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Mark Doty

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Mark Doty's last two award-winning collections of poetry, as well as his acclaimed memoir *Heaven's Coast*, used the devastation of AIDS as a lens through which to consider questions of loss, love and identity. The poems in his new collection, *Sweet Machine*, see the world from a new, hard-won perspective: A coming back to life, after so much death, a way of seeing the body's "sweet machine" not simply as a time bomb, but also as a vibrant, sensual, living thing. These poems are themselves "sweet machines"--lyrical, exuberant and joyous--and they mark yet another milestone in the extraordinary career of one of our most distinguished and accomplished poets.

Sweet Machine Details

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From Reader Review *Sweet Machine* for online ebook

Julie Ehlers says

*Town so empty, off season,
you'd think that everybody'd died.*

Certain types of images pervade *Sweet Machine*: animals, art, city streets in their parade of chaos. Published in 1998 in the immediate wake of the worst of the AIDS epidemic, this collection takes grief and rebirth as its main topics, and sometimes when you think you're getting one you're really getting the other, as in "Murano," which seems to extol glassmaking and Venice but eventually turns dark:

*... Is this
what becomes of art,
the hard-won permanence*

*outside of time? A struck
match-head of a city,
ungodly lonely*

*in its patina of fumes
and ash? Gorgeous scrap heap
where no one lives,*

or hardly anyone

On the other hand, in more than one poem Doty is visited by the dead in his dreams, and although these verses are infused with sadness, they ultimately seem to bring him a kind of peace:

*Bless you. You came back, so I could see you
once more, plainly, so I could rest against you
without thinking this happiness lessened anything,
without thinking you were alive again.*

Images of animals always reflect and magnify the larger world: a humpback whale who casually shrugs off the dire fate Doty predicts for him and instead becomes an emblem of joy; a bowl of small turtles for sale on Broadway that serve as a reminder that even a brief life can have meaning. Even a shelter full of dogs with an uncertain fate are a symbol of renewal:

*No one's dog
is nothing but eagerness*

*tempered with caution,
though only a little.
We wanted to be born*

*once, don't we want
to be delivered again,*

even knowing the nothing

love may come to?

O Lucky and Buddy and Red,

we put our tongues to the world.

I read Doty's most recent collection, *Deep Lane*, last year and thought its title was a reference to T.S. Eliot's "East Coker." Similarly, I thought the title of this collection, *Sweet Machine*, was a reference to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I was all set to make an analogy regarding these influences, about how the Eliot connection in *Deep Lane* is evident both in those poems' more formal structure and in their more inscrutable emotions, whereas the Whitman element in *Sweet Machine* is revealed in the raw emotion, vividness, and stubborn joy at being alive that's present in these more accessible poems. But it turns out I was wrong on both counts: Doty wasn't referring to "East Coker" in *Deep Lane* but to a road near his house, and apparently *Leaves of Grass* doesn't mention the "sweet machine" at all; I don't know why I thought it did. But I believe my larger point still stands! *Sweet Machine* is a book about how even amidst grief and sadness, hope and joy and the fullness of life can still be found: "*Hey... Somebody's going to live through this. Suppose it's you?*"

Megan Baxter says

I feel utterly unqualified to review a book of poems. I read them too fast, I rarely stop and savour them. I mean to, but then I speed up, and catch myself, and have to go back. It's not that I don't like poetry - I do. It's just that I'm not good at reading it.

But I enjoyed this, although I didn't love it. There are a couple of poems that will stick with me for a while. Maybe that's all you can ask.

It was particularly poignant reading the collection, because I'd previously (years ago) read the poet's memoir of the time he spent taking care of his lover, while his lover died of AIDS. This collection was published two years after that memoir, and the same images haunt the pages.

What would I have made of the collection without that context? I'm not sure.

RUSA CODES says

This was one of the 1999 RUSA Notable Books winners. For the complete list, go to <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rus...>

Kent says

I will swear by *Atlantis* and *My Alexandria*. And I mean in that if offered a choice between these books, I would not want to besmirch the reputation of either by bearing false witness to it. Likewise, the love poems at the end of this book deserve every loving praise--I would join whole choirs to sing to them. I wish I had connected with the other sections.

