

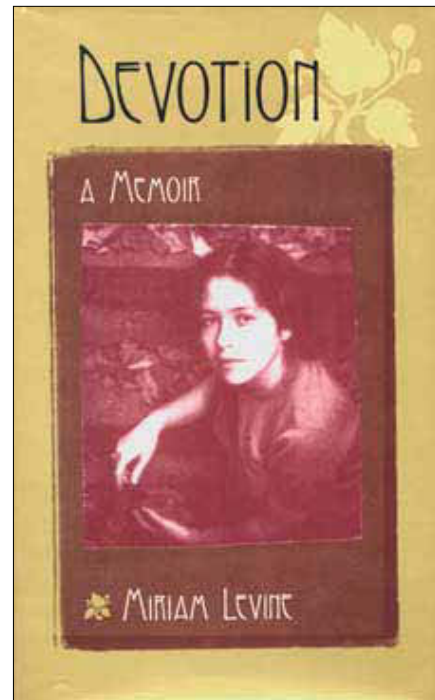
Wilderness House Literary Review 8/3

Devotion, A Memoir, Miriam Levine
The University of Georgia Press
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review by Irene Koronas

We enter Levin's memoir as family, friends and our journey through her past becomes our own. We experience every chapter vividly through her poignant writing. Each paragraph is given to us as a gift that we take and relate to our own stories:

"My grandmother's household revolved around rituals. Gone was the hardship of her earlier Domestic life, when she had to take care of her husbands' parents, her young children, and her daughter Etta, who slowly died of heart disease as well as to mind the fruit and vegetables store while her husband peddled produce from door to door from a horse-drawn wagon."



These vignettes of family characters touch us with a soft cloth; like the one left on the bottom of aunt Jen's hamper -- clean cotton folded like silk. And those humorous moments startle us out of our reverence for the writing:

"If you swallow anything, it's better to swallow a penny or a button, it's the same shape as your asshole." She bounced against me as we laughed, her still firm hip against mine..."

We follow the memories with total interest. Miriam Levine was born with a pen in her hand and cannot be ignored as one of America's more accomplished writers. The characters live and breathe on the page and this reader interest was piqued throughout.

When Levine was thirteen she asked her father Joe, a man she described as one who "fumed in silence," about his ideas about sex and his ideas about intellectuality. He thought intellectual boys were not as inclined to indiscretions:

"They're good boys," Joe said for what seemed like the Hundredth time. "The type to marry." Marry? I had just turned thirteen. I reached into my skirt pocket and pulled out the stack of pictures. "Here." I said, handing them to Joe. "We play spin the bottle." He turned white, a safe sign: he wouldn't yell. His mouth hardened. "What are they doing with you?" he spit. "We were only kissing," I answered. I saw something in his eyes: a thought. I faked him out and nailed the shot. He shoved the pictures into his pocket."

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I can relate to the years the book depicts, the culture, and because my immigrant father and factory working mother had similar experiences, this all might explain why Levine's writing riveted me to each page. This book reads like a classic novel, a Chekhov story, intense and profound in its direct depiction of people. Levine's sentences are a vista of images:

"At nine-thirty Bertocci would burst through the door, slams down his beat-up briefcase, and begins lecturing. He had the face of a commedia dell'arte puppet: a Punch like sloping nose, close-together eyes, a flat wide mouth, which pushed up duckbill-like against his nose-an unsaintly feral face. His odd dark eyes were angry and intelligent. His hair was thinning, but the old hairline still showed, like a shadow, or a scar, or a painter's cartoon: you could see the younger head inside the old."

Life changes dramatically. The university presented Miriam with a new set of books to read and new characters to study. She is used to being with family and family plots, so it became an easy transition, but there are differences. There are more people to relate too. She steps into what life offers, with grace and keen observation:

"Yet this morning when I thought again about courage, I came to the conclusion that my definition of heroism was too narrow. Just having a baby was an act of courage, for all women, for those who go into it without thinking and for those who think and decided. Pregnancy and childbirth have been sealed in a kind of silence, like a taboo. And the films, which were so popular now, of mother and father training for the event in special classes, laboring together, even the films of the actual birth, did not really convey the mystery of the journey."

Page after page, challenges the reader. The adventures in this memoir are fleshed out with Levine's astute observations. Levine's descriptions give the reader a finely detailed picture. Every episode, each chapter is polished and finished. We read on and on because we have come to live within the book's memories:

"...if I step closer, I feel as if I am falling into his head. Our Augusts were usually dry, but this August it had been raining for two weeks. When the sun came out, the trunks of the oak trees steamed. "How do you like the rain forest?" I had asked, cutting through his back garden on my way to Robbins Library..."

With fine strokes and a light touch, Levine restores, peels away what the patina has built up and she gets us back to the original painting:

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“Culture had thrilled me ever since I was a child stepping into my grandmother Molly’s kitchen. There I had felt culture, both hers and ours, European and American. The things in Molly’s kitchen jutted out at me: her coffee grinder, the little white enamel pot with its black handle, the strawberries simmering in that pot, reducing to thick jam, the yellow batter on her sponge, her jars of spices, her knife worn to a flake, the Jewish newspaper open on the table, the black “carving” of the Hebrew letters, the radio with its glowing yellow-green dial, Bing Crosby singing “I’m dreaming of a White Christmas.”

We travel with Miriam Levine, from her ancestral kitchen, to Mexico and Frida Kahlo’s home.

We experience the nit-nacs Kahlo surrounds her life with and her arrangements of the the small objects of red, greens, blues and yellow splashes. The book carries us from one country to another, and we visit with different artists, and writers, and all of them influence us because we are reading this book.

I recommend “Devotion.” Devotion, cannot be read in one sitting. You will enjoy the journey and want for more.