Chiara Maxia

It’s akin to emotional and cognitive whiplash as one learns that a Parisian cab ride home after a fun-filled night can foreshadow a bleak future. There is the self-protective urge to make new memories in the places that caused pain, followed by the feeling of enjoying a caress with the knowledge that it is empty. There are endless contrasts and comparisons, made more relatable through the subtle displeasures of modern life, such as the fallacy of social media and the capitalist perversion of youthful ambition. This stab of reality is dark,

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but necessary in its honesty, with its impact cushioned by humour and sarcasm, making *Icon* an enjoyable read.

The Necessity of Being Unstructured

At first glance, *Icon* appears to lack a rigid structure, rhythm, or pattern. However, herein lies the beauty of the collection. It is raw, unpredictable, honest, and real as the imagery and language used — while sometimes crass — are relatable.

As mentioned previously, *Icon* manages to make the reader a traveller who experiences all the emotions compacted in the poems. However, *Icon* through the lens of a traveller is quite literal in its meaning through Maxia's complementary photography skills. *Icon* has a unique charm in the form of photographs taken by Maxia from her past travels. Many were strategically placed to visually agree with adjacent poems, while others were not. Hence, not only do these snapshots help the unfamiliar reader, but also invite personal interpretation and inference in their abstractness, magnifying the human experience into an art form of survival and growth.

In the simplicity of both text and visuals, they invite reflection, opinion, and perspective into a satisfying discourse. Clarity on specific issues may not be found, not even at the end of the journey, but contentment is there nonetheless as the end provides hope through self-actualization. Maxia explains that no emotion or experience is more profound than another as forty-seven chapters that began on a hopeful, lost, but optimistic nuance, suddenly dip, plateau and plummet. Bursts of energy are followed by lengths of despair until the peak is crested again. Every encounter is necessary and through this collection, Maxia hopes that it strikes a chord in the heart of her readers, a feat that is a certainty as a fellow reader.

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