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The Poet’s Life

JOHN MONTAGUE

*The Pear is Ripe: A Memoir*

Liberties Press, 2008, €25.00

Reviewed by

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THE AIM OF MEMOIR has always been rooted in truthful and mostly believable memory. However, any autobiography "that attempts to be absolute truth will' ultimately fail. Therefore, even though most writers are aware of the slippery slope of autobiography many also insist on attempting some form of life writing. Often the real challenge of self-reflection becomes a question of how a writer keeps his autobiography from being his secondary work or a secondary thought.

Poets, for example, are often motivated, enlivened by the very notion of telling a humorous, profound or honest story from the perspective of personal truth. Luckily, the newly fashionable memoir world has aided this truthful intrigue. One reason poets feel compelled to write memoir is the utility of a different kind of omniscient narrator, one where historical control is livelier than in any other genre, but also seemingly similar to the poetic voice versus the voice in, say, fiction or drama. John Montague's new memoir. *The Pear is Ripe,* is no exception. It uses memory to not only convey the poet's version of the truth, but also to explore believability and perspective, attempt to speak as the voice of an important twentieth-century poet while feeding fans with more anecdotes of literary times from Montague's busy poet schedule.

*The Pear is Ripe* comes nearly seven years after Montague's first foray into autobiography. *Company: A Chosen Life* (Duckworth 2001), and with more maturity, more poetic and personal form. It succeeds gracefully giving a seemingly accurate portrayal in an unassuming narrative voice; a Montague trademark. His memories know about the life of a young poet in new lands and the adventures he procured, the people whom he surrounded himself The times were different in 60s Berkeley, Paris, and. Ireland and Montague had the go.o'd fortune to be in all places and highly aware at crucial times with the memory of a writer and without as many war wounds as the average devotee of arts, sexual activity and of course, all things poetry.

But Montague was not all things to all people and his memoir uses skillful language to peel back layers of this changing and "ready to pluck" pear. His recurring theme of change is reflected in the places and state of mind he lived. He witnessed the Bay Area poetry and protest scene, the Parisian expatriates with their new ideas and devotion only to parties and the written word, and many days in Dublin or Northern Ireland. Wherever Montague was there were always writers, readings, lectures and classrooms.

John also loved to teach and to create an atmosphere where students could learn about

being an artist, could surround themselves with' similar people, people who they respected and admired. Montague was the moral poet, one of the devoted, always in awe of Some of his poetic compatriots: Snyder, Duncan, Rexroth, Spicer, Ginsberg, Sartre, and Beckett to name just a few. These writers helped to shape Montague, but his voice is still his own person, his thoughts often filtered through an Ulster Catholic viewpoint and handed to us through the art of memory. This art is what James Liddy calls Montague's "final great art of redemption" ("Interview with John Montague" *Cream City Review,* 1979) the ability to recall one's own past through .poetry, or in this case, the memoirs of a poet.

Simultaneously, Montague creates a twentieth-century poetic world, one in which many poets know about, but not nearly as intimately. Proof of this seems to be the memoir's exhaustive amount of anecdotes that include almost worldly advice for young writers of another generation. Montague desires to pass on some wisdom. However, while the parties and the poetry are only one aspect of the work, the teachings seem to leak onto the page and hinge ideas together like an older and much wiser guru giving knowledge to a generation of nearly deaf ears, a generation

whose comprehension of such mighty poetic matters may be only cursory. In regards to memory, his lesson is quite clear and told through the learning curve of his poetry.

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academic and writing jobs, the lack of both regular sex and major drug use, the muse of the north, the stories involving other writers and notables. One of my favorites is a brief tryst about Sylvia Beach at age seventy who was invited to a Montague party in West Bank Paris and showed up with a bottle of champagne under her coat, walking up the cobblestone path looking "as frail as a figurine" (60). This was right around the time of the creation of the Joyce Museum at the Martello Tower in Sandycove and Montague interjects his tale because it seems that every good Irishmain knows a story involving somebne who was oft mentioned in the same breath as James Joyce.

And why wouldn't Montague want to include every story worth telling? This is memoir after all. He has seen so very much of interest to the Irish and American literary world and conveys an attitude toward life and literature relayed with a tone and language like a poet's: instinctive and memorable. Perhaps the theme that conies across best in this new installment is how Montague has been such a champion of poetry, a young believer of art whose travelogue on two continents of poetic morality, emotion, and observation could rival most poets of the latter twentieth century, and often does.

We receive many trademark mentions of Montague love, history, and the self in *The Pear is Ripe.* We see his attitude towards life and how he is often "keen" on poets. And with the help of his current wife his technique of "revelation by anecdote" (7) takes shape, starts with realistic times and places. He writes about the past in a rather fluid way and attempts to bring new life to stories that we may have read before. One, in particular, is the John Berryman reading in Dublin where Patrick Kavanagh makes a very public exit. Montague's other version of this story is also contained in his book of essays. *The Figure in the Cave,* but with less detail. These newly fleshed out stories often pack a literary punch as we wander through Montague's world aware of his influence, mindful of his teachings.

The primary reason to read this memoir is that *The Pear is Ripe* is still the poet's life, a part of memory that is a necessary study for any fans and scholars of the Irish literary community. I often wonder if Montague will write the third installment of his life as projected in *Company,* and tell us more truth, more self, more lessons to the next poetic generation. Luckily, for now, we are able to use this chapter as a model to secure our own memories and to see the life of a poet blessed by John's honest and memorable words.

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