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Bee-Kissed Koans

Marry & Burn by RACHEL ROSE

Harbour, 2015 \$18.95

Reviewed by CAROLYN CREED

The sweeping scale of the opening prose poem in Rachel Rose's collection promises large-issue focus, but this first piece, "Anthropology," simply throws up the largest possible canvas to make initial broad strokes. Mainly, the poems in three sections, "Vows," "Legends," and "Addictions," zero in on intimate specifics that cause Rose's reader titillation and unease at once. In keeping with the title paraphrase, *Marry and Burn* exposes the advice from St. Paul, to tie the knot to avoid the scorching heat of passion; "Marry or burn," then upends the advice to say that no matter what marital state we find ourselves in, we shall burn. In the declaredly "cisgender" presence of her speaker ("Growing Pains" 2), Rose's volume entices us to join her in the rewards and punishments of multiply-erring human pursuits.

Somewhere among the twisty vows undertaken by the lovers with gender identities as mercurial as their lovemaking, Rose makes her persona's core of yearning available to us: the suffering insinuates itself into the reader's consciousness, as intensely as if such a reader herself were to experience, as in the Sapphic piece, "Flood," a surfeit of desire: "Once I passed beneath / your brazen linens' pomegranate stain, / on my way to the fountain" (25-27). Both the ages-old virginity test, of blood on bridal sheets, and the rich appearance of the pomegranate's juices impart sensuality to the image; the fountain reached thereafter uses a wet "Spring" as both source and

season, ending with "You were so stone / I flooded" (34-35).

In the poem, "Honey," an erotic dipping of body into thick sweet liquid stirs a reader's most aroused response, though the cleaning-off of all that honey brings the image back to sheer practicality. Equally pervasive to the theme of lovers' triumphant coupling and subsequent woe, as "Honey" suggests, is the motif of the bee. Though a broad picture is created by the current ailing of hives—"The only universal was bees. Bees and love. Honey and sting" ends "Anthropology"—Rose brings the question of bee health to her own back yard in later sections of the book, and the effect is to locate human guilt in the gut of the beekeeper herself. There cannot be a clearer message than rueful admission of bee murder: having failed to host a hive through all seasons, the speaker asks the farmer painfully, "Can we try again?" (38). The query hangs unanswered at the end of "Bees," summoning the plight of the dead bees as well as of their inadequate though well-meaning keeper.

The constant coupling of pleasure and pain takes Rose's poems in "Vows" through layers of breathtaking imagery—first through sheer loveliness, and next (before the breath is fully taken) through discomfort phasing to horror. The section's closing poem, "Tooth," demonstrates the joining together of these:

The need grew in me
the way yeast grows bread
the way a scream grows the chest
the way a baby grows the passage.
(20-23)

Ultimately, as the first and last lines of "Tooth" indicate, the need for love roughens the lover-to-be: "Blown I came in

roughened by love / and you met me with your mouth" (59-60).

In subsequent sections of the collection, a darker cast colours the pieces, as if building legends and succumbing to addictions were two sides to the same fraught tale. A sustained reference to mother and father figures in "Legends" gives the mythmaking a personal feel, and yet the generational elements come across as timeless. A daughterly query in "Sunflowers"—"Mother, where did you go?"(16)—leads organically to a motherly observation in "The Introduction" that, unlike the sons' pensive silence after a "play about evil" depicting the Nazis, the daughter bursts into a fierce declaration that she could somehow have outrun the perpetrators of the Holocaust, "exploding a rainstorm of tears" (25). What Rose calls "brutal vulnerability" ("Serious" 13) is evident in all the legend-making poems.

We might expect the "Addictions" section to carry the bleakest message, yet

touches of humour that lift harsh explorations of love in earlier poems reassert their presence here. "The Test," which poses multiple-choice questions to ascertain "whether you were your addiction / or your addiction simply tested you" (26-27), ends in the binary opposition, "Behind one door was the rest of your life, behind the other / your death and there was no third door" (29-30). The blinkered thinking of such testers strikes the reader as wryly funny in its reductionist approach to the complexities of addiction—funny because too often true.

The horses that grace the collection's cover in stained-glass hues appear in its closing poem: "Unbridle, unsaddle / the dappled horse in your barefooted fable" ("Feast" 9-10): fittingly mythic beasts.

CAROLYN CREED teaches university English courses in Northern Manitoba to support her poetry-writing habit.