

Dion-Glowa, J. (2022) *Trailer Park Shakes*. Brick Books.

Review by Sharon L. Barnes

Justene Dion-Glowa asks a lot of questions. In her first full-length work of poetry, *Trailer Park Shakes*, Dion-Glowa asks, and often answers, questions of herself, of the reader, and of the characters, both two-legged and otherwise, who populate this powerful group of poems exploring life challenged by intergenerational violence, poverty, and institutional indifference that is sometimes outright hostility. Separated into two sections, Dion-Glowa's work makes inquiries into the impact of misogyny, racism, and heteronormativity through the experiences of multiple, complex traumas, bringing visibility to the pain, struggle, and hard-fought efforts at healing, wishing, above all, as she notes in "perch," to "bear witness to the world" (p. 39).

While Dion-Glowa's biography identifies her as a queer Métis writer and human service worker who hails from Win-Nipi (Winnipeg) and currently lives in Secwepemcúl'ecw Territory in British Columbia--indeed some of the finest works in this collection bring forward themes that tie directly to her personal experience as a queer indigenous woman--the poems frequently do their work through a mixture of detail and abstraction that invite application beyond the particular experiences explored in the works. Though some readers might wish for more context-building details in these poems, the emphasis on issues brings the message about harm home.

Two opening ruminations offer Dion-Glowa's combination of philosophical abstraction, attention to detail, and the tension of the experience of complex marginalization that characterizes the best of these poems. In the opening poem, "Tissue," she identifies "desire for specialness" with a spider sac about to burst and "unload its writhing progeny onto this world," observing: "Greatness is a deep valley where/despair also lives." (p. 3)

The second poem, "blur," weaves another common theme, that of monstrosity, with the desire for visibility:

you feel you must be seen
as a palpitating monster ready to lunge
and spread this infection
to anyone who'll let you
close enough to bite. (p. 4)

Later in the book, she asks of her "tiny friend" in "kaanookaat {spider}," "What does it feel like to wield power over such a great creature as humankind?" and "How can I take that power for my own?" (p. 8).

Time and again in these poems, she does wield that power, continually asserting that "something ain't right" (p. 7), in the relationships and institutions confronted here. Dion-Glowa places readers in fearful, painful, and confusing circumstances, giving voice to the experience of powerlessness

in ways that invite readers to contemplate our own positions as co-survivors, as complicit observers, and/or as perpetrators ourselves.

The impact of crushing poverty runs through these poems like the blood of the raven she picks up on the side of the road in “kornay {crow}”: “run[ning] furrows in the creases of my skin”(40). Without anchoring us in a specific place, Dion-Glowa manages through strategic details to bring the forgotten places and people into concrete reality, whether it be the “husk of a town ... bleeding out” (p. 5) in “Dust Bowl Masquerade” or the girl who, because of her family’s poverty, has “one nice dress” she has to wear to church “every time” in “sunday best”(p. 21).

Vulnerability to violence both interpersonal and institutional is practically inevitable under such conditions. In “Meadowwood Daze,” the “children/playing at being grown” attack each other and yet stay friends, because “It’s easier to believe in one another/ than it is to believe someone will intervene” (p. 30). Recounting her brother’s death in “7 grams,” Dion-Glowa returns to the strategy of asking questions, both rhetorical and specific, that drives many of these works:

How many grams of crack in one’s stomach is too much for the
coroner to rule the overdose accidental?
Or rather
what is the threshold for this particular insurance provider? (p. 73)

Noting the doctor’s insensitivity, she wonders if her brother is “just another brown boy in that doctor’s eyes” and “How long did it take for the ambulance to arrive/ while the kids hid away or bore witness? (p. 73). Deeply individual questions driven by the intersectional personal pains of racism and poverty invite bigger questions about social positioning, as Dion-Glowa makes clear when she ironically observes that the hospital bill “add[s] invoice to injury” (p. 73).

