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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ BIOGRAPHY

When You Fall Down - Get Up!

Ella M. Coney
Softcover $15.95 (311pp)
978-1-4259-8777-0

In the 1970s Ella Coney lived the sort of life which conservative pundits cite anecdotally to encourage further reductions in government social programs for the poor. The one-time wife of a Denver policeman is arrested for shoplifting in the presence of her toddlers. More bad ideas roll around the bend. In the winter of ’78 a year of record blizzards she “runs wild” with over twenty men. The crisis comes when state social services investigators gain proof of steady unreported work since the benefits began. Convicted of welfare fraud the choice is jail or the military. Hello US Air Force.

Military training and college classes give the memoirist practical skills. She irritates some supervisors but gets on well with others remaining in the service six years. Enforced separations from children and later from a second husband stationed thousands of miles away foments family conflict. The kids are often elsewhere. For periods of up to a year they live with: her father the ex-husband and his new wife the altruistic sister Helen even a neighbor. One son left home alone at age five wanders away and is picked up by police. A social worker plans removal but is convinced otherwise by extreme friendliness on the memoirist’s part. Three of three children do grow to adulthood; youngest son Markus Gibson now assists the memoirist with an expanding property management business.

Strain from the pull of opposing priorities leads to persistent physical maladies and brings out an underlying mental imbalance. Early in her current career of real estate Coney describes life before pharmaceuticals. “During a ‘high’ I was the best property manager anyone had ever seen. During a ‘low’ I might chase a tenant through the house with a butcher knife…” By 1983 she responds to racist workplace adversity with some of the most visceral revenge fantasies anyone ever dared commit to print. Then remarkably she sets the horrifying plan into motion enlisting the help of two very rough men. Determining culpability in the presence of moderate mental illness is difficult.

On the level of personal history this book holds the attention easily. It works best as entertainment. The stage of rotating lovers will seem juicy to some. Content decisions could have been more judicious. A brag-list of money amounts gifted to relatives is unnecessary and honestly any hemorrhoid talk at all feels like much too much. The angling for men’s wallets is blatant. Precious little redemption here from someone whose actions were markedly selfish or dishonest in youth. Coney lucks into thousands of dollars on three occasions but learns most distinctly that having money is more fun than not having it. The barometer of success is the property ledger the bank passbook. Moral reformation is implied but not demonstrated. You can hear the think-tank policy architects and the legislators cracking their knuckles just before they yank away the remaining safety net.
TODD MERCER (April 9, 2007)

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