ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY COLLECTIONS

Grave Goods: Essays of a Peculiar Nature
John P. O'Grady
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"Those who return from these darkling territories bring with them messages. These messages are poetry. Let the interpretation begin." With these words O'Grady suggests that the "vision of the inaccessible" is a sacred and highly desirable pursuit. He possesses a voracious mind as is evidenced by his vastly varied topics and references. In the course of just a few paragraphs in the essay "Translating the World," O'Grady refers to the Oracle of Delphi, Odysseus, Plato, Socrates, Heraclitus, Plotinus, Seneca, Pascal, St. Paul, poets William Blake, Emily Dickinson, John Milton, Charles Olsen, and Rainer Maria Rilke. In this manner he proposes to readers the holy and oracular nature of poetry.

This large store of knowledge allows O'Grady, avidly interested in all manner of subjects, to make fluid and delightful connections. O'Grady's volume of essays pushes the edge of playful prose, while being both informed and informative. Etymologist, naturalist, historian, philosopher, writer and educator, this author deftly juggles unexpected ideas with word play and humor in an impressive way. Not once does he talk down to his audience, expecting to be met at least halfway in wit and curiosity. His comfort and ability with the world of words is obvious.

In the essay "Telling the Bees," he references the ancient and enigmatic substance called mad honey and the curious notion that colonies of bees should be immediately informed of their owner's passing on. The beekeeper, known for his strangely effective honey is searching for his offended hive, he had failed to inform them of his mother's demise. Apparently the bees were fond of this woman.

In "A Tree Out There," O'Grady presents readers with the provocative idea that every one has an arboreal doppelganger somewhere on earth. It is only a matter of finding it and being sentient enough to recognize it when confronted with its appearance even if that encounter may be in dreams. This is an active and interesting travel through a history of trees, both famous and personally known to the author, from the first and universal tree of the Garden of Eden to a champion elm murdered by a distressed college youth wielding a fire bomb.

The title essay, "Grave Goods," takes its name from the posthumously published

collection of Gus Kinney poems by the same name. The manuscript was discovered stashed in the decrepit tomb of a San Francisco poet during WWII by a teenaged Dennis Grattan. Grattan was in the Laurel Hill Cemetery just before it was due to be razed, he later claimed that those poems were what caused him to become a poet himself. This essay turns upon the questions of historical landscape, the nature of the poet, and a map of philosophy. It is a convoluted and engaging path, completely unexpected.

O'Grady is the author of widely published essays and a study of American wilderness writers entitled Pilgrims to the Wild. He is associate professor of English and teaches environmental writing and American Literature at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania.

Gabrielle Shaw