Angie Spoto says

I loved so much of this book.

Brian says

I've never been a huge fan of contemporary poetry. It's a tricky media that can easily be abused, but Doty's writing is some of the most beautiful I have ever encountered. He tells stunning stories about his life, his partner, his partner's AIDS related death, his dog. It's so human and simple. He's one of the very few authors to ever make me cry with his writing. Every writer should be reading his work.

L.A. says

Doty's poetics remind me a bit of Rilke's early work: the idea of taking an object, a person, or an event and using it as the hub of the wheel from which all the ideas ribbon out and whirl around. It's very pretty to watch them swirl, it's true, but I somehow didn't have an emotional entry point into most of these poems. The exceptions were "Messiah (Christmas Portions)" and "Mercy on Broadway." I think the difference here, for me, is that the central event is one moment in time, frozen, instead of a physical person or object. The magic of a moment -- a choral concert, say, or stopping to look at a bowl of turtles while out for a walk -- is more interesting to me than the magic of an object, so I found myself going back to those two again and again for rereading. Doty is highly skilled, and writes lovely poetry, to be sure, but I love him best when he reaches up, and hits, incandescent.

Bekah says

(one of my favourites)

CONCERNING SOME RECENT CRITICISM OF HIS WORK

-Glaze and shimmer
luster and gleam;

can't he think of anything
but all that sheen?

-No such thing,
the queen said,
as too many sequins.

Kim says

It kind of pains me to only give this three stars, but it alternately bored the shit out of me and blew my mind. Doty's contemplations of the aesthetic, especially shiny things, slow time, and not in a good way (to be fair, he does take two poems to address a critic who has noted his propensity to describe the shiny in great detail). So I found myself almost entirely disinterested in the first two sections of this collection, despite the fact that Doty is a master craftsman. The book picked up steam, for me, in the final poem of the second section, "Metro North," which describes Doty's obsession with writing said train over and over again to catch momentary glimpses of a man who's built a living space in the most upper reaches of Manhattan. Regardless of what he's writing about, one can't help but be impressed by the perfection with which Doty constructs his poems, but the subject matter of some of these couldn't grab me at all. I'm interested to check out some of his other collections, particularly the one prior to this, *Atlantis* in which Doty chronicles the illness and death of his long-time partner. So I'd recommend this highly for the good in it, which is fantastic, but with the reservation that some of the poems just didn't do a damn thing for me.

secondwomn says

showcases what Doty brilliant mastery of modern lyricism - his ability to address those big, classical questions in the now. what is beauty? what is art? what is love? what is grief? what is the self? Doty tackles them all and more with compact, deft wit.

Steven says

In the final poem of *Sweet Machine*, Mark Doty describes grief as "a dim,/salt suspension in which [he's] moved" through in the years following his lover's death from AIDS (115). This collection is an exploration of what is meaningful after a prolonged period of suffocating grief. Many poems ("Favrile," "Lilies in New York," "Fog Suite," "Dickeyville Grotto") are permutations of *ars poetica*, in which Doty explores if the creation of art is truly a worthy representation of life, and therefore significant enough to spend our precious time on. The aforementioned and exemplary "Fog Suite" (21-25) is a beautiful extended metaphor poem in which the fog symbol continually morphs, representing the blank spaces between people, between life and death, between words and their intended meaning, and finally between reality and fantasy. All of these dichotomies are played with throughout this fine volume of work that continues to solidify why Mr. Doty is one of my favorite poets to read and learn from.

Kate says

I love Mark Doty. I love the way he describes things. I love his glimmery, dazzy way of describing things. How he takes the ordinary and makes it memorable and magical. If you ever get the chance to hear him read his poems, go hear him. He brings them to life.

Allison says

I just couldn't do most of the this book. I bought it years ago at a clearance place for cheap and kept putting off reading it. While there were 3 poems that spoke to me in this book, most of it was to "element"al and earthy for me.

David says

Doty's poems are like a kind of experience of luxury in its deepest sense -- the imagery lush, the spirituality expansive, the poems long and full. This book woke me up to the generous nature of the universe that surrounds us in all its details.

Rachel says

Wonderful and haunting a perfect October read.
