

Reviews

NON-FICTION

Naomi Beth Wakan, *Book Ends: A Year Between the Covers*, Poplar Press, 2010

Betsy Warland, *Breathing the Page: Reading the Act of Writing*, Cormorant Books, 2010

Clem Martini and **Olivier Martini**, *Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness*, Freehand Books, 2010

Although very different in approach, all three of these non-fiction works investigate the ways we shape ourselves through narrative, and explore the means by which the very act of storytelling can save us.

Naomi Beth Wakan's *Book Ends* is chatty, personable and plain-spoken, and unfolds organically—a bit like a chat over tea with a favourite aunt. This hybrid survey/memoir proceeds month by month through a year of the author's peripatetic reading. Wakan, a poet and writing workshop leader who lives on B.C.'s Gabriola Island, is led only by her particular interests, which roam well beyond literary fiction in English. The honesty and unpretentiousness of Wakan's prose often lend *Book Ends* a casual, blog-like feel (not a bad thing). The author, who is in her 70s, seems to have little patience for literary snobbery, and is more interested in articulating her frank responses to what she reads, than in advancing a particular critical agenda or creating a writerly persona.

Books covered here range from the classics (*Dr. Faustus* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*) to the contemporary (novels, memoirs, biographies); from the practical (gardening guides) to the inspirational (*Love that Dog* and *Writing Life*). Wakan spends a good chunk of the year rereading *The Tale of Genji*, a classic of Japanese literature, in a translation new to her (that of Royall Taylor). The book acts as a kind of throughline, informing some of her other reading and her worldview. Dense with Buddhist ideas, particularly the notion that suffering is caused by attachment, *The Tale of Genji* also moves her to write a poem titled '15 Canadian Loose-Leaf Poets' when a favourite poetry book falls apart in her hands as she fetches it down from a shelf. Many of the author's musings are interspersed with her own poems, which she has been prompted to pen by the notions and characters she encounters in her reading.

Wakan's responses are also very much grounded in her day-to-day. She makes connections to her life history, but also to what is most immediate—the goings-on in her house, her garden, her island. In fact, she locates much of her reading material at the GIRO (Gabriola Island Recycling Depot). This groundedness, in combination with the chronological format of the text, often makes the book seem colloquial in the truest sense. The quaintness that permeates the narrative, however, can be misleading.

Indeed, Wakan's kindness, openness and generosity toward the authors she encounters through their words make her occasional moments of cheekiness or irreverence that much more incisive. Some of that edge comes through in a no-nonsense remark she makes after reading *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* by Julian Barnes, a meditation on the writer's fear of death. She has little patience for his neuroses, explaining that 'Tragedy keeps us fixated at the navel level of our own ridiculousness.' She eventually advises Mr. Barnes to 'acquire a mortgage' as she finds 'it concentrates the energies so nicely.' Then she muses on the fact that losing a breast to cancer may also have salutary effects as it 'does rather prepare you for what might very well be total annihilation.' And whatever inverse relationship the reader may establish between Wakan's home-spun approach and sharp intellect is obliterated by lines like the following which references Marcus de Santoy's *Music of the Primes: Searching to Solve the Greatest Mystery in Mathematics*: 'It's the end of June and for some reason I'm feeling sad, so a three-hundred-page book on prime numbers may be just the answer to my woes.'

One of the final series of books Wakan reads is Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, in which the author recommends that for 'those of us who feel deeply and who are at all conscious of the inextricable tangle of human thoughts there is only one response to be made—ironic tenderness and silence.' Good counsel, Wakan opines, for the coming new year. And yet, the strength of this book lies very much in the writer's willingness to share her thoughts and spark a conversation based on her expansive love for the written word.

Betsy Warland is an excavator of language who is not content to merely set the word on the page without interrogating it—gently, persistently—for meaning and resonance. This interest is evident in both the form and content (which she would argue are two sides of the same coin) of her new guide to the writing process. Her chapter headings range from the pragmatic 'Locating the Reader,' to the (literally) concrete, 'The Table' (subtitle: 'Table, desk—does it matter which one I write on?'), to the more esoteric 'Spatiotemporal Structural Strategies.' These chapters are interspersed with sections titled 'Quote-tid-

ian’—which contain quotes from Warland’s previous manuscripts or interviews—and ‘In-fluencies’—excerpts of her own poetry and prose.

In this unconventional manual, Warland circles back to and around her own and others’ words regarding the heart, art and craft of writing. Although a beginning writer may find some inspiration and impetus here, the book seems more suited to writers who are already entrenched (or perhaps mired) in the writing process. Those stumbling over such issues as Warland’s four Ps, ‘predicament, proximity, pacing, pattern,’ or the elements that help determine ‘each narrative’s focus and form,’ will find ample support and advice here. The chapter on proximity seems particularly succinct and wise, as it addresses the tricky notion of narrative distance—which is seldom discussed in how-tos as frequently as plot—as a means of both inviting a reader in and ‘shap[ing] and enabl[ing] perception.’ More useful to the poet (or those who straddle the line between poetry and prose in their writing) will likely be Warland’s chapter on ‘Scored Space’ which explains how a writer’s use of white space can signal readers, allowing them room to absorb an image or a section of narrative. Some of the chapters are written in aphoristic sound bites, as in ‘Nose to Nose: Poetry,’ which includes the following snippets: ‘Poetry is a riptide where language and silence negotiate one another’s equally powerful currents’ and ‘A poem is porous.’

