

Reviews

Fiction/Non-Fiction

Richard Wagamese, *One Story, One Song*, Douglas & McIntyre, 2011

Jane Rule, *Taking My Life*, Talonbooks, 2011

Richard Wagamese has published six previous books, both fiction and non-fiction. In *For Joshua* (2002) and *One Native Life* (2008), he accounts, among other triumphs, for his emergence as a writer out of a traumatic childhood of abuse and abandonment and his early adult years of alcoholism and drift. These works are memoir. His newest book, *One Story, One Song*, is also non-fiction, but beyond this is difficult to classify. At a compact 200 pages, it comprises fifty-five brief, titled prose passages organized into four sections, each associated with a direction and a guiding principle: east/humility, south/trust, west/introspection, and north/wisdom. It shares this structuring device with *For Joshua*; with *One Native Life*, it shares much more, including an abundance of gratitude and optimism.

When compared with his earlier non-fiction, *One Story, One Song* offers little narrative and less memoir. One might call it a book of musings or meditations. The entries are slight, most running about three pages. Although at times they refer to stories covered in the earlier works, the material here inclines to the recent past and the present. For instance, we read about Wagamese's investment in the latest Democratic primaries (he was conflicted, rooting at times for Clinton, at times for Obama), his do-it-yourself renovations (converting a make-shift garage into a creative artist's space), and his heady delight at riding the rollercoaster at Vancouver's PNE for the first time as a man in love and nearing fifty.

Structurally, the prose passages develop simply, as homilies do: a subject suggests itself—prompted by an email from a friend, a news item, some change in the wooded landscape Wagamese hikes daily with his beloved dog, Molly—and the writer in him lifts off into reflections that he spins out over several paragraphs. He draws from personal experience, pop culture, or the teachings of elders, before wrapping up each passage with a brief assertion that arrives as swiftly as a rhyming couplet completes a sonnet. Pithy and sure. The ordering of the directions and virtues—the east and humility as-

sociated with sunrise and youth, through to the north and the wisdom associated with great age—implies that some sort of maturing principle underlies these pieces, yet because of the book’s anecdotal nature, one can dip in and join the contemplations at any point.

Wagamese’s theme, the through-line that holds the meditations together, is the value of conversation, the human need to share stories. He encourages us to transcend race, class, linguistic or other identity distinctions; whenever we do, he contends, we invariably find more common ground to unite us than differences to divide. This is folksy, feel-good wisdom. His message is also about becoming ‘dog-wise,’ that is, about attaining the clarity of living in the joyful present, where ‘[t]here are no thick books to read, no products to buy, no deep meaning to search for. Instead, there’s the satisfaction of knowing that the world is full of interesting smells and sounds and sights, of wonder and infinite possibility, and that if you venture out into it, you’ll always find someone willing to take a walk with you.’ Wagamese celebrates having learned to embrace the value of the smallest gesture, and to appreciate all forms of community. He can coax a teaching from an acorn cup.

The strength of the book is the simplicity and appeal of such a message. However, if one is in the mood for more rigorous intellectual challenge, *One Story, One Song* may not satisfy: those keen to pick up the conversational threads of the earlier books may grow impatient with this work’s brief treatment of many topics at the expense of depth. Ironically, given his focus on sharing stories, I’m not sure Wagamese says much here that really deepens or advances his committed reader’s conversation with him. However, for anyone unfamiliar with this author’s sensitive, generous voice, this book offers a fine sampler of the clear prose and straight-talking, gentle wisdom one can depend on him to deliver, and would make a good introduction to readers new to the man Joseph Boyden has called ‘a national treasure.’

Another wise, humane and much cherished voice among Canadian writers is novelist and essayist Jane Rule, who retired from writing in 1991 and died in 2007, leaving many readers doubly bereft. The posthumous publication this year of her autobiography is a welcome but un hoped-for gift.

Apparently undated, *Taking My Life* exists in two forms—a handwritten manuscript, showing very few strike-throughs and changes; and a typescript, a slightly revised and expanded version, and the

text published here. Researcher and editor Linda M. Morra is to be thanked for lifting this text from the obscurity of the UBC archives.

