



Fred R. Coorad/The New York Times

The poet Eileen Myles has published her first novel, "Cool for You."

Poetry Soaked In the Personal And Political

the University of Massachusetts in Boston, so I was a total townie and very aware of it."

Poetry was in the picture from the start. She describes her mother (Polish by descent) and father (Irish) as "readers and singers." In school, she was required to memorize and recite poems. And there was a Harvard trickledown. Her Aunt Anne worked as a maid in the dormitories in the 1950's and 60's and brought home books left behind by students at the end of the year.

Family members, teachers and classmates come and go in the novel, which shifts restlessly between childhood and adulthood, tragedy and farce. At its center is the figure of Ms. Myles's grandmother, who died in a state insane asylum, a woman whom Ms. Myles barely knew but feared she might become. The book begins with a dedication to her and circles around to her in its final paragraph: "My grandmother's name was Nellie Riordan Myles. She was born in Ireland, and she died in Massachusetts in 1957. Her body was received by the ground."

Ms. Myles left Massachusetts for New York in 1974. She discovered the St. Marks Poetry Project in the East Village and showed up there for workshops and readings almost every night for 10 years.

"It was dedicated to the idea of the working artist," she said. "You could just walk in, sit down and take a class. It was all free." She became its director, briefly, in the 1980's, and she still reads there regularly.

She made friends, among them Allen Ginsberg, her role model as an activist-poet. And like many "indie" writers, she scrambled to make a living. Art criticism brought in a little cash. She worked briefly as a caretaker for the poet James Schuy-



Eileen Myles writes about growing up in working-class Boston.

ler, an influential New York School link. She took adjunct teaching gigs at colleges but more often held classes privately, finding students through word of mouth or by posting fliers.

Her publishing history has a similar ad hoc pattern. "My books weren't so much self-published as friend-published," is how she put it. "It was like everybody published the person next to them." She also did her own distribution. "So many people end up throwing their books under the bed, and I just found that too depressing. I felt better going out there and doing it myself, which was, of course, often humiliating."

Both her poetry and a 1994 collection of short stories, "Chelsea Girls," were highly autobiographical. "I wanted to make a poetic documentary of my life," she said. "There was something about my particular life — as a female, as a person prone to

By HOLLAND COTTER

Eileen Myles has been called "the last of the New York School poets," the seal on a lineage that began with the personalized, speech-based poetry of Frank O'Hara. Her writing also has roots in the visionary, intensely political work of the Beats. At 50, she is a cult figure to a generation of young, post-punk female writer-performers who are creating a niche for poetry in the better-known world of pop music and, in the process, forming a new literary avant-garde.

If Ms. Myles's name is unknown to many readers, that's no surprise. As often as not her work turns up in fugitive journals like *Shiny*, *Cuz* and *Queer 13*. All her books have been handled by maverick small presses. She has no university affiliation nor, for that matter, salaried job of any kind, though she is a dynamo of freelance activity.

She recently published her first novel, a picaresque, unsentimentally heartbreaking roman à clef titled "Cool for You." A new book of poetry, her eighth, is due out later this year. She teaches, reads and performs. And she writes about art for *The Village Voice* and *Art in America*. A few years ago she toured the country in a minivan with the all-female "word band," *Sister Spit*, performing in bars and galleries and on college campuses.

Ms. Myles is a quick, free-ranging talker. Her speech, like her writing, is peppered with sudden shifts in direction and dazzlingly phrased ideas. Her delivery retains the flattened A of her native Boston, and her novel, released by Soft Skull Press, is a barely fictionalized account of her early years there.

"My parents were working-class children of immigrants," she recently said over coffee in the East Village. "My father delivered mail to the Harvard dorms." He died in an accident when Ms. Myles was 11. "I grew up in Catholic schools in Arlington and went to

drug and alcohol abuse, as a lesbian — that I sensed was endangered. I had a feeling nobody would know what it was like if I didn't tell it."

The way she told it was in a stripped-down vernacular style. "When I teach," Ms. Myles said, "I talk about writing in terms of running to catch a train. You start with too much. The idea is to let yourself drop as much as you need to drop to get on board. Eventually you might have to let go of all of it, and even then you might not get on. But at least you know where you're going."

The idea of movement, social and personal, runs through Ms. Myles's thinking about art. She is, for example, skeptical of the popular image of the artist as "a middle-class person who gets downwardly mobile for a few years, to experiment and get sort of earthy, and then becomes a success," a notion of dues-paying that is, she said, "very threatening if you come from a lower-class background and have always been on the edge economically."

She is also acutely aware of how social status and language intersect. "You know so much about people from the second they open their mouths," she said. "Right away you might know you want to keep them out. So when I write, I want to keep changing the locks, saying the 'wrong' thing when I'm doing the right thing. That's why I can't stop using dirty words."

Because she sees her own experiences as basically typical rather than unique, she feels no qualms about the personal content of her work. And she feels that all writing contributes to building a community of the spirit, "a tribal reality," as she puts it.

Her own tribe is made up both of literary forebears and a group of new artists who are blending poetry, art and performance, some of whom are part of what Ann Powers, music

critic for *The New York Times*, has referred to "an increasingly borderless lesbian music scene."

