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General

We Are Billion-Year-Old Carbon: A Tribal-Love-Rock-Novel Set in the Sixties on an Outpost Planet Called Memphis

Corey Mesler
Livingston Press
978-1-931982-61-0
(December 31, 2005)

Even in the postmodern era, it's a stretch to call this a novel, but that's not to say it doesn't have its pleasures. More a collage of stories, poems, "music reviews," and sort-of-journalism than a narrative, it falls somewhere between desk-drawer and portmanteau; many, if not most, of its elements have appeared elsewhere and are linked by a few recurring preoccupations and characters (some real, some made up) rather than a plot.

The author previously wrote *Talk*, a novel-in-dialogue, and is an award-winning poet with several collections to his credit. This book is best approached as poetry: playful, allusive (and often elusive too), with a distinctly hippie sensibility, which veterans of the Age of Aquarius will recognize instantly, and which will give other readers a vivid sense of those bygone, patchouli-fragrant days. Indeed, this book is perhaps most accurately described as a literary version of that Sixties-specific phenomenon known as a "Happening": there's a lot going on, it's often colorful and entertaining, but when all is said and done it's not entirely clear whether it adds up to much, although a good time was had by all.

As befits a poet, Mesler loves words: in the first two paragraphs alone, the unwary reader encounters "matutinal," "fecula," "archimage," and "nautch," and may understandably wax anxious about what's to come. But not to worry, the author's combination of headlong momentum and sheer delight in language skates lightly over these (and many more) showstoppers—we may not understand exactly what he's saying, but we get the general idea, and it sure *sounded* good (which is, upon reflection, not such a bad objective correlative for the Sixties *zeitgeist*). Alert readers will also realize that several characters are anagrammatically named; those partial to such whimsies will be in clover, but even the more sober-minded won't find them insufferably coy.

At its best—in the stories of characters like Johnny Niagara or Camel Jeremy Eos and

his paramour Allen (a woman)—the writing attains the fluid rush of a conversational tale told by a first-rate, slightly stoned raconteur. In fact, much of the so-called prose seems more genuinely poetic than the actual poems scattered throughout, which are mostly brief and occasional, though some achieve lovely Imagist effects.

Fictional—or at least fictionalized—personalities share space with such touchstone figures of the era as Richard Brautigan and Allen Ginsberg, as well as a few whose reality is ambiguous. That this makes almost no difference is emblematic of the book's strengths and weaknesses both—in capturing the ethereal, magical atmosphere of the Sixties, it also draws attention to a kind of insubstantiality and evanescence which sometimes leaves the reader feeling that maybe there's no there there. That said, however, the trip is fun while it lasts.

Peyton Moss