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Justice is Served

Magazine: J Journal

Issue: Fall

Year(s): 2009

Reviewer(s): Abby Machson-Carter

Rating: 4

Categories: Conventional (i.e. not experimental)

Categories: Cultural focus

Categories: Theme issue

For the second volume of a literary journal, J Journal is off to a good start. Published by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, J calls itself “a journal of new creative writing that poses questions about justice, directly and tangentially.” Receiving it in the mail, I wasn’t sure what to expect – how much mileage could they get out of just one topic? Would it be filled exclusively with essays about the criminal justice system, or would fiction be a part? Could this really be called “literary”?

What I got was a mouthwatering literary surprise that had me reading from cover to cover. Chock-full of essays, stories, poetry and photography, this edition of J Journal is an exciting, smartly put-together collection of writing that revolves around the concept of justice. Defined from every conceivable angle, J translates that term easily from image to poetry and prose. In some ways, journals like J might give traditional poetry-and-prose magazines a run for their money. By taking on a weighty topic, they have found great stories and authors with strong points of view.

Traditional journals often ask for writing that is “surprising,” “fresh” or “unexpected” in their submission guidelines. In return, they get stories that try hard to surprise - a kind of “look at me!” quality that pushes originality over moral weight. Though well-written, they are forgettable because they fail to tell the reader anything new about the world.

Not so in J Journal. The editors have taken on a big challenge, and they deliver. Each entry seeks to deliver a new edge of nuance on what justice could mean to different people in different places and times. The journal draws its strength from the many points of view represented; victim, perpetrator, investigator, witness, lawmaker and innocent bystander each sound off in poetry and prose. In fact, part of the fun of reading J was a real element of surprise – as each story or poem opened I had to wonder, will the narrator of this piece be a victim or a victimizer, or both? Whose skin would I be asked to crawl into for the next piece?

J also won my heart for its openness to ambiguity: stories end quickly, without much resolution, we are not always sure who the bad guys were, or what any particular take-home message

might be. The connection to justice is not always spelled out for the reader – sometimes we are asked to figure out which characters, or parts of a story, represent fairness or unfairness, lawbreaking or law keeping, and it is refreshing to be challenged this way.

Although in her fall review Becky Tuch guessed that all of J's unlabeled prose was fiction, I'd suspect it would be more of a mix of fiction and first-person narrative. Many of the authors work in fields about which they write, and many have serious non-fiction credits to their names. It certainly makes for an interesting mix to not knowing if the writing represents reportage, memoir or fiction, but I'd vote for labeling them, if only to know which genre I was reading. On the other hand, it raises the question of how important "authenticity" is for any piece of writing we read, as I had to stop myself from flipping to the author bio after every poem and essay.

Fact of fiction, justice shows up in each story, often unexpectedly. Lyn Halper's sensitive "Besa, in Three" explores how the Albanian honor code pushes the boundaries of what kind of justice we find acceptable. Rick Kempa's 2nd person poem "What's Truly Yours" puts us in the shoes of the newly incarcerated, while Tetman Callis' piece, "regarding dreams and prisons" tells of a prisoner dreaming about cream cheese cupcakes – I've never felt so much sadness and longing over a dessert product before. The shifts in tone between pieces made it much easier to read the more challenging work, and I especially appreciated the shifts in tone that the editors created in their selection and placement. We could move from Meg Stone's excellent, but anger-inducing piece, "Women's Work," about domestic violence courtrooms, to stark street-photography entitled Estambul, to surreal and funny poetry in a few pages. In between pieces on hate crimes or murder, Joel Moskowitz's "The Upright" describes a man incarcerated for vacuuming up his fiancée's canary, or Dell Smith's tender "Younger Things" tells about a love story between a younger man and a coke-addled, cancer-ridden older woman. Each story and poem struck a different note emotionally, which helped create a little space for the darker aspects of the topic. I enjoyed the straight-forwardness of the writing – almost every poem seemed to be telling a story – but I also enjoyed the deviations: James O'Brien's surreal-tinged "Night's Work" about a traumatized cop, or Randy Koch's poem, "An NSA Wiretap Picks Up This Conversation about French Poetry, Which Results in the Arrest of Two," which I think speaks for itself.

In general, I think many of the essays ended before I was ready for them to be over, and I'm hoping that several authors are working on book-length versions. It is hard to strike a note of sincerity, honesty and humility with a loaded issue like "justice," but most authors pull it off, and describe complicated situations, full of moral ambiguity. I'd only level a critique at a few pieces, which seemed to be groping too hard for a kind of authenticity, or righteous indignation, that I would suggest the editors steer clear of.

Deborah Digges, Joan Maiers and David Salner's poems all seem to push the reader towards sympathy for uncomplicated victims, and Jeff P. Jones' "Another Cop Story" risks being just that, with a gruff, jaded, drinking-on-the-job cop protagonist.

But all in all, this is the first literary magazine that I was even tempted to read cover-to-cover in a long while, and since I haven't seen it on my bookstore shelves, I'm thinking about subscribing just so I can get my hands on the next issue, and find out what kind of stories they will include next.

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