ForeWord Reviews

POETRY

The Red Canoe
Joan Cusack Handler
CavanKerry Press
978-1-933880-08-2
(September 2008)

This book is said to read like a novel, and so it does. *The Red Canoe* is a narrative of Handlers marriage, and we learn to love and follow her characters through the pages of their journey towards understanding. This is definitely poetry, however. Handler uses line break and all of the space on the page to map a voice that is courageous and original. She layers the history of her own and her husbands childhoods with the joys and difficulties of their marriage and its intersection with her physical injury and healing. This is an absorbing read. Handler is unflinching in her description of the complicated emotional terrain of this marriage, including the dynamics of its bed: "This time, let *him* be the one to / let moving over…be his statement of need."

Handler is not afraid to describe her feelings of fear, rage, and isolation in detail, but the arc of the story is strong enough to carry the material. Her spatial arrangement of the text is varied and unusual, and the sense of authenticity it lends to the text deepens as the reader works through the book. The red canoe of the title appears as a metaphor for the marriage: a vessel which has carried them to this point, but which has been overused and perhaps neglected:

Brave and tender, this book illuminates the dark corners of marriage. We emerge, with Handler, into an intimacy which is more precious for being hard-won.

Teresa Scollon