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Masks

Ruthann Robson
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In her first collection, Robson offers dozens of singular, beautifully crafted poems that join hands to form a strong, well-forged ring. A professor at the City University of New York School of Law, Robson has published numerous articles of legal scholarship as well as four books of fiction and five books of non-fiction. Her poetry has been published in many literary journals. Strongly focused on the female and lesbian experience, Robson examines the masks women have created for themselves, lending some light to the faces behind the masks as well as the forces that inspired them.

Throughout Masks, Robson's voice is both strong and flexible, working in short-lined verse as well as longer-lined verse and prose poetry—the language at times round, fertile and forgiving and at other times coolly introverted. Although often constructing firm political criticism, as in her poem "the last decade of patriarchy," Robson's poems never suffer poor craftsmanship at the hands of an overbearing political message. In the above-mentioned poem she writes: " even with low heels and dressed in a dark blue success suit/she stumbles/again and again/on that same crumbled curb outside the mirrored building;" making politics into lifelike, living and breathing entities rather than stiff cardboard ideologies.

Robson's poetry is sometimes sensual and passionate, sometimes stark and critical. None of the few references to men are positive, but she does not revel in name-calling or finger pointing, but rather offers a host of sanctuaries. In her poem "aesthetics," she writes:

Leaves in the shape of stars of hands of
hearts
Leaves in the shape of leaves knives that
tremble
Tonight is a deep breath of green an inter
mission
From the terrible arts of manipulation the
garden

Moreover, Robson's clear voice sounds an inspiring call for change, "there are other things we still need to say/about the streets, about the academy about/the distances between our love/ of death and our love/of masks and our love/for each others and our love." Recommended to mature readers who have an interest in women's studies, Masks is a richly rewarding collection of poetry.

JENNIFER SPERRY (February 13, 1999)

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