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Barbara Henning

Wednesday, June 13, 2007

Bill Kushner's *In Sunsetland With You*

Last week I finished reading a new book by Bill Kushner, *In Sunsetland With You* (Strawgate Books/Phyllis Wat) and I was incredibly moved by this book, so fluid, so funny, so heartbreaking. After reading the book I fell asleep and dreamt I was in lala land with Bill.

All Those Old Weird Songs

Lincoln in the bathroom, what's he doing? I hear him humming singing weird songs, it's whenever he's sadlike all these old weird songs, songs I do swear that I ain't never heard of all these damn sad hymns. Lincoln's

Voice is what gets me to shivering. Lincoln's voice, as deep and as true as the winter wind, cutting deep into every part of me, shivering along. I open the door for a tiny peek in. Old faucet dripping. But where have you gone, Linc? Lincoln gone.

*

That Night

Skateboarding at midnight, me, Mister Rabbit, and the big guy, Mister Honest Abe. "Why they call you Honest, huh? I tell lies all the time. Hell, I even like to lie to myself all the time. Hell, I like to tell lies. Hell, Lincoln, the holy truth sucks. It's a fucked world and the damned truth sucks. Our almighty leaders have led us fucking amuck!" "My word," said Mister Rabbit, "such a naughty tongue for a little ten-year-old bunny."

"Rabbit's right!" the Lincoln chimes in. "The truth is what we the people don't want to hear, and so that's why I tell it. And the truth's you're growing wild as

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the wind, boy, what's the big problem?"

"That's me," I says, breezing along
down Main Street, USA, "the fucking
wind! For I am America, the beautiful!
Now you see me, whee! Now I'm gone.
Kaboom!" When I stop and look around,
I see I'm alone. "Alone!" No one
on the dark street, no, no one. "Fuck
you both. Fuck you all, then!" One
purple neon sign flickering something,
nothing, off, on, off, then gone, alone.

Bill told me the other day ago when we were eating lunch at Angelicas that he wrote this book right after he was ill a few years ago. And he told me he has always had an imaginary friend. Reading some essays today for a class I'm teaching on Saturday on the French New Novel, and Nathalie Sarraute writes about writers and imaginary partners "who emerge from out our past experiences, our daydreams, and the scenes of love or combat between us", populating the space where our novels emerge and movements "are set in motion." That's what Bill does in this poem-novel, remembering/living the life of Billy, old and/simultaneously growing up with his friend Abe Lincoln, with his gray eyes and his glistening body. And Abe's there to talk to about the war in Iraq, and the last war, and all those wars before, about those dying, Billy's father dying in the world war two, his mother dwindling away, about his loneliness as a young man, "seems like them fairies, they always/need saving," says Lincoln, and then just as suddenly as his father dies in the war, his mother dies, Lincoln takes off, leaving Billy running along the highway, alone. And then a new poem, "Born", and the voice is no longer that man/child's voice, but now the voice of an old man of the city.

Old as methuselah, I was born yesterday
In the baths, a man took me to the moon
& when I came back down to earth
Why I was the same old fool I always was

Coughing exhausted cars buses taxis go by me
Where am I going? looking for somewhere
something to believe in besides last night's trick

. . .

You take the wheel, old man says, old
Bag of wrinkles, what wars he's seen?
How many sailors seen off at their piers
Waving his hanky, tearing his tears? You
Take the wheel while I blow you, yea,

Bill writes lyrical, personal poetry that celebrates and mourns dailyness, laying out the secrets of ordinary nyc life, apples and buses and blowjobs and . . . "Oh Spring, you arrive on a song" One of the things I admire about

Bill Kushner is his practice. He writes poetry every day. In a coffee shop at night, he watches two young women kiss and he says "I stop to write this tiny souvenir of our life on earth". His poems are collections of these souvenirs of our life on earth. Utter honesty. Beautiful Song. He's sailing over the city like a modern day Whitman and he ends the book "by this dark church, St. Mark's/ They say you are haunted, St. Mark's /they say the ghosts of great poets wind down your stairways." Buy this book. Read it is terrific. Bill Kusher is one of the real live living singing and loving poets I've known in NYC. I love him and his poems.

posted by Barbara Henning @ 9:49 PM



2 COMMENTS:

 **At 10:43 AM,  Arlene said...**

enjoyed this review, barbara — and the insight it also gives of the author as a person.

have added a link at **straw gate books**. thanks!

a.

 **At 9:08 AM,  Thomas Devaney said...**

Barbara: what a loving and fitting tribute to Bill Kushner and his tender, raw, honest, and beautiful poems. I love Bill, and his poems. Thank you, thank you both!

-Thomas Devaney

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