Nowhere is this personal/political duality more heartbreakingly rendered than in the poems that address sexual vulnerability, hers and others’. In “The Van Man,” she and her friend Claudette escape the van man’s invitation for “a ride” because Claudette is brave and knows to say no and run. The author, “small and scared,” wonders what would have happened “if I had been alone,” and “if there are other Claudette’s out there/ saving little girls/one at a time” (p. 31-2).

In other works, she isn’t so lucky. The incredibly powerful “Aces” catalogs multiple experiences of sexual vulnerability and exploitation, noting “I didn’t really know/ what *no* was.” (p. 50) Understanding rape by age 4 and having a “porn habit” by 6, she observes, “CFS should’ve taken me when they had the chance to/ help but/we know they make things worse.”(p. 49) Depicting a near miss at 15 from the man who tried to coerce her into “doggy style at his house/ The penetration is just so deep he said,” compared to “waking up with fingers inside me/while the porno played/Like that other time,” and the 20 year old who she dated at 16 who wouldn’t acknowledge her in public, Dion-Glowa claims, “I would run without even knowing where is safe/What safe is as a concept” (p. 51) and reflects that “no is a powerful word for someone who/ wields none” (p. 50).

The titular poem, “Shakes,” perhaps one of the finest in the collection, reverberates with the other works exploring the mental health crises that living in generationally abusive conditions can create,

“shakes” of a whole different kind. The piece opens by claiming, “The trailer park shakes when the trains go by” and, as is often the case in this collection, a duality emerges when the poet “can’t tell yet if it’s a comfort or a curse” (p. 17). Dion-Glowa again asks questions, wondering “if the kids know they’re poor” but observes that, despite the noise of the contentious neighbors and the heater, and the broken fence and deck, there’s a washer and a dryer, a skylight, and a “spectacular” view of the river and desert mountainside out back. In this poem, one of many in which the cyclical forces of social class oppression are overtly addressed, she wonders “how it is that no matter how hard we have worked we/never really make it” and asserts “everything you thought you knew/about how to be an effective adult is just misinformation/ ... it really is just one fucked up situation after another in a/ never-ending loop.” Ruminating on her Dad’s love of trains, she directly posits, “Maybe intergenerational trauma got him/ the way it gets all us imperfect simpletons/ just trying to make it to next pay day” (p. 19).

As is often the case with underdogs, especially working-class ones, fierce love of family, despite the violence, deep will to survive, despite the suicidal ideation and consistent structural and personal harm, and wicked humor in the face of the odds being stacked against you also abound in these poems. Two of the three final poems in this book are my favorites. While they don’t negate the horrors, affronts, and indignities explored earlier, “n8v aunties” offers the details that make her indigenous auntie’s home become a refuge, though not without loss, as when she describes her autie’s home as the place:

where it becomes painfully apparent you have not yet felt the song
pour from your hand to douse a drum
where the rattle lies still cuz there was no one to teach you how to
shake it –even your auntie doesn’t know that. (p. 80)

But here at n8v auntie’s where “the cedar hangs above every door,” where the stories come with a “feast of KD and tomato soup,” cousins and neighbors understand each other as family, and “the backyard is small but full of toys for kids/ that are too young to be her own” (p. 81), and “it’s always so comfortable no matter how full or cramped or cluttered” (p. 82). The beautiful final poem, “Claim Laid” is “a prayer for the dead and dying” wishing for peace, reconciliation, and rest, ending with:

I hope sagebrush bursts through your cedarwood coffin
and Eagle carries you home to Creator
I hope Thunderbird screams your name
and Coyote howls a lament for your spirit’s journey

We will keep the fire burning for you

to light your way home (p. 84-5)

In these challenging, questioning, deeply personal, and darkly political poems, Justene Dion-Gowa asks difficult questions, and the stories she tells as partial answers offer little space for distance, which is as it should be in such poetry of witness.

Reviewer Bio

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