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Physical and emotional privation, familial violence, racial enmity, and recurrent death are the features of this collection of poetry, set amid the landscape of the South.

Carolina Ghost Woods Details

Date : Published March 1st 2000 by LSU Press

ISBN : 9780807125564

Author : Judy Jordan

Format : Paperback 59 pages

Genre : Poetry, Paranormal, Ghosts

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From Reader Review Carolina Ghost Woods for online ebook

Kat Stromquist says

Luminous phrases, challenging sentences.

Robert Beveridge says

Judy Jordan, *Carolina Ghost Woods* (Louisiana State University Press, 2000)

Judy Jordan writes dense, exquisite poems that both shock and satisfy, while making you feel vaguely like taking a shower afterwards.

“...it informs the toads,
crouches them in crooked caves of alder roots,
pulses the pale skin under their slack mouths,
keeps them in the pond's tight waves clutching anything:
a pine's resinous knot, a fist of chair foam,
even a drowned and legless female.”
 (“Long Drop to Black Water”)

I loved this book; very easy to see why it won the National Book Critics' Circle Awards, though I have to admit I'm somewhat surprised that they received such heavy subject matter with such aplomb. This one's definitely a keeper. ****

Chris Blocker says

Jordan is one of my favorite poets. Her writing is equally gritty and beautiful. Often, while I'm reading her work, I find myself stepping back and saying "whoa." There is nothing else I can say. Just "whoa." And that's one sure sign of a fabulous writer.

This collection, her first, left me wanting more sometimes, but there were still many "whoa" moments. I've read parts of her follow-up, *Sixty-Cent Coffee and a Quarter to Dance*, and loved it. I look forward to reading it straight through.

Abraham says

Judy Jordan has moments of incredible wonder in these poems. You can feel her drop into mastery as she leads us to difficult places full of wondrous characters. But in the end, most of the poems - especially the nature poems (of which there are too many, and for which I have, admittedly, little patience)- are safe and minimally inspired. Still, I would pick up another of her books and try again some day.

Julene says

Very lyrical. My favorite poem is "The Delivery," where a woman witnesses a stabbing while working at a pizza place. She goes to her lyrical writing about the moon after the stabbing, "...If there was a moon/it might have chosen that moment to sail from rifted clouds. That moment to feather the twist-/ed terraces of ivy in silken light and dissolve the shadows to gray and purple mist."

Her book won the 1999 Walt Whitman Award from The Academy of American Poets.

Although this first book has beautiful writing, I found it hard to follow many of the early poems in the book, hard to stay attentive, I started to engage more easily in the poems where she starts to bring in some powerful stories about her mother's death and racism in these back woods. In the poem "The Delivery" I felt a shift. In many poems I felt disembodied not finding a grasp to hold me in the poem.

Mills College Library says

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Carrie says

Absolutely breathtaking in its intertwining of image and narrative. I was mesmerized by Jordan's control over her materials and the emotional depth of the work. Although the subject matter is heartbreaking and sometimes shocking, she never lets it descend into melodrama.

Julie says

From *Scattered Prayers*, a highlight from this excellent collection:

It's time's mirage,
this world,
sleight-of-hand and the clown's dance,
the same questions and somewhere
answer enough.

Cheri says

This collection of poems by Judy Jordan, winner of the 1999 Walt Whitman Award of The Academy of American Poets, is dark, somewhat gloomy, occasionally dipping into disturbing moments. Jordan is the daughter of sharecroppers, raised on a small farm near the border of the Carolinas, which is evident in her work.

The first poem in this outstanding collection:

Sharecropper's Grave

(for my grandmother)

**"The night is hoot owls, wind-whistled flue, babies bundled in burlap.
Breath of another child, mid-gasp.**

**In the next room, those who live
and the ones sickness took—the pail of milk,
thick and frothing, they did not drink.**

**Small holes, secret graves,
children scattered around the iron fence.
Not even a scratched stone.**

**The wind rises, clouds cover the moon,
a dog's bark and those owls,
alone and no end.**

**My children who won't hear.
The night of cries they will never make."**

And...

A snippet of a longer poem:

Help Me to Salt, Help Me to Sorrow

**"When I was nine, the starling pecked outside her window a whole week.
Somebody's gonna die, she said
and made me hug Uncle Robert's neck
as if I couldn't know he'd be gone in two hours,
as if I hadn't learned anything about people and their vanishing."**

I began reading these poems earlier this month, here and there, and thought it was a fitting way to wrap up my October reads.

Many thanks to my goodreads friend, Julie, whose review prompted me to hunt down a copy of this book!

Joanne Rixon says

Jordan's poetry is sere, haunting, and full of grief. My favorite poem in this collection is "Sandbar at Moore's Creek."

Kent says

I appreciate Jordan's pathos. The sadness from her mother's death, and the difficulty growing up in a house with a father as the only parent is immediate, and tragic. The images surrounding this event is very real. I

have difficulty, however, with the portrayal of the South as a place. It feels as though Jordan wants to create this mysterious land of the hoodoo, a world that exists beyond explanation. In the end, it tips too far into the clownish.

John says

Riveting
PTSD laden--

C says

I heard her read this weekend at the John R. Milton Conference. She was amazing.

I love poetry that evokes animal and hills imagery and she does so with such a ghostly voice that I found myself trying to lean as close as possible so as not to miss a word (which is difficult when you're 25 feet from someone). The collection reads almost as well on your own--so go find a copy today. Now! Do it!

(AND she's in animal rescue. What more could you want from a poet?)

Lorraine says

This collection of poems contains beautiful descriptions of nature juxtaposed with descriptions of poverty and violence (gun death, suicide, knifings, beatings). The speaker of the poems cannot move beyond her mother's death when she was a child; she'd like to be literally haunted by her mother as her grandmother claims to have been, but instead she's just metaphorically haunted. The ghost woods are a land of blight; the violence is cyclical and seemingly inescapable. There's no redemption, no rescue, and as Jordan writes in "October," "nothing that's ever enough."

