

## INTO CELEBRATION

KATHLEEN McCracken.

Toronto: *The Coach House Press*, 1980.

Kathleen McCracken, at age eighteen, has published her second book of poems. The most recent, *Into Celebration*, is the author's poetry of a personal doctrine of love. She deals with themes such as the need for independence and yet the need for a lover. *Into Celebration* shows an obsession with images of rocks and grasses, which seem to be the symbols of death and change. The poet arranges her poems so that there is a distinct succession from rock, the lifeless yet immutable force, to forest, the living real world of relationships. Simultaneously, as the elements shift to changing forms, McCracken herself grows from a frozen woman with no love to a joyous woman who has emotions and love. Her lover is her means of transformation.

McCracken rejoices in submission. Several relationships are established which emphasize her penchant to be dominated. She does not want to be easy prey but she does want to be caught. She has seven old women inside of her, one for each of the seven lovers she has had, yet she looks to a new lover to "win me skillfully." Like Icarus ascending, one of the women images

sends up a string  
and  
catches a ride  
out.

The irony is that the now free self must figuratively kill herself to become who she wants to be.

McCracken sets up a tension between herself and cold nature, symbol of frozen emotions, and with the gentleman—"flinching at (his) easy touch." Thus, a parallel between man and nature is set up: he is colder than snow; he is the green figure in the forest calling her to life and love.

watch only  
your lips  
deep  
into the forest  
whispering—

this is  
where to start.

The new lover is both her saviour and her antagonist. He evokes the other men from her past. But the poet has greater strength. She has survived her past. Accordingly, she stands for a paradox as well, and from this she gains strength.

I am she  
who bandages  
your wounds . . .

I am  
the knife that  
twists eternal

in your spine.

With her concrete imagery she tries to convince us of her strength, but on the whole, her first poems speak of submissiveness. She gathers stones about her in a preparation for the ritual; her nakedness and aloneness with the earthy forces she uses to build walls around herself. Finally, the reader comes to identify her with the stones, and the gentleman with greenness. The poet cannot be alive until she ac-

cepts greenness and rejects the stones, a transition, requiring ritualistic methods:

five smooth stones  
on the sand  
symmetrical  
orders from the sun  
rearrange them  
watch how I dance.

The bleak symbols show her recognition that even this new union will not be equal to life for her. In "The Winter In Us", the lover has been a part of the ceremony before the festival; his love is sacrificed. Once she understands this, the poet begins to assume control of her own life.

I leave you  
easily

She has become eclectic:

I carry  
grass and stones  
in my pocket

From winter, to fall, to summer, three stages have passed in the poem. The poet stresses the paradox of winter moving backwards in order to go forward. It has been a journey into memory where:

I remember  
try to forget.

In fact, the book ends with a statement of spring, of rejuvenation and celebration.

The poet initially tells us that she has no control of her actions since she "was not used to forest trickery." She does act, saving herself by a *deus ex machina* inspiration. As in "Five Smooth Stones," she deals with her subject in

concrete terms. The stones are used throughout the series as solid representations of life. They are tangible and long lived. Leaves die and drift on the wind of time, but rocks do not change. Because the male is equated with plants, love and life are equated with change, transition. In the summer stage of the poems she is one step away from the celebration of womanhood, of singleness "unwed". Like a chameleon she changes from rock to grass to stone. The title, *Into Celebration* categorizes her poems into this linear progression from stone to flower.

There is one poem worth quoting in totality. In it she is struggling to understand changes the new lover has caused.

#### Heritage Song

This is	I have the mouths of dead men on my lips,
the ground the ground the cold ground	your wild look where they buried you. in my eye.
This is	I plant flags
the land	I scream alone
you taste.	I dig  this cold land  with my green hands.

McCracken uses British Columbia place names to establish a locality for herself. It is, however, somewhat incongruous that Brian

Molyneaux's petroglyph photos which accompany the poems were taken in Ontario's Lake of the Woods areas. When place is made so specific, consistency must be maintained.

On the whole, the poems are provocative and the book is attractively laid out. It will be interesting to see how this young poet's talent matures.

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## CONTRACT WITH THE WORLD.

JANE RULE.

*New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980. Pp. 339.*

Joseph goes mad. Meanwhile Mike deserts his wife, Alma, and begins an affair with her best friend, Carlotta. Alma then decides that she is a lesbian and becomes involved with Roxanne. After this, their lives get a bit complicated. Mike soon leaves Carlotta and she begins a sexual relationship with Roxanne. Alma divorces Mike but gets pregnant by him before he goes away and marries someone else. And worst of all, tragedy enters the lives of the novel's only stable couple, Allen and Pierre, when Allen is exposed as a homosexual and Pierre commits suicide. Not to worry too much, though. Everything turns out pretty well. Joseph becomes sane; Alma gets a job; Roxanne goes away to become a famous artist; Mike finds fulfillment selling mobile homes; Allen become a true artist; and Carlotta paints everyone's picture. And it's all over by page 339.

Obviously, the melodrama is alive and well and is even acquiring a little intellectual and social tone. Why, I wonder, are intelligent and ambitious novelists like Margaret Atwood (at least in *Life After Man*) and Jane Rule shackling themselves to the conventions of melodrama? Melodrama works for the likes of Harold Robbins and Irving Wallace because they intend only to thrill their readers by bombarding them with characters and crises. Jane Rule, on the other hand, is interested in how her characters react to boundary situations and seeks complexity along with sensation. But complexity simply is not possible when you try to deal with six major characters who experience personal, sexual, marital, artistic and social crises (fortunately, none of them seems much interested in religion).

Jane Rule's narrative technique is, I presume, designed to overcome the danger of slipping into melodramatic superficiality. Instead of skipping randomly from character to character and crisis to crisis, she breaks her narrative into six sections, each focusing on one of the major characters. As a result, readers are able to concentrate their attention on that character for a period of time. The device, unfortunately, does not really work because the author refuses to slow down her frantic narrative pace to allow for any chronological overlapping of the six narratives. Joseph is placed in centre stage until the point of his mental breakdown. Then, he is shoved off to one side and we follow Mike through his separation from Alma. Alma's narrative begins after Mike leaves for Arizona, and takes us through her relationship with Roxanne. The end of this relationship is recorded from Roxanne's point of view. Allen becomes the focus of attention after Pierre's suicide and the novel concludes with an account of Carlotta and her art show.