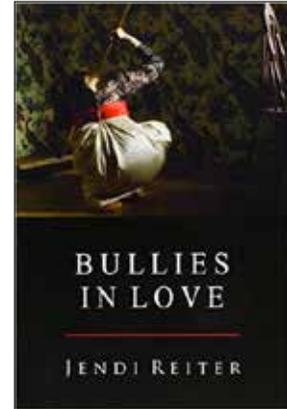


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Bullies in Love

poems by Jendi Reiter; photography by Toni Pepe
Little Red Tree Publishing, 2015
7 x 0.3 x 10 inches paperback, 120 pp.

Review by Carol Smallwood



I had the pleasure of reading the poetry collection, *Swallow*, so was looking forward to Ms. Reiter's newest poetry collection, *Bullies in Love*, the Winner of the Little Red Tree International Poetry Prize. Ms. Reiter isn't a stranger to awards as she's received: the Massachusetts Cultural Council Artists' Grant for Poetry, Betsy Collquitt Award for Poetry, James Anderbo Poetry Prize, as well as others in fiction.

The fifty-three poems are pretty equally divided in four sections; the collection has an index of first lines and titles; biographical backgrounds of the photographer as well as the poet. Art photographer, Toni Pepe, teaches photography at Boston University.

Ms. Reiter's free verse poetry is gutsy, bold, direct, and very contemporary but not devoid of humor which appears in the second poem, "I Wish I Were in Love Again":

*Where the sheriff,
big-bellied as Cupid
didn't see the evidence
of the split rope, the double-smudged lipstick,
the blacksnake-cold gun under the belt.*

And in "Possession"

Rats shrink from the sound of crackling, like a teenage boy forced to read a nineteenth-century novel of manners.

"What Dora Said to Agnes" ends with the memorable lines:

*When a man undresses a woman
he is unfolding a letter
he expected would be addressed to him,
when he reads it whatever memories
he brought to it he will take away again.
When a woman undresses a man
she is promising to wash him,
she is offering the hand that will close his eyes.*

Each new poetry collection is an exploration, a sharing with the poet, a trying to understand and enjoy what the poet says (and what they don't say) and how they craft it. Readers enter a realm the poet makes—just the right words chosen after a long time of mulling, indecision, revision, finally a letting go of each poem with a mix of satisfaction and doubt.

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“Trigger Warning: Pour Homme” is a list of memories with famous perfumes; most have a reference to her mother until “she’d become allergic.”

Some of her lines demand to be read again and again to savor them at will such as those in, “Deep Sister”:

*the spoon-eared hare,
leaping from bush to vanish
fast as a memory of God*

My favorite, “Inheriting a House Fire” is a stark summary of a family: father, mother, aunts, cousins, grandparents, that cuts to the bone and allows no pretension. The four stanzas are a remarkable assessment, one too penetrating to allow any tears of sentiment.

The longest poem is the last one, “Split Ends” which is divided into six sections. The seven photographs question what our vision takes for granted – what we see; the poems question the ever present role of sex, probes comfortable personal assumptions, and our collective cultural fairy tales. The photographs and poetry work together well; the book is larger than the usual 6”x9” collection most likely to accommodate the photographs.

I recalled the word, fractal, after reading *Bullies in Love*: a term applied to a type of geometry that allowed us to get a better grasp of our natural world that isn’t arranged in the straight lines of Euclidean geometry. Ms. Reiter’s poems strive to give form through words to lives that follow irregular lines and are as complex as the never-ending patterns of fractals.

Carol Smallwood’s most recent poetry collections include *Divining the Prime Meridian* (WordTech Communications, 2015); *Water, Earth, Air, Fire, and Picket Fences* (Lamar University Press, 2014). Recent anthologies include *Women, Work, and the Web* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); *Writing After Retirement* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). *Women on Poetry: Writing, Revising, Publishing and Teaching* is on Poets & Writers Magazine list of Best Books for Writers.