"There's this huge girls' art movement going on," Ms. Myles said, "straight girls and gay girls together. The energy has been building for years. It reminds me of the explosion of rock 'n' roll in the 60's." Among other things, she points to the prolif-

A lesbian and an activist compelled to document life.

eration of poetry-literate female bands, like the Butchies, Cat Power and Le Tigre, which have only recently begun to get mainstream recognition.

She is more than just an older citizen in this movement. She is one of its heroes, as she learned when she got a call in 1997 from the poet Michelle Tea, a leader of *Sister Spit*. Ms. Myles still performs with the group, though another road trip seems unlikely, for lack of time. She just wrapped up a national book tour for "Cool for You." She is organizing a series of multimedia readings, involving poetry and rock, at the Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo. She has two more novels in progress.

Writing, in short, is a total commitment, a full-time job. "Ted Berrigan, who was an early teacher for me, and a good one because he was a Catholic, would always talk about poets in terms of taking their final vows. There's a sense of getting deeper and deeper into this thing. If you let it be as important as it could be."

BOOK REVIEW

A Rebellious Spirit In an Institutional World

Myles blurs distinctions between fiction, memoir

COOL FOR YOU

By Eileen Myles
Soft Skull, 183 pages, \$14 paperback

Reviewed by Dodie Bellamy

Poet Eileen Myles' "novel" is the latest publication from Soft Skull, the anarchistic indie press that won notoriety with two previous books: "Fortunate Son," another publisher's withdrawn biography of George W. Bush; and "Outline of My Lover," Douglas Martin's roman a clef about an affair with a man very much like REM's Michael Stipe. Myles' book marks a quantum leap from tabloid publicity to real achievement for this press.

"Cool for You" is a coming-of-age story in which Myles' rebellious spirit struggles to stay alive against all odds. The book chronicles her Irish-Polish Catholic childhood in suburban Boston, where her father was a mailman at Harvard. Later, after a brief college stint, she gets a series of low-end jobs and takes up serious boozing and pathetic sex with a variety of men in San Francisco. It's not a fun book, but it is a book that one has to occasionally put down and gasp at for its brutal splendor.

"Bobby made little clicking sounds, little smacking birdlike gusts of laughter. I was like him but they broke me. I didn't want to be here. I was a little glowing bird who heard hundreds of

sounds and was swaddled by streams of color and light and they made me wake and listen and come out and be here and go to school and I was in hell, no matter what happened. I wanted to kick him in his eggshell sweetness. I wanted to see his yolk flow."

Myles evaporates the distinctions between fiction and memoir. Reviving a term promoted by Truman Capote in the '60s, Myles labels her book a "nonfiction novel." "To call one's book nonfiction," she has written, "is to imply that the burden of truth weighs heavily on this book. I wanted to take the truth as I understand it and oppress and dazzle and flatten and crop, etc. If it were in a gallery you would call it painting, or installation, mixed media. Fiction means my family story went to heaven."

"Cool for You" is the novelistic equivalent of Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time"; dissonant movements are counterbalanced with the sweetest heart-wrenching pathos. When Myles' father dies of a cerebral hemorrhage in the final pages of the book, language collapses before the "music" of his death rattle.

Myles was 11. Her father lay on the couch while Myles sat in his maroon chair, writing over and over for Sister Ednata, "I will not talk in the corridors." After 200 or so repetitions, the meaning of her punitive mantra breaks down to gibberish. Suddenly her father begins rasping:

"I heard my father die. I saw him die, but it was the sound. I know his final notes, not the words,



Eileen Myles' autobiographical novel, "Cool for You," is a coming-of-age tale in which a girl's rebellious spirit struggles to stay alive.

taneously voyeuristic and pulled into this intimacy. Stories are told in bits and fragments, meandering and winding back on themselves.

Narrative lines frequently seem incomplete; then, when you least expect it, they're back, opening almost magically before you, details added, explanations provided. Oddly, this isn't frustrating, because Myles' digressions never fail to intrigue. Line to line, her writing is tight as a drum. She's always in control, performing a deft juggling act: Just when you think she's dropped the ball, she'll make a stunning retrieval. The story of her father's death flashes in bits through the final 40 pages of the book. Details of her grandmother's 17-year confinement and death in a state mental hospital accrue throughout the book, mirroring Myles' earlier experiences working as an attendant in similar hospitals.

"Cool for You" examines institutions from all angles, institutions as places where unwanted bodies are stored (mental hospital, nursing home, school for "severely retarded adult males," boardinghouse for aging widows), institutions as places where children are conditioned (Catholic school, summer camp, the family) and, by extension, institutional codes that enforce heterosexuality and femininity, class structures, the work ethic and social hierarchies.

Out of this nightmare of death and physical disintegration, Myles rises, a poet. Myles' portrait of an artist depicts a painful ripping away from cultural prisons: "I never wanted to be a woman because they end up being alone." Humanity and the body may fail, but the book offers a sort of redemption. The beauty of Myles' prose breaks the silence, and a writer emerges triumphant. ■

Dodie Bellamy is the author of "The Letters of Mina Harker." She teaches creative writing at Mills College and San Francisco State University.

words are nothing. Believe me. Words are empty. It's the squawking of the animal, the wheezing, the desperate wind of a life rattling through the body, I heard him, he was not alone. This man who tried to hear me. I became possible. Now the message is complete.

"I am not alone, I wrote. Words are nothing. The empty repetitions of language, that holds me like a friend, a pattern, a net. I will not talk, I will not talk, my rattle, sash. I must not die alone. I heard his blue notes as he slipped away. I yelled, Mom."