This is a straightforward coming-of-age story: Rule accounts for ('takes' the measure of) the first twenty-one years of her life, from her birth in New Jersey in 1931, which she 'remembers remembering' as a 'painful brightness,' to the brink of adult independence, in 1952, when she settled with her lover into a flat in London, England, eager to begin work on her first novel.

Despite its structural simplicity, this book's narrative arises from complex motives. Rule remarks in the first paragraph that she is turning to autobiography 'because there is nothing else to do.' Her fiction is 'stalled'; she feels 'directionless.' She hopes to find the life-writing exercise affirming: 'I may be able to learn to value my life as something other than the hard and threateningly pointless journey it has often seemed.' Her psychological and creative challenge is to find a 'positive way' to re-engage her 'imagination,' which 'resolutely sleeps.' In Rule's hands, autobiography seems an alternative to despair.

Characteristically unsentimental, Rule recalls a childhood that spanned the Great Depression and World War II. Seemingly sheltered from the worst economic hardships, in part by its property wealth, Rule's immediate family still experienced a great deal of dislocation, moving across the USA at the mercy of her father's career. And she clearly felt many losses, not just of the friendships, schools and extended family left behind with each move, but also of the early, easy rapport between her and her brother, Arthur, Jr., as they grew into teens. She seems most wistful when describing family summers spent at South Fork, the wooded acreage in California: these were 'light-struck months' that seem to have anchored the nomadic Rules, a time when the children could run 'wild,' swim, disappear on berry-picking ventures for whole days, and spend time with their maternal grandparents.

Rule is equally unsentimental in assessing her own flaws, and unapologetic about recognizing her strengths. She describes herself as having been shy and gawky (hitting six feet before a teen), as stammering when nervous, and as being embarrassed by her low voice; she was afraid of heights and of the dark, battled insomnia and anxiety, and was prone to migraines and to fainting spells when overwrought. She had trouble learning unless she could see the point of the knowledge. Perhaps most surprising is her revelation that she repeatedly 'failed' IQ tests, scoring as a 'moron' despite her obvious intelligence. She rebelled against capricious or arbitrary exercises of power—running afoul of many school authorities along the way—

and yet submitted to the self-imposed discipline of serious study when inspired by a teacher in whose eyes she saw herself reflected back as a worthy pupil. One detects in Rule's candid self-portrait, as much as in her simple syntax, that hers would become the voice of a woman known for speaking her mind and suffering no fools.

Indeed, in *Taking My Life*, anyone familiar with Rule's later work will detect the childhood traces of themes that would come to preoccupy her writing life, most notably her obsession with truth-telling and her defence of personal freedoms, in both love and art. For example, she reflects on having internalized her society's general disapproval of homosexuality while accepting in herself the specific truth of her own lesbianism. And we see her as a girl quite literally finding her voice. Encouraged by a speech therapist to trust that '[o]ne day,' she would find she had 'grown up into' the deep voice that now brought her ridicule, the young stammering Jane found solace in this woman's support: 'into the huge vacuum of my inadequacy, there rushed a sudden hope that growing up could be an answer to my voice, to my body, even to my fear and anger.' A few years later, during an admission interview for college, when her poor IQ test scores were pointed at as evidence that she was "particularly weak in language and reading skills," Rule was assertive enough to reply, "I'm weak at the test's language and reading skills."

86

When describing this same interview, Rule first articulates the clear path she then saw before her: 'I wanted to learn to understand and then tell the truth. I wanted to be a writer.' As a writer, we know, she went on to a fiercely independent-minded publishing career. This last book, despite having been left undone, is a fine capstone to that career. It is, quite simply, another good read. Of course, one wonders what more Rule, with her legendary sharp eye and her contempt for the inauthentic, would have added, deepened, sharpened in the manuscript, had she been the one to usher it into print. Even as it stands, the book resoundingly defies anyone to see Jane Rule's life as having been a 'threateningly pointless journey.'

—Meg Stainsby