

Quench Your Thirst with Salt

Nicole Walker

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Quench Your Thirst With Salt, a collection of essays and memoir by Nicole Walker, invites the reader to sit down for an open-ended chat with the author over a glass of chardonnay. The director of the MFA program at Northern Arizona University is a superb writer, wielding clear, direct prose to paint vivid pictures of the Great Salt Valley of Utah and her years growing up there.

This book, Walker's second, can be read from start to finish or joined in progress at any point. While each piece is an essential part of the whole, they are all understandable and complete in themselves. Walker has an uncanny ability to find meaning and connection in the random and sometimes minuscule facts of life. Thus, a landslide of historic proportions gives rise to a thoughtful riff on the physical changes this event brought to the areas most affected, as well as a metaphoric discussion of changes brought to the author's body by a hernia and the healing surgery. Some changes are permanent while others are temporary and leave only small scars.

Walker's genius rests in her considerable ability to make the physical environment a tangible aspect of the life of the folks who inhabit it. Her observation on the differences between lakes in Utah from those in Minnesota may not be cosmic, but it is thought provoking. It is worthwhile to be given an opportunity to read a book slowly, to savor its writing and the author's thought processes. It is like resting on a quiet park bench in the midst of a noisy urban canyon.

The other rare and enjoyable feature of this collection is its originality of thought. Walker has a playful way of looking at the physical world that is delightfully entertaining and provocative. "Which would you rather be? A grain of sand made by erosion? ... Or would you rather be built up from layers of brine shrimp poop?" She is not firing merely for effect. Walker has a point to make from this consideration of the seemingly absurd. She concludes, "To grow from something gross suggests a rare ability to overcome your circumstances."

Finally, Walker is to be commended for showing restraint in including pieces of memoir among the other essays. Too often, writers expose too much of their earlier lives to their readers for no apparent reason. Not so with Walker. Her reflections on her relationship with her father, with her younger twin sisters, and on her time as an adolescent are more impressionistic than photographic.

This book will find a place on the bedside table of anyone seeking a writer who speaks softly, elegantly, and deeply about life and things that matter.

JOHN SINGER (July 24, 2013)

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