The message in her father's death remains complex, enigmatic. Meaning builds through layering, never releasing an easy understanding. Myles is a master at tugging at our emotions while exercising remarkable restraint. "Cool for You" is deeply poetic without sinking into preciousness.

Conversational in structure, "Cool for You" mimics the disjointed logic of memory. Myles begins the book by addressing an unidentified intimate. "I know I've told you this before but I'm lonely tonight and it's raining." One feels simul-

Cool Troubadour

BOOKS

Eileen Myles' Offhanded Genius by Nate Lippens

"I WAS IN A DARK and hopeless place when I decided to write the book, and I wanted to write my way around it, through it, and out of it," says author Eileen Myles of her new book, *Cool for You* (\$14, Soft Skull Press).

"I meant to write a big, chaotic, sloppy experimental kind of book. I sort of chuckled at the idea I was writing a novel. I went back and read *Ulysses* and that gave me permission to do it," Myles admits. "I had this idea about very deliberately going through every institution I had felt installed within, and talking about that from the inside, from a very female perspective."

That idea of women and institutions provides the novel with a flexible spine, around which Myles weaves her personal memories and musings. At the center of these mingling stories is the dark heart

story and her own experiences together with crosscurrents of humor and sadness. It is a tour de force, which Myles accomplishes with offhand genius.

"Plot doesn't interest me that much, but time travel does," Myles says. Her methodology shows a daring and adventurous sensibility. "I started this book on the heels of *Chelsea Girls*. I was going through an 'I wonder if I can still write stories' thing. I made a list of the stories I would write if I could write stories, and I started writing them. Somewhere in the first chapter I got the idea I could make a novel by shuffling the stories into each other and finding some way they could be interconnected," Myles says.

Cool for You was a labor of love. Myles worked on it for six years. Over that time, the arc of the book and its theme of institutions changed. Myles had written at length of her experiences of sexism during her tenure in the early '80s as artistic director of the renowned Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, but decided not to use those experiences in the book. "When I threw out that hundred-page section, that's when I knew I was a novelist," Myles says.

Cool for You is still infused with a fierce sense of measuring a woman's treatment within institutions. Myles worked in a nursing home and in a hospital for severely retarded adult males. The small degradations and the joys of hard work with discarded, ignored people are imprinted in Myles' lean, agile language—a tough grace in uneven reality. The impressionistic flow



of her concerns: childhood memories of her grandmother Nellie's institutionalization in a mental hospital. Something had happened to her grandmother that could not be undone, and it became the thing around which everything else seemed an accommodation.

Nellie Myles spent the last 17 years of her life at the Westborough State Hospital. As a five-year-old, Eileen Myles wanted to visit Nellie, but her parents would not let her. Her grandmother's illness became a troubling mystery, and, as a writer brimming with a poet's sense of discursive possibility, it became a shadow hemisphere for her to plumb. Myles uses the metaphor of institutions as a guideline reel to navigate the dark and tricky caverns of memory.

Like *Chelsea Girls*, her brilliant 1994 collection, *Cool for You* is written with a deadpan lyricism that reminds one of Frank O'Hara. The nonlinear, episodic chapters are fragmented but not disjointed. Myles twines her grandmother's

creates a time-tripping style that transcends and transforms memoir, giving birth to a hybrid: a mythobiography with a real, grounded heroine. Myles writes as narrator, commentator, and interlocutor. In a simple prose shard she encapsulates 20 years of experimental feminist fiction with a sly, modernist sleight-of-hand: "Crying in my workshirt in my room. Really not a girl anymore. A boy on her bed in the world."

Myles is a well-respected underground literary figure with a maverick spirit. In 1992 she toured 28 states, campaigning as America's first "openly female" write-in presidential candidate. In recent years she has toured with Sister Spit, the all-woman spoken-word traveling road show. "I love reading. I love touring. I want to do America seriously," Myles says. "It's an independent book, and I think in many ways you have to come to your readers. I'm happy to do that. The troubadour model is one I've always liked as a writer." ■

Girls, Interrupted

CHRIS KRAUS

COOL FOR YOU. By Eileen Myles. Soft Skull. 196 pp. \$14.

Eileen Myles's new novel, *Cool for You*, is much more a writing-out of female madness than a book about it. Framed around the author's search for the medical records of her grandmother, who spent the last years of her life in a state mental institution, *Cool for You* is about the institutionalized life in general. Though she begins with a description of the sanctioned squalor of the state asylum, really Myles is looking at the big picture: the processing of people into grades and schools and genders, cliques and classes. Like the writing of the late Kathy Acker, *Cool for You* is a kind of fragmented autobiography. Both Acker and Myles write adventure books in which their lived experience becomes the engine, not the object, of a narrative. Both present an "I" as large as the narrators of *Heart of Darkness* or *Tropic of Cancer*, although in female hands, the use of "I" is often misconstrued as memoir. Like Acker, Myles values the most intimate and "shameful" details of her life not for what they tell her

about herself but for what they tell us about the culture. In this sense, *Cool for You* makes the classic Female Madness Tale, from Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* through Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted*, look like a kind of psychic liberalism.

