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MARY AULD

Realism & Marvel: A Review of Sonja Livingston's *Queen of the Fall*

I am immensely proud to be a woman. I research the issues, and I am angered by misogyny in policy, media, and daily interactions. I know that the opportunity and respect allotted to individuals should not be determined by social constructs of gender. Sometimes I feel weary about being a woman among debates over abortion, equal pay, birth control, sexual assault, objectification, and representation in government. Being a woman sometimes feels like steeling myself against an unreasonable opponent. Sonja Livingston's *Queen of the Fall: A Memoir of Girls and Goddesses* stirred in me an almost-forgotten joy over my identity as a woman. The book reminded me that it is the suppression of this joy that is the ultimate reason for outrage over unequal treatment, and for the policy and the picketing. As I read this collection of essays I was reminded of the legacy of endurance, vitality, sorrow and triumph that I share with people of my gender.

I met Livingston when she visited my college town just forty minutes from Rochester, where many of her stories took place. Her essays are written from her unique perspective: that of a woman who grew up in an impoverished neighborhood in Rochester, who is set apart from her origins by ed-

education and financial success as an adult. I asked her whether she hoped to advance a social agenda with her work, and she said that this was not her aim. I believe her, though the essays contain issues that are current and politically charged. This book does not belong to the realm of business suits, statistics, and jargon-ridden policy. Livingston recalls beauty in nuance, praising the power already present in her memories of women, reminding us of all there is to celebrate.

Livingston finds no shortage of opportunities to honor womanhood in her own experience. In the essay entitled “Capias,” Livingston recalls attending a Puerto Rican family wedding as a child, and extends admiration for this elevation of the female experience. “An ordinary woman making silk of just one day,” she writes. Livingston laments her own childhood revulsion for Susan B. Anthony, and makes up for it by taking Anthony on an imaginary tour of Rochester, complete with Abbott’s frozen custard, and asks her the question, “What would you make of Kardashians and sexting and the soft scatter of our lives?” It is not only the traditional or well-known roles of women that are celebrated. Livingston admires the girl who comes to her as she works as a school counselor and tells her of the beautiful, imaginary horses that her family raises. “What exquisite lies they tell, little girls. What perfect fictions,” she praises.

Livingston attends to the language employed in her essays with the same tender admiration that she grants to the subjects of her essays. The book is full of artful, weight-bearing language. Livingston describes French as, “the language that sounded like a mouth swollen with delicious things.” She questions the assumption that Adam and Eve were worse off for Eve’s consumption of the fruit, writing, “but how much more they had to say to each other then, how much wider the world and how lasting the memory of the tree—during even the hardest of times, there would be the taste of it, brave upon their tongues.” Livingston’s approach to the essay is simultaneously universal and deeply personal, stretching from research on Susan B. Anthony to the intimate details of her own attempts to have a child. “What becomes of women without pink skin and soft smiles? What happens when I stop seeking out the sweet in every last thing?” Livingston asks. The whole of humanity is the subject of her query.

Child-bearing is a defining characteristic of womanhood, and the tension between the devastating impact of teen pregnancy in her childhood community and Livingston’s own struggle to conceive as a middle-aged woman is one of the principle threads through the collection. These seem to come to a pinnacle in “Mock Orange,” in which Livingston learns that her niece, of whom she says, “She is mine and I am hers,” has become pregnant at the age of sixteen. Livingston’s concern about the sacrifices that this event will require of her beloved niece are nested in questions about opportunity, race,

class, and of course, gender. But Livingston never preaches. In fact, she writes, "Will you think less of me when I say that, in this moment, I cannot know if my grief is entirely about this child making another?" It is this commitment to telling a story not to convince, but to perform the necessity of communicating experience, that makes Livingston's work resonate.

It is impossible to separate gender from the social and cultural facets of the human experience, and Livingston considers all of the factors that influence the situations of the women about whom she writes. "The women in my family are nothing so much as birds, every last one of them throwing herself against cages that seem self-made but are in fact constructed of poverty, early marriage, and children," she writes. As a white, middle class student at a liberal arts college, I have learned about injustice and economic inequality that I haven't lived through myself. Though I can argue adeptly for the redistribution of wealth, I am insulated from the reality of poverty by my parents' support, my family history, and myriad other occasions of privilege. Livingston's childhood in a low-income area in Rochester serves as the backdrop for many of her stories. Rather than inciting pity or placing blame, Livingston brings to life the spectrum of unique experience that defined her childhood. In the essay, "Our Lady of the Lakes," Livingston expresses her childhood admiration for the mysterious "Indian maiden" depicted on the packaging of sticks of butter. She writes of the moments when her mother returned from shopping, "The giddiness infected us all, brightened even the cracked linoleum floor and persisted beyond the unpacking of food." I am convinced that were it not for the scarcity of groceries, and the luxury of real butter, "Our Lady" would not have received the attention that, after reading the piece, I know she deserves. As I read Livingston's collection, I felt the distance close between the small, picturesque village where I attend college, and the dilapidated, but lively, streets of Livingston's Rochester.

Livingston presents an understanding of the human experience that is driven by realism and marvel. She glorifies human life through truths that are often difficult and gives the reader license to see the world in the same pure, exalting light. "How strange this world," she writes, "so advanced and so wonderfully primitive."