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I’ll admit that, as a predominantly prose writer myself, I sometimes felt Warland’s more abstract musings winging over my head. What I appreciated more readily was her hard-headed guidance regarding writing space and surfaces, a writer’s unique relationship to time, the challenges of earning a living and finding a writing community, and the ways in which a computer can fool a writer into believing a book is finished. Also obvious throughout *Breathing the Page* is the author’s immense passion for the writing process and the rigorous care she brings to her students’ work (which is excerpted in several chapters). This consistent attention to both the mysterious and the more mundane aspects of the writing life are what make *Breathing the Page* a worthy addition to any writer’s reference shelf.

Bitter Medicine: A Graphic Memoir of Mental Illness by brothers Clem and Olivier Martini is unique in its format—perhaps less graphic memoir in the traditional multi-panelled sense than illustrated personal report. Or moving testimonial plus pictures? Heartbreakingly serious (seriously heartbreaking?) doodles meet scathing indictment? If it is difficult to accurately describe the particulars of this book’s MO, no matter, since its powerfully articulated message trumps any questions regarding the mechanics of the narrative.

The bulk of *Bitter Medicine* is concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of Olivier (Liv) Martini's schizophrenia and the way his illness ripples outward and inward, changing both himself and his family. The more straightforward account of Olivier's struggles is told (in words) by his brother, an award-winning playwright, screenwriter and novelist. These struggles are framed by what Clem refers to as the beginning of 'laissez-faire health care,' a direct result of the 'Great Closing' wherein governments opted to close psychiatric institutions in favour of integrating patients into local communities through various health-care and social-service agencies. The underfunding of these agencies has led to an ongoing crisis in Canada's mental health care, and an epidemic of neglect of mental illness sufferers. The way the brothers bear witness to a system in disarray points out, with more force than any study or statistics, how we as a society care for the mentally ill.

In his introduction Clem explains how he wanted not to discuss mental illness from a clinical perspective, but instead explore its effects on a family. In this he succeeds admirably, articulating the nearly untenable position in which family members of those suffering from mental illness often find themselves: 'But the fact is that while families are expected to offer assistance, they aren't invited to question the standards of treatment or to intervene.'

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It is perhaps testament to Clem's pedigree and training as a playwright that the tragedy that haunts their family (their older brother's struggles with schizophrenia and subsequent suicide) is handled with such directness and delicacy. To resist the inherent drama in the brothers' predicament seems to me an act of noble restraint. Consider, for example, a brief, poignant bit of dialogue that occurs after a shattering encounter with an insensitive employer, who fires Olivier after the first day, publically embarrassing him in the process:

Every once in a while Liv would break the silence to declare, 'Oh well' and fall silent again.

'Oh well what?' I'd ask.

'Just, oh well.'

This exchange perfectly encapsulates the heart-rending relentlessness of the fallout that accompanies mental illness without spelling out the brothers' desperation.

Olivier, in turn, tells his own story through a series of black and white comics that depict various significant emotional upsets and pit stops on his journey. The brothers' narratives run parallel to and inform each other without always corresponding exactly. While Clem offers a lucid analysis steeped in the gift of retrospection, Liv's

illustrations often depict a provisional, in-the-moment reality. While Clem's words are reasoned and measured, there is something brash and rushed about Olivier's comics that adds an immediacy and rawness to the text. Quick black lines that often betray the artist's shaking hands (a side effect of Liv's medication) create a kinetic and sometimes jangling effect in many of the frames that is offset by a page layout—minimal text and lots of white space—that recognizes a reader's need for breathing room. Olivier's drawings—especially those that detail his relationship to his father, his string of jobs and joblessness, and his depictions of the five circles of mental-health hell (the fifth being a lawless, homeless state of despair)—most viscerally illustrate the anguish and bleakness that a diagnosis of mental illness nearly always entails.

What is wonderful about this book is the way the two forms—literary and graphic—communicate in much the same way the brothers do, stumbling toward meaningful connections. When Olivier is first diagnosed, Clem begins a difficult and necessary ongoing conversation by sending his brother a letter with an SASE enclosed. His brother writes a reply, and they correspond in this way until they eventually graduate to nightly phone calls which become the basis for a resilient and rewarding friendship that is, nonetheless, full of both awkward and graceful pauses.

Bitter Medicine opens with the following self-deprecating disclaimer: 'The biggest thing to understand is that we were nothing remarkable.' And perhaps the Martini brothers were (and are) not, but the approach they have taken in telling their story—and the fact that they managed to tell it at all—is not only remarkable, but lovely, resonant and important.

—Heather Birrell