

Ruth's Skirts

Kathy Engel

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The preface to *Ruth's Skirts* reads like a polite manifesto, a call-to-arms where the weapons are poems: "I've learned that the poem is the action and the action is the poem." The creation of art is a political statement in and of itself, but Kathy Engel goes further. She rolls up her sleeves and gets down to work.

Spanning twenty-five years, the writings in *Ruth's Skirts* tackle a wide range of social and political hot topics, from women's rights and AIDS to the death penalty and the war in Iraq. In "An Arm for Haiti," the poet mourns for a woman left to die, her arm severed from her body. In "Home," she grieves for the people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: "let's get it out in the open / each name of pain / unaccounted for." Engel does not avert her eyes from anything, creating a collection that is at once brazen and in praise of the brazen. The first section in particular, "A Woman Inventing Heat," is generous in its praise. There are poems for Muriel Rukeyser, Susan Sarandon, many of Engel's female friends, and one simply "For the Strong Woman!" The earnestness in Engel's work is disarming.

But many activists are earnest; Engel distinguishes herself by an added note of jubilation. In her piece titled "No Apathy Here / Happy Mother's Day," she recalls with pride her daughter's participation in a pro-choice demonstration. She ends with the cheeky possibility, "Maybe that's what we have going for us: weapons of mass optimism." Despite confessions of sobbing after the 2004 elections and other moments of feeling overwhelmed, optimism wins out most of the time. There is even dancing in the title poem "Ruth's Skirts" when the poet wears a skirt that reminds a Zambian woman of her mother, Ruth, which in turn reminds the poet of the biblical Ruth. The gesture is one of connection, that all women, regardless of geography or time, are connected.

Perhaps it is Engel's optimism that has led her through a successful career as, so she calls herself, "a poet; a communications/strategic planning consultant; a producer for social justice, peace and human rights organizations." She is also, literally and figuratively, a teacher. Unsurprisingly from such an industrious woman, both the genres as well as the topics vary in *Ruth's Skirts*. However, Engel's message remains the same, quite a feat for a book covering twenty-five years of material. As she maintains in her preface, "We need to conjure up all of our selves and unconscious powers we're not even tuned into, so we can believe the change we know is necessary." Each writing that follows answers that call to promote change in the world.

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