
July 28, 2009

BOOKS

Constant Reader

First Runner-Up

by PAUL CONSTANT

Brendan Kiley has already written about it in *The Stranger's* book section, but it deserves to be repeated: Rebecca Brown's new book, *American Romances*, is an **incredible collection of essays**. And like most really good books, as soon as you finish reading it, you want to read more books that are just like it. But that's impossible—books are all bad in the same sort of way; good books are good (in part) precisely because they are unique.

If *American Romances* didn't exist, the best collection of the season would clearly be *The Importance of Being Iceland* from MIT's literary press Semiotext(e). Eileen Myles is best known for her semi-autobiographical novel *Cool for You*, and for good reason: It's a fantastic book, at once a raw memoir and a weird experiment in conversational language. Myles is a brilliant stylist; she writes in a way that **we wish we could talk**. Which is why it's so exciting to finally have a great big slab of essays, to observe her language when she's not constrained by the rules of poetry or fiction. We get to hear what she says when she's being herself.

Myles writes about anything that appeals to her at the moment: Iceland, visual art, automotive repair, and lesbianism. She's bold in her truth-telling. In a piece about Allen Ginsberg, Myles makes no apologies for his tendencies to **eroticize very young men**:

Our whole culture is pedophilic in the way it celebrates youth, we can barely look at youth without eroticizing it, and then NAMBLA takes one step forward and says I want to eat you, and for this even gay culture wants to throw them out.

There's something about Myles's delivery that seems straight-faced but has a slightly daffy tone. Sentences come from out of nowhere to **slap the reader** in the side of the head, like this question from an interview with Daniel Day-Lewis:

I have several myths about actors that I wanted to unload. One thinks of actors as the abstemious or the excessive type. Like, Richard Gere only drinks tea, and Richard Burton has a heart attack and dies. What's your relation to excess?

The tenuous relationship between heart attacks and excesses makes sense once you think about it, but there's a comical moment, somewhere around the Richard Gere part of the sentence, where you have to wonder if Myles has **come completely unrooted** in the conversation with Day-Lewis and is floating around in the atmosphere. These strange moments are everywhere in her essays, and they make reading Myles a distinct pleasure; in this book, more than any other, she invites us to join her up in the clouds for a day or two. ★

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I'm disappointed in Paul Constant's review of Myles' "Importance...Iceland." Why is she 1 a "brilliant stylist"? That's just asserted. If she writes about "anything that appeals to her at the moment," why isn't that sloppy dilettantism? "Bold in her truth telling," how? In which ways? I found Mr. Constant regresses to "fanzine" writing, e.g. "sentences come from out of nowhere to slap the reader...". Really? Isn't it worth asking why readers might want to be slapped, if that is in fact someone's desire? Finally, if Mr. Constant affirms that Myles "invites" readers to "join her up in the clouds for a day or two," well, I'd like to know how that invite connects with the assertion by Mr. Constant that this book is a "raw memoir." Raw clouds? Cloudy raw?
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