Unlike Plath and Kaysen, and dozens of practitioners in between, Myles has no particular belief in the possibility of a fully integrated female self. She doesn't think her experience will be redeemed. The circumstances of Myles's life—she is the daughter of a Polish secretary and an alcoholic Irish mail carrier in class-riddled Boston—are no more dire than those of millions who daily feel the disparity between their own lives and the surfaces of upper-middle-class life that are projected blandly on TV and intricately probed in most contemporary literary fiction. What's harrowing is the detail in which this disparity is experienced and recorded.

Chris Kraus, the author of the novels *Aliens & Anorexia* (Semiotexte/Smart Art Press) and *I Love Dick* (Semiotexte), is currently working on a biography of Kathy Acker.

Nellie Reardon Myles entered the Westborough State Hospital at the age of 60. Her complaint: "I don't feel well." She was a refugee of the Irish potato famine who'd cleaned houses all her life in Boston and given birth to seven children. Appetite: normal. Sleep: normal. Speech: normal. Nellie was stricken with grief over the death of her daughter, Helen. The color of her urine is fully documented over the fifteen years she spent before her death at Westborough. Teeth missing: thirty-two. Economic condition upon her entry: marginal. Her mental state: sometimes resentful. What Myles remembers most are the Sunday outings of her family to the asylum: "Dad went inside. My mother stayed out with us and the camera. Nellie is led out with great aplomb. The queen mother. The camera clicks.... It was our Buckingham Palace."

It's fitting that *Cool for You* begins with a quote from the Modernist hero Antonin Artaud. Just as Artaud's experience as a wartime inmate of the Rodez asylum became a launching pad and paradigm for his rage against the military-corporate forces that were then gathering toward a new postwar order, Myles reads the cursory entries on her grandmother's life at Westborough State Hospital, where she was warehoused by the State of Massachusetts, as proof of something she already knew: *The Poor Don't Matter*.

The writing of both Myles and Acker is dependent on a great belief in myth, the conduit through which we may experience the Modernist passion to be larger than oneself. To use a very public "I" to speak, as Myles has put it, "to her time..." But mythification doesn't happen much to female writing. We have great hagiographies through which to read the works of Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, but in the case of their contemporary, Diane di Prima, the twenty books she's published must suffice. Criticism also helps create a myth around the lives of certain male contemporary fiction writers. Girls in my writing class refer to the author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* as "Dave," as if they knew Eggers, and memorize his interview remarks as if they were late-night phone confessions. Female myth, it seems, is something much more self-created.

Myles and Acker have both succeeded in bringing difficult work that goes against the grain of contemporary commercial narrative to wider audiences through the sheer willingness to cultivate and engage with myth. Acker hit large in the United States and England following Grove's rapid pub-

lication of her books in the mid-1980s. She knew the game and cultivated straight-girl celebrity with a vengeance: sex and motor-bikes, tattoos, black leather. ACKER JUNKIE, screamed the headline of her review in *The Independent*. She could be seen at 10 AM hailing taxis on Third Avenue in full Punk Priestess regalia whenever heading uptown to meet her agent. By 1995, she knew myth inside out. "The KATHY ACKER that YOU WANT..." she wrote to a friend in Australia, "another MICKEY MOUSE, you probably know her better than I do. It's media, it's not me. Like almost all the people I know, and certainly all the people I'm closest to, all of whom are 'culture-makers' and so-called successful ones...our only survival card is FAME... We're rats walking tightropes we thought never existed. Oh sure, we all look good while traveling. We're good at media images."

Myles, who isn't straight and is best known as a poet, approaches myth from a different angle. Since the publication of her first book, *The Irony of the Leash*, in 1982, she's been offering audiences fleshy, candid slices of her consciousness and life. A friend and apprentice of the late James Schuyler, Myles writes in a style that is deceptively immediate and conversational, giddily expressing a huge range of speculative thought. She arrived in New York City in 1974, a working-class butch lesbian from Boston, and adapted the literate candor of New York School Poetry to her needs. Her very presence at that time and place was perceived as confrontational, and it was a challenge she accepted. In 1992 Myles ran as a write-in candidate for President in eleven states, memorizing her poems and delivering them like stump speeches. In "An American Poem," she poses as a Kennedy and implores her listeners:

Shouldn't we all be Kennedys?
This nation's greatest city's
home of the business-
man and home of the
rich artist. People with
beautiful teeth who are not
on the streets. What shall
we do about this dilemma?...

Like Acker, Myles uses "autobiographical" material, but her deployment of it is more revelatory, less strategically conceptual. In *Cool for You*, Myles's first published novel, she sees much of her own life in tandem with her grandmother's madness. "It seems people go nuts," she writes, "from a number of things," and then proceeds to tell us what. The trajectory of a lost, dissatisfied working-class girl who

wants to be a boy is necessarily less insulated, more wide open to a scary form of chance than that of the Harvard Blessed, whose lives she naïvely tries to emulate. She takes a job at Harvard Coop and gains twenty pounds stealing expensive candy bars while marveling at her co-worker, a girl who'd come from Beaver Country Day School who took time off from school to work a little job. "All these people had a certain colored skin, kind of golden peachy and expensive. It was leisure skin." Meanwhile, she was getting pimples. She attends the University of Massachusetts, Boston, imagining "images of the past—college, some bunch of bright young people in sweaters dashing up the steps to their astronomy class," only to find that "it was not school. There was no campus." She commutes on a string of suburban trains and buses to her classes and sits with her fellow students at a seedy coffee shop called Patsio's, as close as U Mass got to an off-campus hangout:

We would sit...and drink our bleary morning coffee and see the first street people we had ever laid eyes on. An old woman pulled up her skirt for us and showed us her bald old pussy. We were going to school. There was an Irish bar around the corner where we'd go after jazz class and smell stale beer and a trio would play there on Friday afternoons, a really old man and a really old woman and some third thing, I can't remember, but I know it was a trio. They were so drunk the music was incredibly bad... and one afternoon they weren't there because one of them had died.... This could not be college.

