Review of Rash's "Eureka Mill"

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Ron Rash begins *Eureka Mill* with an invocation to summon the ghost of his grandfather, the spirit he needs to help him "weave with words a thread / of truth as I write down / your life and other lives, / close kin but strangers too." The consistent excellence of these poems suggests that the spirit came with fire.

The first section's poems supply an historical and economic background necessary for understanding the people in a mill town. Set in the farm country around Eureka, South Carolina, near the turn of the century, these poems portray the shift from subsistence farming to tobacco farming. The need for cash money, coupled with recalcitrant weather, drives many folks into a cycle of debt, making the lure of a job in the mills their last hope. The second, fourth, and fifth sections present life among the displaced farm families, and they do so with a variety of voices and angles. In "Spring Fever," a mill wife observes the men's longing for their farms each year at planting time, but points out, "It's easy to love a life / you only have to live the good parts of." In "Mill Village," a worker's homesickness has driven him to hang "a dime store picture, a country scene" and "stare / up at that picture like it was a window." But eventually the noise of the mill town has stopped bothering him: "the weave room jarred the hearing from my ears, / and I got used to living with a crowd." "Preparing the Body" is told by a predatory undertaker who, after laying out a man's corpse, connives to visit the wife a few weeks later, since "[t]hat's when she'd need the hugs, the sugared words," and because "[b]y then
she'd know that she would grow old young. / By then she'd know her man was the lucky one." "Breaking the Whistle" brings triumphant comedy into the mix, detailing four workers' Sunday night conspiracy that results in a couple extra hours sleep. Quite the opposite, "The Stretch-Out" is a despairing concession: the speaker, this time a young wife, suffers a spontaneous abortion due to overwork, and lets "the sheets slicken and stain" to spare her husband the grief of knowing—and to let him "save what strength / what hope a good night's rest might give."

Equally compelling, sections three and six lend continuity to the collection by focusing on the poet's grandfather, James Rash, and on the displacement he suffers. In "Bearings," he is new to Eureka, lonely and illiterate, and so befuddled that he must leave his boots on his roof so that he can find his way home at night—he has already been lost once in the disorienting forest of company houses. "Local Color" supplies a darkly comic glimpse of his marriage. Returning home drunk on a Saturday night, he manages to tangle himself between mattress and springs as his wife and her friends play cards in the next room. They listen to him yelling, convinced, as he explains later, that he was in "the very jaws of hell" being bitten by "ninety teeth." "He was a new man for a few days," we're told, "But by Saturday night he was at it again. / My grandmother believed in original sin." By section six, the historically placed voices yield to the poet's own, and the teller becomes the grandson, a character in the narrative. Poems such as "First Shift" and "September, 1957" give a more contemporary perspective on the life that was lived in Eureka.

In light of the historical record, this book's sympathy is appropriately with the workers, and the tales are rich with their irony and anger and fear. Yet this is not a doctrinaire economic tract sketched in moral black and white. The poet shows the evil and the good of human nature among owners and workers as well. In "Boundaries," one of the book's most compelling poems, a group of mill workers beat and humiliate one of their own because she "thought that her beauty brought her a way out / She thought she could live like she wasn't a linthead." In another, we hear the voice and perspective of the "Colonel," the mill's owner; it suggests that he was guided by some sense of honor, and that in a more just economic context, he might well have been a decent man. This complexity makes realistic the frustration of workers torn between loyalty to their owner, who has at least acted less unjustly than most others, and the promises of equality offered by union organizers.
As praiseworthy as Rash’s historical and human insight is his mastery of craft. His attention to sound is consistently keen, and his line, often an understated blank verse in varying stanza forms, works well to suggest the rhythm of speech and to progress the narratives formally. He also treats us to three poems which feature the Anglo-Saxon split line, a choice particularly effective in “Fighting Gamecocks” and “Boundaries,” in which the primitive echoes complement the violent events described. His use of rhyme and half-rhyme is subtle and effective as well, most notably in “The Sweeper,” a successful pastiche of Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” poems. A possible formal weakness of the book, at least on the first reading, is the very complex movement in point of view between individual poems, especially when coupled with the implied overarching narration. For example, when a young wife is recalling her courtship, she does so in a poem entitled “My Grandfather Comes Calling,” with the “my” referring not to the first person narrator of the poem but to the general narrative voice that stands behind the volume. Increasing the difficulty, given the implied narrative, is the fact that while the point of view is shifting through many historically grounded voices of mill workers, occasionally a voice with the distance and objectivity of the poet intrudes. While Rash writes successful poems in all these narrative contexts, the shifting is occasionally disjunctive.

But only occasionally. The particularity and variety gained compensate, and the result is a brief but compelling chronicle of life in a mill town in the first half of the twentieth century. Like the great photographers to whom he alludes, Rash gives us glimpses of such graphic force that the greater picture is suggested as a powerful social commentary. Today readers may feel far removed from the unchecked greed that built the mill towns, the long days of crippling work, the brown lung, the inevitable acting out of despair; they may feel more distant yet from the rural poverty that made such conditions, at least for some workers, an improvement over a life of rural labor and hopeless debt. But through Rash’s empathy and craft, we cross the time barrier and live in the mill town of Eureka, suffer alongside the workers there, and, finally, without discounting the austerity of their situation, begin to look beyond the particularity of their plight to the condition we share.

-William Jolliff

66