There are some seriously beautiful lines in these poems, but I feel like Jordan focuses more on the sonic quality of the poems than the meaning. I like her narrative poems in this collection best, and I don't know if that's because my poetry reading skills have atrophied or what. I think there's a cryptic quality to much of the poems that just doesn't work for me overall.

Overall, I would recommend with the caveat that it's pretty graphically violent in places.

Chetley says

Themes: Separation, sacrifice, violence, death, family, fear, reunion, supernatural, transition, and longing.
Setting: mental and nature.

Form: mostly free verse, musicality is internal: assonance, alliteration, off-rhymes, etc. The poet does use some slanted end-rhymes. Stanzas are usually separated by governing images or themes. Sometimes they contrast of juxtapose against one another.

The book is divided into four sections: 1) "Carolina Allowance" 2) "Along an Unseen Edge" 3) "The Silence,

The Bone-Wearied Sound" 4) "Dream of the End"

From the title poem, the intertwining of both mental and natural settings work together intricately. Some answer other than ghosts-

in those woods of otherworldly drift,
that Carolina allowance
of the ease with which we shake from ourselves
and are lost on the path's dip,
lost where the water's slow rise becomes air,
where I become air
and tremble above myself.

The fear "tremble above myself" and separation "the ease with which we shake from ourselves" the speaker experiences in the mental setting is paralleled by the surrealism of the natural setting "woods of otherworldly drift" and "lost on the path's dip" and the radical transition the speaker feels turning from water into air - the sacrifice/allowance of self whose consequence is fear and separation. The mention of "ghosts" and the surrealism of the poem makes for the supernatural. Even the form pushes the surreal, supernatural overtures and themes. The broken lines drift into one another and are as stark yet complex intellectually as the entire book.

The passage and poem are representative of the book as a whole. Jordan is consistent with her themes, presentation, and style. Each section of the book climaxes, as in line three of the above passage, with the line of a poem which gives the section its name.

As aforementioned, the first section appears to deal with the consequences of "allowances" aka sacrifices. The speaker is an explorer of both the natural and mental in the second - from "Hitchhiking into West Virginia":

Hitchhiking for no reason
other than to be somewhere else,
I don't know if I should backtrack
along an unseen edge or continue,
pavement dripping and ascending, my brother
grabbing the empty pistol
and swinging his right fist to her face,
or should I hike further, to her death, one year later.

The speaker is traveling both mentally and physically. There is a contrast between the subdued tone of "Hitchhiking for no reason / other than to be somewhere else" and the violence between the mother and brother. Family, many times broken, continues through the book as does the death and longing in the above passage. So do juxtapositions, like those of actions and time between the 3rd to seventh lines, crash against one another.

The starkness of her images and the compression in her poems as the contrasts and juxtapositions between tone, action, and time creates an incredible tension and vividness that proves extremely effective. Consider the pain and death present in the third section's "Silences":

It's a line of men,
black men,
sunk eyed and swollen-faced,
digging in the heavy clay in bloated silence.

And as the two-lane becomes four
in the shackled summer hours of god's sleep
under the guard's gunmetal gaze
at the shank-end of the century,
it slinks past, into the haze-shot horizon.

The passage's tone and imagery of "shackled summer hour's of god's sleep / under the guard's gunmetal gaze" conveys a scene of indifference for the imprisoned and tortured black men and the fact that god is asleep makes one wonder if the black men have received justice or not in a world where god takes a nap while they toil "sunk eyed." The tension and pain of the black men can be felt from their "bloated silence." The next stanza creates juxtaposition between the men and a slaughterhouse, time, and setting.

From my father's store I could hear the screams
of the cows surging along the plank walkway
from the holding pen to the damp room
where Big John waited
for the massive scaffolding of forehead,
the curled eyelashes and those eyes
he'd rock a twelve-pound sledge between
Then a hooked hoof, pulley, and slash, tied intestines,
the saw's sundering
and the final hosing of the waste
through the rusted grate.

The speaker's matter of fact tone, and the bloated silence of the previous stanza, is in stark contrast to the screaming cows of the passage's first line. The minute detail of the cow's "curled eyelashes," "twelve-pound sledge," "saw's sundering," and the "final hosing of the waste / through the rusted great." gives the poem extreme emotion without a drip of sentimentality. The fact the next stanza features a black bull who is coolly shot down when trying to escape ties the poem together with the black prisoners. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker is searching for a defining moment an explanation amongst regrets, violence, slaughter, injustices, and everyday life. The poem concludes:

Or maybe that moment is in that line of men,
the sun spangling off the chain links,
their hands twisted to the smalls of their backs,
pushing themselves to a slumped sickle-curve
to stare toward the dirty windows of Jordan's Grocery.

Or as the highway crawls belly-down through dust
under a sun that hunkers even the weeds
and pins the spawn of ash in the west-
maybe it's in the silence, the song they didn't sing,
the bone-weary sound they made when they did not cry out.

The constricted imagery and silence of the characters is crushing. Also the snake-like image of the highway crawling belly down works with the alliteration of "s" throughout the lines to make the poem feel brought-low in a pseudo-biblical fashion. Last, the almost paradox of the explanation being the silence is also crushing, a mystery unsolved.

The last section is a lone poem. A surreal look at the ultimate unknown mystery of death. Consequently, the book ends on a death note.

Jordan's imagery, style, tone, and music all dance together to push her themes to an extreme effectiveness. Her poems are surreal but the meanings are reachable, but the imagination is also involved. She has successfully portrayed a non-pretentious look into gothic southern life.