The Riots

Danielle Cadena Deulen
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There is general agreement that adverse childhood experiences leave permanent scars, but with a person as gifted as Danielle Cadena Deulen, the result is transformative for writer and reader alike. In *The Riots,* her collection of personal essays, Deulen poignantly and poetically relates the effects such experiences had on her, her family, and those around her. It is a sad, but beautiful, and, ultimately uplifting compilation.

Deulen received the Association of Writers and Writing Programs Award for Creative Nonfiction for this book. An earlier volume of her poetry, *Lovely Asunder,* was the recipient of the Miller Williams Arkansas Poetry Prize. It is obvious that Deulen is a writer of considerable talent: “But the story ripens like inedible fruit—as poisoned, bitter, and bruised as your face, your wrists, in the morning dusk of that first consummation.”

From the title essay, the author uses only a few words to convey the intensity of the alienation she and her junior high school classmates experienced: “The adults were afraid of us and we felt it, and it made us afraid of ourselves—we were callous, lawless, criminals in waiting.” These kids would never be part of regular society and they knew it. Deulen, however, being part white, was different. She would escape this isolation and she also knew that. But, she paid a price: “…I felt half-crazed with guilt—wanted to apologize to every dark face that passed mine.”

In her most gripping essay, “Aperture,” Deulen describes in painful and tender detail the violence visited upon her older autistic brother by their alcohol- and drug-driven father. The essay is a reflection on her reactions to these events over time and her inability to stop the beatings: “Cowardice is an adjustable opening in one’s psyche that limits. (The amount of light that can enter.)”

This collection is not like the familiar morality play, concluding with a tidy lesson. Instead, Deulen leaves the reader wanting more, some explanation that wraps up her early experiences. “I wish I could give you more, but my life is already moving on, has moved on, and I simply drag this story with me,” she confesses. If that is the tag line for this entire anthology then Deulen is due our gratitude for so generously and eloquently sharing her life.

JOHN MICHAEL SENGER (May / June 2011)

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