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## Cold Fusion

**Paulette Burden**
Writers Club Press
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It's 1988 and Olympic fever heats up every household as television screens transmit the excitement from Calgary. At thirty-eight, Paulette Burden is single, financially secure, and living a relatively content life as a mother and successful workingwoman in Massachusetts. Captivated by the historic "Battle of the Brians" in men's figure skating, Burden faithfully follows the event. Known for her stern, no-nonsense view on life, Burden is surprised at the deep, spiritual connection she feels with American skater Brian Boitano's performance. In a rush of euphoria, she dedicates herself to telling the story of Boitano's Olympic success. Burden's intense focus on Boitano becomes a consuming obsession and quickly descends into a psychosis that threatens to unravel her life.

Though this is Burden's first literary work, her writing is polished, images are vivid, and her ideas are expressed with ease and fluidity. Written two years after her latest mental breakdown, Burden's prose bristles with an urgency that suits her subject matter well. The narrative is written in retrospect, but it jolts readers with memories of the struggle against intrusive and consuming thoughts. Describing a moment of mania, Burden writes, "I practiced walking into the inferno with the light over me. I was walking into the sun and it would not consume me. Deeper and deeper still." This sense of immediacy makes the reader a participant in Burden's rollercoaster of emotions and ultimately helps cultivate a better understanding of the battle waged in Burden's mind and the enigmatic ways in which mental illness can seep into unassuming lives.

Though the immediacy of Burden's prose is energetic and interesting, it highlights critical flaws that make Cold Fusion a difficult and often exasperating read. Burden rarely steps back to offer the kind of informed perspective that an appropriate level of distance and detachment from a traumatic life event would naturally produce. Her reiteration of events, emotions, and ideas comes off as self-absorbed and obsessive; the balance between relaying memory and offering retrospective wisdom is too often ignored. Readers will find themselves in the thick of a mental battle between Burden and an imaginary Boitano, but are rarely offered adequate insight or clarity outside the throes of Burden's mental illness. Though memoirs are characteristically self-absorbed, a good one will provide present-day context and a sense of how things fit now that a particular moment in the author's life has passed. When Burden does offer insight—a quick glimpse into her relationship with her father, or rumination on her perceptions of failure as a woman in the modern world—the reader is better able to relate to her fears and empathize with her situation. On the whole however, it seems Cold Fusion has been written as a therapeutic and cathartic exercise more suited to benefit the author than the general reading public.

Cold Fusion meticulously documents the author's disturbing mental breakdown and offers a rare glimpse into the workings of a manic-depressive mind. The ideas discussed are incredibly compelling but too often get lost in repetitious over-analysis. As a whole, the work must be further refined to appeal to the average reader.
SHOILEE KHAN (June 28, 2010)

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