She knows she's lost. She feels the future opening up into the present and loop-

ing back again; she sees a girl dancing to the Doors and it is Jim Morrison's voice that keeps repeating in her head as if the voice were hers, and she wants to be the one to take the dancing girl on a ride into a parallel universe. Like Sade's Justine, Myles has many picaresque adventures. She quits her taxi-driving job and starts working as a nurse-assistant at The Fernald School after a chance conversation with a fare. The Fernald School is an institution for retarded men, and there she finds three classes: the institutionalized men; the staff, consisting of "the slightly educated well-meaning down and out confused," like her; and the Harvard-trained behavior-modification therapists, who rarely venture out into the wards but devise a program in which the staff pass out handfuls of M&Ms to reward appropriate behavior. The Fernald School is as dead-end an institution as any Myles encounters. She recalls: "All around us was the subtle feeling of a campaign for self-improvement. If we were daily...improving these men's capacity to live 'normally' then what could the therapy do for paragons of intelligence like ourselves. When the buzzer went off we would hug each other for not smoking."

She saves up; she travels to the West. She remembers blueness and the perfection of the air and mountains and working lots of different jobs. She wants to be James Joyce, get rid of everything and write, but then there's nothing to hold on to. She starts a book but can't get past line one, about gerbils running around a cage. At night she hears a million voices. The only thing that held her still was taste, and she kept thinking if she could taste the right thing then she would have something to hold on to. "The day was some runs that I knew with my mouth." One time in the park she floats, and realizes she's not anyone or thing. "I was not connected...not in at all. Not outside either. It wasn't like a movie."

For Myles, madness is not exactly something to be overcome. It is a permanent state, because it is a correlate of the female struggle against poverty. Madness isn't ever isolated from the dead-end jobs, the crummy schools, the institutionalized future that awaits the unconnected. Therefore, madness is something richer, darker, more inevitable than a way station on an affluent, rebellious girl's journey to success. In one of the book's most terrifying scenes, 14-year-old Eileen is working part time in her neighborhood at a nursing home. Delivering trays one night, she gets a glimpse of a familiar body, a woman she'd known as Mrs. Beatty. Seven-year-old Eileen had known the same Mrs. Beatty as the most elegant lodger at her friend Lorraine's moth-

er's boardinghouse. She was a large woman with chestnut hair, joyful, with an air of sophistication, who wore hats with veils. But now she's naked, no longer wrapped in an elaborate fox-fur coat, and she's being lifted off the potty by a nurse and she's not a person anymore, she is a smelly shapeless thing. "She turned or a I saw her face and there was nothing in it. She was gone.... I wanted it to be someone else so I wouldn't

have to have seen what I saw. This is Mrs. Beatty, said the nurse, disgusted."

Cool for You is a difficult, painful book to read. It is a construction of identity that's truly public, absorbent of the lives of others. With the audacity of Henry Miller, without the protection of his bravado, Myles lets the voice of poverty-madness-shame speak through her and proves the past is never operable. ■

Book Sense
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Book Sense 76

INDEPENDENT BOOKSELLER RECOMMENDATIONS

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TAKE ONE

Here are the Top 10 Picks for this Book Sense 76, as tallied from hundreds of recommendations from independent booksellers.

6 **COOL FOR YOU**, by Eileen Myles (Soft Skull Press, \$14 paper, 188712859X) "Poet Eileen Myles transforms a slew of autobiographical material into a narrative that is as bleak as it is redemptive. Each page is imbued with the kind of tone that you want to hear when you pick up the phone late at night and it's a friend calling to catch up. Dark, hip, astonishingly bright. I cannot recommend it enough."—**Tom Padilla, Posman Books @ NYU, New York, NY**



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EILEEN MYLES AT HER APARTMENT NEAR TIMES SQUARE

EILEEN MYLES' 'COOL FOR YOU'

LAURIE WEEKS

Eileen Myles' latest book, *Cool for You*, is a rare and excellent thing: an autobiographical "non-fiction

novel" that draws you in as if it were a crime thriller. Eileen is a poet and prose writer whose previous books include a short story collection, *Chelsea Girls*, and the poetry titles *Maxfield Parrish* and *Not Me*. Throughout *Cool for You*, her first novel, Myles transmits her coming of age via paragraphs that flash on the page like a slide show. She tracks her journey through a maze of institutions, from her family and Catholic school in Boston, to summer camp, where she worked as an indolent

counselor, to a job at a "school" for developmentally-disabled adult males, where it was her duty to clean and soothe the inhabitants. Within these "little containers for the self," as she calls them, Myles grapples with internalized straitjackets of identity. She writes about what it means to be female, through the context of her recurring fantasies of being a boy.

