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CLARION REVIEW ★★☆☆☆ POETRY

Twenty One Days Later: The Journey

Tony Baccarini
AuthorHouse UK (Sep 26, 2012)
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Twenty-One Days Later chronicles Tony Baccarini's three-week stay at Kenilworth Clinic, a psychiatric institution in Cape Town, South Africa. Most of the poems revolve around staff, fellow patients, the author's treatment for bipolar disorder, and his gradual healing from past events, including the death of his son. Tangentially related poems, such as those penned for friends, loved ones, or specific occasions are interspersed throughout, creating a portrait of a man concerned with therapeutic themes of acknowledgment, acceptance, recovery, and relationships.

While poetry by writers who suffered through mental illness has a long history—from Christopher Smart's *Jubilate Agno* to Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*—Baccarini's work remains autobiographical rather than serving as material for wider-ranging art. Framed by a poorly edited introductory note and an afterword that explain the author's circumstances as well as the origins of several poems, these sincere jottings offer direct reportage of emotions through representative lines such as, "Son, it's now been long enough / Had seven years to deal with my stuff / It's time to open the prized written words / Without the need of avoiding the pain that disturbs."

Serious topics, from mania to divorce and loss, are undercut by the book's design. Each poem is accompanied by cartoonish, stock clip art that emphasizes the most literal aspect: an elegy is illustrated with a tombstone bearing the epitaph R.I.P., "What is a Shrink?" features a man reclining on an analyst's couch, and "Bipolar" is represented by comedy/tragedy theater masks. Misspellings, a penchant for the same brief, direct, rhyming style, and a tendency to end poems with summarizing lines result in work that is more concerned with expression than craft. Still, underlying themes of optimism and faith in the goodness of others have their merits. As Baccarini aptly reminds readers, those who battle a "problem of mind" can retain kindness and worth, and they deserve understanding.

The author, who candidly reveals that he experienced numerous hardships and did not complete a formal education, demonstrates enthusiasm for his newfound medium. As a record composed during the course of treatment, Baccarini's poems are adequate touchstones for personal progress, from the relief of diagnosis to learning the clinical terms and tools for managing behavior. As a published work, however, the poems appeal for a general audience may be limited.

KAREN RIGBY (January 18, 2013)

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