

2008

Review of Worthington's "Larger Bodies Than Mine"

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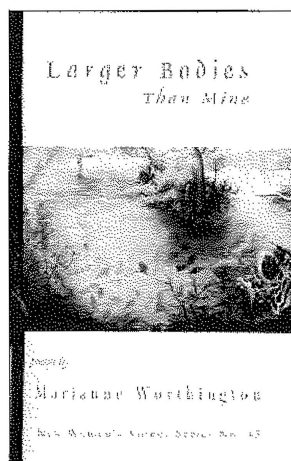
Recommended Citation

Jolliff, William, "Review of Worthington's "Larger Bodies Than Mine"" (2008). *Faculty Publications - Department of English*. 19.
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Larger Bodies Than Mine. By Marianne Worthington (Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press, 2006) \$12.00, paper. ISBN: 1599240688, 30 pp.

Given the number of full volumes published in any year, one may rightly ask why the Appalachian Writers Association would award any slim chapbook its Appalachian Book of the Year Award in poetry. Even a cursory reading of Marianne Worthington's *Larger Bodies Than Mine* should begin to answer that question. And a second reading confirms the choice.



The majority of these 26 poems play within the field of Worthington's memory, where the sometimes hollow pain of loss is in constant dialogue with a rich and abiding sense of presence. Though most center on the poet's family, particularly her grandparents and her father, Worthington portrays her subjects with a depth of sentiment—and unfailing sense of detail—that defies sentimentality.

"How Your Finger Speaks to Me" is a case in point. The poem focuses on her grandmother's "mangled index finger." It was "split through / the nail" in a childhood accident and "healed by growing apart / like a two-headed snake." Yet that slightly gruesome image brings back memories of the intimate and loving acts of everyday life, such as pulling a tooth, preparing food, and combing "a path through my scalp." "How your finger speaks to me," she exclaims to her grandmother's memory, then closes by "hoping that finger, / engraved and blunt, will show me what to do now" (5-6). There's nothing sentimental in such a description; instead, her vivid particularity suggests a longing for the quiet guidance that is the gift of a life well lived.

The strong heritage from her father is honored in a number of pieces as well. Though crippled by a severe stroke at 16, he becomes her abiding example of perseverance. "Fatigue" presents his struggle with vivid realism. She recalls his tired body at the end of a workday, "streaked / with machine grease and sweat / smelling like Winstons and gasoline." He scrubs "his nicked hands and blackened fingers" with Ajax, and "watches the gray clumps rinse away / with the grit from another day" (16). His weary washing serves as a powerful synecdoche for the determination it took this man to provide for his family—and maintain his self-respect—while doggedly playing the hand he'd been dealt.

Finding those resonant details that pull the past so powerfully into the present is Worthington's forte, and nowhere is that done with more precision than in "Porcelain," a selection that depicts the poet standing at the sink, washing her grandmother's dishes and recalling the daily labors of that woman's life, always performed with "no time for distraction." As the poem closes, we're given that single ironic instant in which the speaker, her mind drifting with the memory, drops one cup. It becomes "a golden-edged bird who lost her way home, / sparkles in sunlight then shatters like bone" (3).

Worthington doesn't only work from past to present, however. Some of the most powerful pieces bring her daughter, and thus the future, too, into the family continuum. The collection's masterpiece, "My daughter sits for the artist," is set at a town fair where, at the speaker's insistence, the girl reluctantly agrees to have a chalk portrait done, and we watch the generations unfold in chalk. When the artist traces her eyebrows, the poet writes, "my grandmother peeks out at me." As his fingers brush the hairline, "my sister's forehead appears"; and as he shapes the cheekbones, "My father laughs back." The closing is powerful, not only as it pulls this poem together, but as it summarizes the book's theme: "With short sweeps he smooths the chalk / and dusts away my relatives, / finally revealing one who is us all" (23). Such a consummation affirms the present, the past in the present, and the future in the present as well. It reaches beyond individuality with the suggestion of an immortality realized in family: our ancestors abide in us as we were in them, and such truth is revealed even in a quick sketch at the county fair.

In an interview for the Southern Appalachian Writers Cooperative, Worthington confessed that this slim book was 30 years in the making. Her readers, I suspect, will share my hope that the next volume will come a good bit quicker.

WILLIAM JOLLIFF

Bill Jolliff is professor of English at George Fox University in Oregon, where he teaches American literature and writing. His articles, poems, and reviews have appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *Midwest Quarterly*, and other journals. In 2005, Tracy Grammer's recording of his song, "Laughlin Boy," received extensive airplay on folk radio.