Cool for You teeters on a rickety balance beam, teasing apart the differences between good daughter/bad daughter, crazy/not crazy, straight/gay. Myles zaps right into your nervous system, implanting the anxiety and disembodied sensations of a girl so uncomfortable in her skin that something as simple as eating a sandwich becomes an occasion for panic.

"I couldn't bite" becomes

symbolic of a lifetime of a perceived failure to live up to expectations. "I just couldn't imagine pushing my teeth through the bread. My mother looked at me nervously. 'C'mon, Dear, eat your sandwich.'" Food plays a big part in Myles' investigations - if she eats the oatmeal fed to the asylum inmates, does she become one of them? "I only considered having it when another attendant was in the room because if I was alone with them and I had a bowl of it I would be one of them." When she's confused by her infatuation with 14-year-old Lucy Bean, one of her summer-camp charges, the 18-year-old Eileen cycles between fat and thin, ice-cream binges and dieting - her physical outlines reflecting her disoriented sense of self in the face of a dread desire which,

as they say, has no name.

Myles calls *Cool for You* a "captivity narrative." She says, "I free myself again and again in the act of writing. This novel is like an institution that I patched together to undo other institutions." The book's style also escapes the bounds of tradition. A hybrid between poetry and prose, Myles' jittery but graceful idiolect touches down in one or the other only to take flight again. "I think literary categories are false," Eileen recently told me. "They belong to the marketplace and the academy. It's the obedience issue that I'm saying fuck you to, the scholar or the editor trying to trap the writer like a little bug under the cup of 'poetry' or 'prose.'" Much of the book's sadness and dread comes from the

death of Myles' father, an image that also appears in her earlier work. 11-year-old Eileen was in the living room writing an exercise doled out as punishment by one of the nuns at her school, scrawling over and over, "I will not talk in the corridor." Suddenly, her sick, alcoholic father, lying on the couch beside her, gasped and died. Myles' insistence on revisiting her father's death defines the act of writing for her. "Writing is composed of a few moments that shape you. When I lost my dad, I performed an act of replacement. Writing was a big patch on the hole. I can write anything there - so why not Dad, again and again? At the moment of his death, I got the rhythm of life."

In Myles' hands, the rhythm of life is unnerving and speedy. She captures the fast flow of sensations and identifies the world's imprecisions. *Cool for You* is an insistent communiqué of its writer's self-reflexive observations, semaphored from a psychic funhouse of shame spirals and guilt-whirls. I don't know if anyone's ever so utterly captured the weirdness of being a girl, and, by extension, the weirdness of being.



BERECA GREENBERG



Cool for You

By Eileen Myles. Soft Skull Press, 196 pages, \$14.

A steady stream of lucid, deeply sweet, and occasionally bitchy poetry and a collection of stunningly blunt and personal short stories (*Chelsea Girls*) established New York City writer Eileen Myles as a literary loudmouth to be reckoned with. With grace and anger, Myles reveals and accuses; she's a butch dyke Bukowski whose confessions clear a place at the table for her queer, working-class sisters while hurling bottles at the larger culture that continues to kick them to the curb.

Cool for You, Myles's first novel, is a tour of the soul-crushing reality of the hand-to-mouth set. The novel begins

with the 22-year-old character Eileen — “a girl and a fuck-up” — employed in a chamber-of-horrors state hospital for “severely retarded adult males.” Anxious, alcoholic, and barely keeping it together herself, she rewards “good” behavior with the chocolate candies she shamefully binges on during breaks. “For this I was born,” our heroine despairs, “for this I came into the world?” Myles's misery is achingly familiar to anyone who's ever been trapped in the low-pay grind, and the working-class martyr she creates of herself is grandiose and self-aware, creating a great swelling myth that obliterates the regulation hopelessness.

Myles's prose is also a roomy place: she seems to recognize you as one of her own, and she invites all of her people to join in her grand rejection of the system and reclaiming of our marginalized lives as desperately important. The strength of Myles's voice is unique and fantastic — giddy, almost bratty slang skids across the surface of her deeply sad, deeply intelligent prose. *Cool for You* is a mesmerizing poetic novel with purpose and wit. (Michelle Tea)



READING AND WRITING
MARNI JACKSON

She's a (feminist) lady

The new feminists, to judge from their magazines, are not leery of domesticity, motherhood or girliness

Every six months or so, somebody declares feminism dead. Then, like Glenn Close in *Fatal Attraction*, it lurches up out of the bathtub again, when (and where) you least expect it. The Web, which began as a guy's domain, is now awash in feminist/activist/girl-art sites (including the Canadian site www.moxie.ca, "a women's portal that isn't about lip gloss and firming up your ass"). And you can find on the newstand, in copies of *Curve*, *Bust* and *Bitch*, a different breed of (young) women's magazine.

By the way, the feminist girl isn't a woman, or a womyn, or even a grrrl any more. She's a lady.

The "ladies" behind these independent magazines are busy on all fronts, but especially in new hybrid forms of writing that mix music, poetry and performance. Lady heroines include Kathleen Hanna, former frontwoman for the group Bikini Kill, Joan Jett and the ubiquitous Melissa Etheridge. Girl groups like The Butchies, The Hissyfits and Le Tigre are produced by an indie record label (two women in two rooms, actually) called Mr. Lady. The American version of *Lilith Fair* is known on both coasts as *LadyFest*. The band *Ladytronic* is (no surprise) four women who play electronic music. And *Bust* magazine ("for women with something to get off their chests"), going strong for almost 10 years now, devoted a recent issue to the traditional "lady crafts" of knitting, crocheting and needlepoint. One piece of art photographed in *Ms.* magazine, the grand old dame of the new-lady media, featured a giant "tank cozy" — a Russian military tank knitted over with pink rosettes. The same issue of *Bust* ran an article extolling the virtues of housework, called *A Broom of One's Own*, alongside ads for mail-order leopard-print ironing boards and



BRIAN GABLE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

zebra-skin brooms.

