

STUDIES IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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hostile or indifferent to their own economic class?” Cook’s query, in part, points to the nature of representation as both an aesthetic and a political act, and, in her discussion of *The Lowell Offering* (an early literary magazine associated with New England factories), *The Dial* (a journal of Transcendentalist thought), and *Mother Earth* (the periodical of the anarchist movement), she examines representation in relation to agency and to literary experimentation. Her discussion of Margaret Fuller and Emma Goldman makes amply clear the ways in which women could resist dominant social norms through engagement in various types of work.

Even for readers who are well-versed in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American literature, Cook’s *Working Women, Literary Ladies*, by juxtaposing women’s entry into factory production with their literary output, expands the frameworks of how scholars can consider women in the public sphere during this period. Cook discusses a wide range of texts—Sarah Savage’s novel of uplift, *The Factory Girl*, for example, and Lucy Larcom’s epic poem, *An Idyl of Work*—which have not previously received the critical attention that they deserve. In addition to the familiar paradigms of regionalism, realism, and naturalism, Cook adds the frameworks of work and class to the study of literature by women of this period.

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boy. By Patrick Phillips. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. 51 pages. \$16.95 (paper).

Patrick Phillips’s *boy* is a risky book, not in the sense of its being daring, innovative or *avant garde*, but in its utter simplicity. Its twenty-six poems are straightforward and spare, so that Phillips’ meaning is available to most readers even on first reading. Therein lies the gamble. Many of those readers might be tempted to dismiss these pieces as “easy,” unchallenging, or even lacking in craft. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I heard the late Jim Wayne Miller once describe his ideal poem as one which was as clear as a high mountain stream, so clear that it looked only inches deep until someone stepped in and found himself or herself completely immersed. Miller’s model hovered in the back of my mind throughout my engagement with these poems, most of which deal with their speaker’s roles as father, husband and son. Just as the style gambles with simplicity, the subject matter gambles with sentimentality, but in every case the house loses. Phillips’s poems bring the

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reader back again and again to delight in their aptness, their focus on what should be most important in our lives.

Perhaps my favorite among these offerings is titled "Our Situation," a brief description of two parents watching a child who has fallen asleep clutching "a balsawood airplane." The last four lines of the poem (almost half its length) note

How reckless it seems.
How naive:
to love a thing
so fragile and so weak.

Most of the significance here arises from the double meaning of the word "thing," applied to both the boy and his love for the airplane and the parents in their love for the child. Recognizing this, it's easy to miss the weight of the words "reckless" and "naive," terms that apply to the emotions invested in virtually every situation explored in *boy*, whether it is when a playmate is suddenly engulfed in flames in the midst of a childhood game or when the parents, having slipped away from their adult children after hearing bad news from a biopsy and a bone scan, are found at a theater in a nearby strip mall watching a comedy on screen,

the old wife whispering everything twice,
the old husband
cupping a palm to his ear,
as the late sun lit up an orchard
behind the strip mall
and they sat in the dark holding hands.

Nothing here is wasted. Even the detail of the orchard's proximity to the strip mall evokes the threat of loss and the difficulty of holding on to things that any sensitive person would value. The children's temporary loss of their parents foreshadows the more profound loss to come, while the parents' physical connection is a testament to the power of holding on, recklessness or naiveté notwithstanding.

Phillips does offer more complex poems in *boy*. One of them is a meditation on time and causation entitled "What Happens," in which the past intrudes into the future as an automobile accident unfolds. Another reveals how the finality of a friend's death becomes real to the speaker hours after he has been awakened and told about it. In another of the more complex poems a child's death during his birth turns out not to have happened at all, even though the speaker's imagination of that death and his projection of the child's future life are so vivid that he is changed by the event,

And I have never been the same
though I've learned

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to pretend I do not know
what can happen and unhappen
in no more time than it would take
an angel or a devil to descend into my wife
and pass through her into my son
who was miraculously born into this world

....

But even in these “difficult” poems the language is direct and simple and the situations are clear and coherent.

The only poem in the entire collection that does not work for me is “Those Georgia Sundays,” Phillips’s imitation of, and homage to, Robert Hayden. Even here, however, the problem is probably more mine than Phillips’s. Hayden’s poem, about a father’s sacrifices for his family that the speaker comes to fully understand only years after they had been enacted, depends heavily upon his use of the word “offices” in the final line. In the domestic setting that Hayden creates, “offices” at first seems out of place, until its associations with duty and sacramental obligations begin to obtrude on the reader’s mind. In “Those Georgia Sundays” Phillips’s phrase “waxing floors at Southern Bell” brings the word back to its ordinary meaning. His “austere and lonely offices” are the spaces he and his father cleaned in the commercial complex. Even though the whisper of death hums through the buffers the father and son slide across the floors, the echo of Hayden’s line has for me an almost bathetic effect.

But this is a minor quibble. The book is physically beautiful, the cover’s close-up half portrait of a young boy almost transcendent. And the collection as a whole soars. The risk that Phillips takes with simplicity is emblematic of the risk he asks us all to take in investing our emotions in such fragile roles as fathers, mothers, children and friends.

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Larry Brown and the Blue-Collar South. *Edited by Jean W. Cash and Keith Perry.*
Foreword by Rick Bass. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. 184 pages.
\$50.00 (cloth).

When Larry Brown died in 2004 at the age of 53, scholars began laying the critical groundwork to secure his place in literary history. In 2007, Jay Watson published his edited collection of *Conversations with Larry Brown*, showing just