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Canoodlers by **ANDREA BENNETT**
Nightwood Editions, 2014 \$18.95

Reviewed by **BRITTANY JOHNSON**

andrea bennett's *Canoodlers* is an incredible accomplishment of poignant, blunt poetry involving sexuality, gender, substance abuse, family relationships/dysfunction, and survival in the world of suburban Canadian life. She brilliantly plays with structure and expectation throughout the collection, offering playful and meaningful interpretations of poetic forms. Each poem is rife with emotion, ranging from the most somber and reflective to the witty or suggestive. Her candid and insightful prose offers truth and relatable experience in each line; the reader is seduced completely into the world she creates.

Sexuality and gender are themes in several poems. In the title poem, the speaker is telling a friend about a male/female couple "canoodling" at a table. In the final line, the speaker decides not to tell her friend "[she] ran [her] tongue along the edge of those two together, testing for tenderness in first girl, then boy" (9-10). Relationships and sexual desire are discussed in a fluid form throughout the collection. In "ΛΛΛ," the speaker and her friends humourously concede that "long hairs can date long hairs, yes. But who's going to carry the stuff?" (7-8). This particular line is amusing as it is a car full of queer women discussing the gender performance of lesbian relationships.

Sex or love is paired together with food in several poems. "Chopped" describes having sex with an ex-boyfriend, interwoven with descriptions of watching the Food Network program of the same name (46). The competitors "decide on seasoning,

sweetness, acidity" (8), while her naked ex-boyfriend stands "at the base of the stairs, an elephant trunk / nos[ing] for peanuts" (12-13). A romantic relationship is given substance in "Godwits" as the couple "scatter[s] [their] *love vous* like rice at a wedding" (1) while "watching a marathon special of the celebrity chef cooking show" (5-6) and eating pizza together. Both of these poems describe a moment of sexual or relational desire and action in relation to food. The excitement of the ex-boyfriend as a "secret ingredient" is contrasted with the "marathon" of the cooking show that accompanies a more serious relationship.

bennett describes painful struggles with relationships and dark times in several other poems. One tragic moment of pain is described in "IV," the final poem in the set of four poems entitled "Eighteen." In this poem, an emotionally charged scene of attempted suicide concludes the set, with the speaker using

a twenty-sixer
of my father's whiskey,
twelve and a half
little pills (19-22)

to escape from issues of sexuality and work-related difficulties. Many other poems discuss growing up with an alcoholic mother and familial dysfunction. The poem "Like A Vacation" describes an awkward and empty family dinner, with the speaker realizing that "Don Cherry has better conversation skills than my stepfather, and my mother doesn't love me anymore" (25). This moment of realization is at once heartbreaking and humorous.

Humour and sarcasm are employed in "Rhyming Couplet," bringing the reader in on a secret joke at the expense of the speaker's friend. The poem pokes fun at the

cliché poetic style when the speaker calls her friend a rhyming couplet. Her friend thanks her, and the speaker thinks, “I didn’t think it was the type of thing to be thankful for” (3-4). The poem is written in two stanzas of several lines each, with the final two lines of the second stanza being the only present—and hilarious—rhyming couplet that ends the poem.

bennett plays with poetic structure in several other poems as well. Many titles are actually the opening line or first few words of the poem. In “Dock Shoes” a solitary line stands out in a poem of (non-rhyming) couplets. The speaker says, “Later, I will be scolded for not saying hello” (11); it is a moment of pause and reflection in the midst of witnessing an implied sexual relationship between her mother and the new neighbour. bennett’s prose poems

highlight the cadences of human speech and thought rather than specific rhyme schemes or metre. By denying traditional poetic structure, bennett is able to draw readers into the emotions and experiences of her poetry in a much more affecting form.

Canoodlers is a fantastic collection of poetry that draws readers in with its blend of relatable, humorous, and difficult subject matter in beautifully articulated prose. It is a must-have that any lover of poetry will want to add to his or her collection.

BRITTANY JOHNSON is a graduate student in the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta. She holds a bachelor’s degree in English as well as a certificate in Writing Studies.