

Cradled by Skeletons: A Life in Poems and Essays

Marta Miranda-Straub

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The heartfelt poetry and essays in Cradled by Skeletons impart an argument that all be welcomed, as all are worthy.

At once intimate, poignant, and raw, the entries of Cuban American poet, essayist, and activist Marta Miranda-Straub's *Cradled by Skeletons* reflect how she lives, loves, and creates at the intersections of queerness, feminism, and of being an American immigrant of color.

Miranda-Straub relates that her boundary crossing began early. Her poem "The Cradle" shares a message received from her twin sister who died in the womb: "Always remember that your big sister is watching out for you. / Breathe, beat, swim, stretch, grasp, swallow. Your time is now." Elsewhere, "The Feast" pays homage to her Cuban grandmother's abiding love.

Striking and multisensory, lines evoke the smells of orange peel and melted brown sugar; the flame of red tiles lining the stove; the cracked porcelain of the sink; and the sight of her grandmother's hands as she prepares the special treat to carry on the trip to America. "I carry *Abuelita's* warmth and sweetness close to my sprouting chest," she writes.

Spare and eloquent, the chosen words carry deeper messages about grief and hope. Other poems hold tragedy and rage: "When Ancestors Call" is about the legacy and brutality of slavery and rape, while "The Prince Was a Frog" captures the disillusionment and pain of an unhappy marriage and ends with the urge to rise up and claim a new life.

Profound essays concentrate on joy, sorrow, and astonishment. "Upon Being Brown in the South" is a moving expression of Miranda-Straub's love for the mountains of Kentucky, so strong that she identifies as "Cubalachian," although she looks, lives, and loves in different ways than most of her neighbors. Her shock and hurt is palpable when, though she is an American citizen, a white Appalachian neighbor questions her right to vote based on her appearance.

Elsewhere, the writing is warm and humorous. "A Day in the Life," about the adventures of two inexperienced women living in the mountain wilderness, includes the reflection that "we don't know how to properly handle poisonous snakes ... all those years of Catholic graduate education, and not one damn course in snake handling."

Presented in both English and Spanish, the book is an expression of vitality and of being open to all that life has to offer. It approaches American society with both appreciation and criticism, noting that, while it is rich in material things, it operates out of fear of scarcity and of difference, rendering Latino people, the latest and largest group of immigrants to the US, targets of racism. The text invites a larger, more curious, and more welcoming worldview.

The poetry and essays in *Cradled by Skeletons* embrace immigrants, broken people, and people otherwise disillusioned and dispossessed. Their heartfelt beauty and hunger for justice impart a sense that all be welcomed, as all are worthy.

KRISTINE MORRIS (December 13, 2019)

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