ForeWord Reviews

WOMEN'S STUDIES

Sleeping with One Eye Open: Women Writers and the Art of Survival

Judith Ortiz Cofer, editor
Marilyn Kallet, editor
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“Thank you ironing for always being there, for holding me with board and cord to what’s sane. Sane.” Alice Friman, in an essay which symbolically pits fear of the unconventional against passion, may well have substituted a wayward “f” in place of sane’s “n,” and kept the same incisive sentiment intact. “Safe,” the other four lettered “s” word which insolates the combustion of creative thought, becomes both profanity to and assassin of, the woman who writes.

Sleeping With One Eye Open, a collection of essays edited by Kallet and Ortiz Cofer, professors of English at the Universities of Tennessee and Georgia respectively, presents a wellspring of inspiration and encouragement for women who wrestle with satisfying their gift of word. This relevant work bridges the minds of female poets, essayists, novelists, authors of nonfiction and journalists who have all tasted the bitterness of self-doubt, and have overcome staggering odds which once threatened their self-expression as artists.

Reinforced by the symmetry of four branches of thought, conveyed as sections, the book is copiously laced with essays, which reach as vines upon their structured lattice. The first section considers how cultural myth, ritual and poetry provide inspiration for women writers. This section introduces, for example, the myth of Maria Sabida, the woman who “slept with one eye open.” Literally, this is a tale of a woman who out-smarts her murderous husband, managing to live happily, albeit cautiously, ever after. This metaphorical heroine vigilantly protects her art, while remaining warily married to both fear and the negativity of obstacles in order to master them. Sections that follow address “Writing in No-Time,” the common plight which plagues the multi-faceted life of the contemporary woman. Finally the book turns full circle, as it explores family as a source for personal and artistic inspiration, evoking shadows reminiscent of the opening essays.

Perhaps the book will find its strongest audience in those women who feel oppressed with the overwhelming demands of their daily lives, or feel as if the luxury of dancing with words is a futile turn. Comforting in its confessional style, each essay opens warmly with a

woman intimately sharing her own tale—a tale of physical pain, of chronic depression, of the time bereft mother, of racial prejudice, of the joys discovered within family. With lilting whimsy and solemnity, Sleeping With One Eye Open amplifies voices whose honesty will haunt and shame the procrastinating writer—even from the safe depths of a desk drawer.

Karen Wyckoff