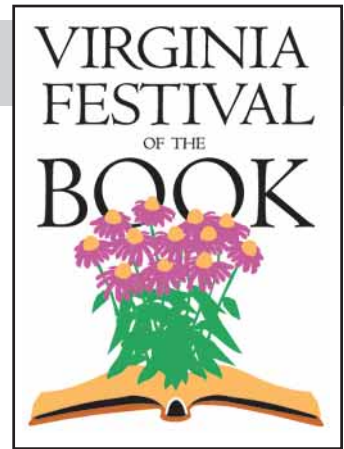


VABooks!

January 2003

Brutal Imagination by Cornelius Eady recommended by Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon, winner of the 2001 Cave Canem Poetry Prize for the collection *Black Swan*, recommends *Brutal Imagination* by Cornelius Eady. Van Clief-Stefanon will be among the authors appearing during the ninth annual festival, March 19-23. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss our common heritage.



It is no surprise to anyone who's read *Brutal Imagination* that it was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award. Its two cycles have also provided the basis for two award-winning theater pieces. Eady won the 2002 Oppenheimer Award for his play based on the "Brutal Imagination" cycle, and his libretto for the jazz-opera based on "The Running Man" poems was a 1999 Pulitzer finalist.

Four sections comprise the first cycle. In section one, Eady melds the mind of Susan Smith and the voice of her creation, the black man she said stole her children. Eady chooses a plain-spoken, conversational style that reminds me of the seemingly effortless purity of Lucille Clifton's writing and that illuminates the layers beneath the lie that engenders Smith's "Mr. Zero." This fusion reveals an aspect of America seldom directly addressed. In poems like "The Law," Eady offers a glimpse of this (sub)merged identity:

I'm a mother,
Which is why we sing
Have mercy, come home
No questions asked.

But I'm black, and we both know
The law.
Who's going to believe
That we had no choice
But to open that door?
...

I'm black, which means
I mustn't slow down.
I float in forces
I can't always control,

But I'm also a mother,
Which is why
I hope
I'm as good as my word.

The speaker is that word made flesh, spelling it matter-of-factly for all of us in poems like "Composite":

Susan has loosed me on the neighbors,
A cold representative,
The scariest face you could think of.

In section two, Aunt Jemima, Buckwheat, Stepin Fetchit, and others take up their voices, adding historical context. In "Uncle Tom in Heaven," the older icon compares himself to Susan's newcomer:

I watch another black man pour from a
White woman's head. I fear
He'll live the way I did, a brute,....

...
I watch another black man roam the land,
Dull in his invented hide.

"Uncle Ben Watches the Local News" and laments, "Like him, I live, but never agreed to it./ ...He and I were/ stamped from the same ink."

In section three, Mr. Zero begins to surface, itching beneath Susan's skin. Eady deftly brings him up as the sheriff interrogates Smith, like something slowly rising from the bottom of a lake. "What I'm Made Of" ends "But I am water, pebble,/ Silt and gravity,/ Evidence under her nail." The tension builds in the tight, angry final poem of this section, "Confession," driven by short, insistent lines. The fourth and final section is a single poem entitled "Birthing," in which he springs fully formed from between the lines of Susan's confession.

Eady continues this conversation on race, identity and morality in "The Running Man" cycle, which includes the voices of several characters. Eady employs the blues, highlighting a cycle of loss as in these lines from "The Train":

Train, train rolling
Down that track
Train, train, just a-rolling
Down that track
You can ride those rails forever,
It'll never bring him back.

A new vision of motherhood appears in this section. From "Armor (Mother)": "I'm going to make him strong/ Like a river that wears away/ A stone. ...The lessons I teach will be/ Armor for his/ Beauty." But, like the invention of the first cycle, the Running Man is also a type of word made flesh. From "Running Man":

I am whispered
I rise on anger's
Updrafts.

Where in the world
Will he land,
Worried my folks,
This pretty black
Hatchling?
What pushes him up

Will keep him down.

I am grateful to Cornelius Eady, for the stark phrase brutal imagination, and for his amazing poetry collection, this bridge from experience to art he's created, something lasting and brilliant.

Virginia Festival of the Book

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