ForeWord Reviews

Journey: New and Selected Poems 1969-1999
Kathleen Norris
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This author dares to look for wisdom in an age of poetic narcissism. Norris's book is a journey—both through thirty years of writing (including material from previous books of poetry) and through regions of belonging, in the realms of geography, relationships, and spirituality. Appropriately, therefore, the poem "Excerpts from the Angel Handbook" intimates that wisdom is closely tied to direction and place, for the angels are not especially alert to dangers; rather, they are told "never go anyplace / you're not meant to be."

The journey into love with man and God is earmarked by epigraphs from the Song of Solomon, which introduce the chronological sections. Early poems, including "Excerpts," become a compass for the reader in tracing Norris's poetic territory.

In "Celebrations," the poet's simple observations could be trite were it not for the effectiveness of her narrator: a plant that seems more like a person. In "Evaporation Poems," Norris meditates on the substance and forms of water (the vapor state produces some uneasiness). These poems are echoed later, as she makes abundant use of images of plants in their growth cycles. Norris also probes the mementos of her heritage, everything from her g randmother's tins of rouge to the arm of a long-john that covers her rolling pin. She scratches and elevates the human craving for an "Antiques Roadshow," complete with memorable characters.

Although the collection traverses New York City, small towns of the Great Plains, Catholicism, Protestantism, despair, loss, grief, celebration, zany humor, and more, the threads that flow between the poems and hold them together are nicely fashioned. The variety mirrors the displaced lives in which Western civilization now thrives and sighs, yet Norris's overall expression is one of rootedness.

Her early poems have a mystical, surreal emphasis. Narratives with a strong epiphanal drive predominate. Meditative religious poetry is difficult to excel in, but Norris's infrequent attempts to tie poems to a wisdom or prayer tradition are mostly effective. Aside from Dickinson, whom she quotes, one might presume the influence of poets such as Szymborska, Levertov, and Forché.

The collection is both noteworthy and accessible, which is particularly good news, since

Norris's success as a writer of best-selling spiritual memoirs will, no doubt, provide a much wider audience for this new collection of poems than the typical huddles of literati.

Deborah J. Shore