Retro need not be retrograde, however. For the "ladies," housework is part of a hands-on philosophy all round. Pro-sex and pro-fun, a blend of gay, straight and post-punk energies, the new feminism is an evolution of the once-feminine pursuit of homemade crafts and "do-it-yourself" projects, now extended to orgasms as well as jams and jellies. They put out records and their own magazines, and to judge by the ads, the sex-toy industry is about to outsell eyeshadow.

Even sexual identity isn't the big deal it used to be. *Bust* reports a trend among young Norwegian straight girls who like to kiss, but aren't gay. Life is more complicated now. However, nobody has solved the poverty issue yet. Magazines like *Bitch* ("A Feminist Response to Pop Culture") can only afford to publish twice a year, and although women now outnumber men in America by an astonishing eight million, they still earn 72

cents to every guy's dollar. It's enough to make you . . . knit.

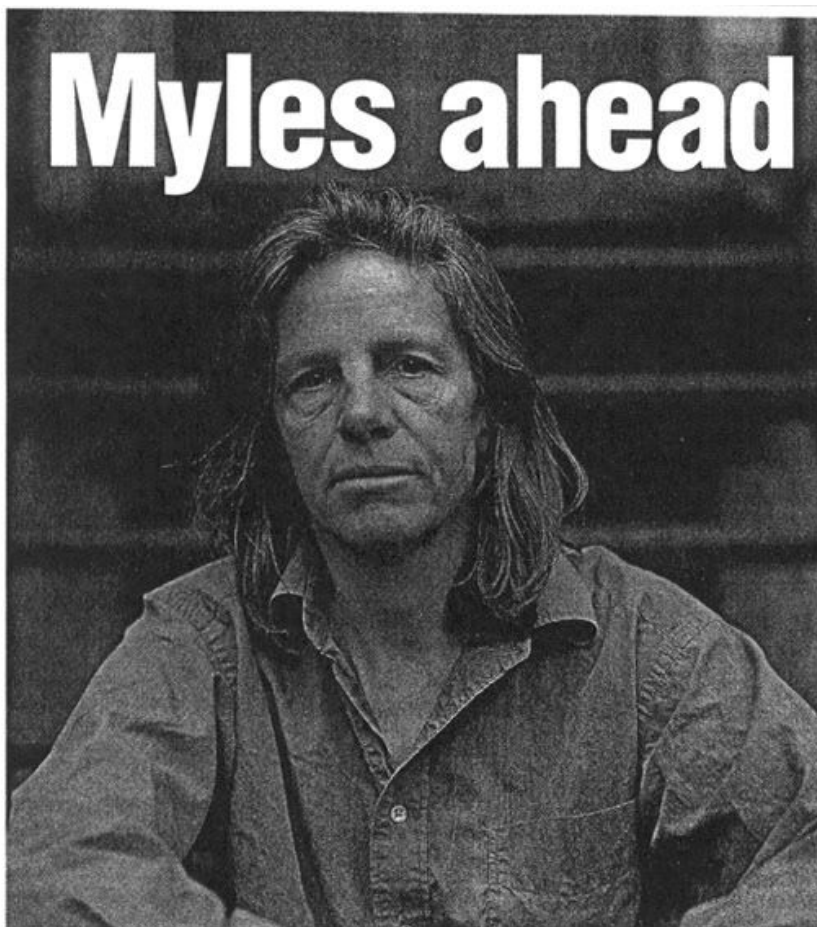
In the new feminist magazines, self-acceptance has replaced the women's-mag mantra of self-improvement. Even more "realistic" magazines like Oprah's *O* can still leave readers in a gloomy pall of "makeover" envy, convinced that everything from their apartments to their bodies requires a major overhaul. Insecurity drives both the advertising and the editorial content. But *Bust* has a loyal readership of big girls fed up with the fashionista reign of size twos. A free-for-all slumber-party ethos reigns, where corporate takeover dreams are compatible with flaming nail decals.

The one faintly tiresome aspect in all three magazines is the undisputed worship of the vibrator. It reminded me of men and their sound systems, this new fixation of girls on their Magic Wands. One music critic in *Bitch* even felt compelled to describe a band as "working together as smoothly as a vibrator and a couple AAs." This constant hum in the background of the lady media is a nice change from the unsexy, furrowed-brow feminism of yore, but I worry that carpal tunnel syndrome will set in. Are we never going to leave appliances behind?

As for fashion, *Bust* has a feature called "real women in their real clothes" that achieves a wonderful strangeness that any Prada ad would kill for.

Curve magazine ("The Bestselling Lesbian Magazine") featured an interview with another new feminist heroine, 50-year-old renegade poet Eileen Myles — a sort of latter-day lady Beat who has made a career out of avoiding mainstream success. Myles talked about her new novel *Cool for You* and her approach to writing.

"Literary culture has always struck me as being a turnoff," says Myles, the author of eight books of poetry. Her new roman-à-clef novel is about growing up in working-class Boston, where her father delivered the mail to the Harvard dorms. Her relationship with academia and any other institution remains that of a testy, "inside" outsider. A former pal of Allen Ginsberg, Myles is a true original, an independent voice in an increasingly branded publishing culture. No wonder she's an inspiration to the ladies.



East Village poet Eileen Myles may call *Cool for You* a novel, but this offbeat collection of mini-memoirs is far from traditional

By Gerry Gomez Pearlberg Photograph by Eric Ogden

Poet Eileen Myles pulls her trademark green mountain bike up to a patisserie near her East Village home, and saunters in with nothing in hand but a jumbo Rand McNally road atlas. She's using it, she explains, to plan her national book tour, which began on November 1, just as her first novel, *Cool for You*, hits the stores. It seems particularly apt that Myles travels light, powered by her own steam, forever mapping her next move. After all, this fiercely independent poet's writing style is marked by velocity, risk-taking and adventure.

Myles, 50, says she came to New York from Arlington, Massachusetts, "to be a poet." She succeeded: An active literary figure with six books of verse to her name (she's also written articles and reviews for *The Village Voice*, *The Nation*, *Nest and Art in America*), Myles has taught poetry in New York, California, Provincetown and at the Boulder-based Naropa University (poetic mecca and Allen Ginsberg's old

stomping ground). In the early '80s, she was artistic director of the influential Poetry Project at St. Marks Church. In recent years, she has toured with Sister Spit, San Francisco's all-woman spoken-word show, and curated "Scout," a reading/performance series at NYC's Thread Waxing Space. She's just completed yet another poetry collection, *Skies*. All this from the woman who, back in 1992, went on the road through 28 states, campaigning as America's first "openly female" write-in presidential candidate.

Given Myles's eclecticism, it's no surprise that *Cool for You* is a novel of experiment and fusion. Part memoir, part manifesto, the story is centered around Myles's grandmother Nellie, who spent her last years in a mental ward. For young Eileen, Nellie was a mysterious figure whose troubled life resonated long after her death. "As a child, my parents would not let me see where she lived," Myles says. "It's so scary to think of it, even now, to be a child who *wants* to go inside

the mental hospital." Myles uses the book to explore not only the nature of the institution, but also what it means to be mad—both in and at American society. In a style reminiscent of *Chelsea Girls*, her prosaic collection of memoirs from 1994, Myles writes *Cool for You* in a deadpan style through a series of nonlinear, often absurdly funny episodes that weave her own life experiences together with those of her grandmother.

"This is not a quote-unquote real novel," Myles notes. "It's my kind of novel—pasted together and funky. While writing this book, I thought, It's going to explain more than novels are supposed to; it's just going to do any fucking thing it wants to do, and then I'm still going to say it's a novel when I'm done." The book's opening quote—"Jamais real, toujours vrai" ("Never real, always true"), from early-20th-century artist-madman-provocateur Antonin Artaud—pretty well sums up Myles's offbeat approach.

Not that this writer has ever been conventional. Growing up in a working-class town near Boston, Myles dreamed of becoming an astronaut. Instead, she accepted the slightly more down-to-earth mission of literary progenitor, artist-activist and opponent of the status quo. "I sort of consider myself 'the public,'" she says. "Offenses to the public—like the 'dumbing down' of popular culture—are offenses to me. I'm very ordinary in a way, but I think the ordinary person, the ordinary woman, is very fantastic. It's a challenge to make an art life out of such quote-unquote mundane material as me."

Mundane is the last word Myles fans would use to describe her. In jacket blurbs for *Cool for You*, best-selling author Dorothy Allison has declared Myles "a genius." Novelist Dennis Cooper vividly describes Myles as "one of the savviest voices and most restless intellects in contemporary lit."

Like its author, *Cool for You* follows a unique trajectory in pursuit of the surprising and new. "In the writing, I gave myself total freedom to occupy places of memory, and to make my own conclusions from there," Myles explains. "Back when I ran for president, my campaign was about a poet's right to speak; so is this book. *Cool for You* is a completely realistic novel by a person who basically believes that life is a dream."

***Cool for You* (Soft Skull Press, \$14) is in stores now. See Books for readings by Eileen Myles on Saturday 4, Sunday 5 and Tuesday 7.**

FOR WOMEN WHO SHOW UP TO GET THE MOST OUT OF LIFE

BUST

SPRING 2001

COOL FOR YOU

By Eileen Myles

[Soft Skull Press, 2000]

Cool for You is an intense first-person novel by the rock star of modern poetry, Eileen Myles. This book covers a lot of ground, told mainly in flashbacks and short scenes, as we follow Eileen's life from her childhood through her fifties. It's a story of alcoholism, uncertain sexual identity, and petty, thankless jobs, but somehow Myles makes the whole thing meaningful and funny. "The summer is half over. I am 18. I came here because I weigh one hundred and thirty-three pounds and live in Arlington with my mother and brother and sister and my father is dead and I drink too much. Nothing is ever right in my life. I have no desire. I only want clothes and to be somewhere else."

Myles has a gift for raw writing, making you feel as if you are right there with her. Unlike other writers who use this technique, her quality never suffers for the sake of immediacy. Although the form of this novel is unusual, it is as well-crafted and precise as any poem, and fun to read, besides. *Terri Griffith*