

REVIEWS

Journeyman

Michael Rychlik. Pocol Press: Clifton, Virginia. 2007.

Michael Rychlik in his debut novel uncovers the overlooked but fascinating world of minor league baseball in Florida during the 1940s. Popular small-town teams with fading veterans and ambitious rookies kept America's game rolling through a rural and sparsely populated state. In *Journeyman*, the waning fortunes of former Babe Ruth teammate Myril Hoag are chronicled day by day, inning by inning, by greenhorn Gainesville Sun journalist Jersey Paige. Jersey's tour covering the minor league baseball circuit helps the young man to understand the complex lives of the players he writes about and to delve into the center of his own heartaches.

The book's opening chapter sets the tone, as young Jersey badgers Hoag for a story about the Babe. Jersey and Hoag roll into a bar for drinks and a pool match, and with each passing moment the old baseball hero, now a manager for Gainesville's minor league club, drops his guard. Soon Hoag unwinds a story about how Ruth had been too drunk to play on the first Babe Ruth Day at Yankee Stadium. Hoag had subbed for the legend and had knocked six consecutive base hits, a record. The crowd didn't notice. However, when the Babe pinch hit late in the game and smacked a double, the crowd went wild. This sense of melancholy, this bitterness from being both overlooked and forgotten, pervades the narrative and adds to the story's sense of longing.

Myril Hoag, now past his prime, longs for more than coaching "Class D — the lowest rung of professional baseball"; the man actually sees himself making a comeback as a pitcher in the majors: "I played thirteen years in the major leagues, and now I'm working my way back." He flexed his right arm and knotted his bicep. "And this old soup bone's my meal ticket." Hoag is just one of several characters in the novel who holds onto unrealistic hopes too tightly.

Jersey Paige, the novel's central protagonist, also has unrealistic hopes. He's interested in the server who works at Presto, the local Greek diner. The only problem is that Katina Papadakis's interest has flagged. Additionally, her father Demetrios, the diner's owner, is definitely not happy with an "amerikanikos" boy pining for his little girl. He wants Katina to be like her reliable and malleable mother; but Katina has ambitions of her own, including becoming a professor.

The love story between Jersey and Katina again reinforces the theme of longing that courses throughout the book. Jersey always has the Greek girl on the forefront of his mind, distracting him from his sports beat for the newspaper, filling him with melancholy.

Another important melancholic figure is Jake Powell, another washed-up big-leaguer hacking his way through the minors. Powell, an alcoholic and a malcontent, contrasts sharply with Hoag, his former teammate with the Yankees. Powell has no illusions about where he's headed. He shuffles

through life wolfing down as many drinks as possible. Hoag's long-shot hopes of a major league comeback, though delusional, seem noble compared to Powell's mercenary approach to life.

Despite the book's plaintive themes, the pages are filled with humor. Cantankerous, funny ballplayers and fans pack each of the small stadiums described in the novel. Quirky pitchers bring the most grins. Young hurler Smoky Thomas has a particularly odd warm-up ritual on the mound: "He was glancing down at the baseball primer still open on the ground, as he reared back for his next pitch. At that juncture Smoky inadvertently knocked off his cap, so he froze in mid-windup--his fine, rust colored hair hung down his face. He stuck out his lower lip and tried blowing the bangs out of his eyes while he teetered on one foot and eased down to retrieve his cap."

Michael Rychlik's humor and humanity ring true throughout his novel, and because of these attributes this narrative will resonate not just with baseball fans but with any reader who appreciates a story with heart.

— Michael Trammell

Madonna Magdalene

Kim Garcia. Turning Point Press: Cincinnati, Ohio. 2006.

In Kim Garcia's new collection of poems, *Madonna Magdalene*, the intense and formal voice pulls us to the striking imagery that haunts stanza by stanza. Her voice sings confidently as the poems' lines strike chords within the macrocosm of religious mythology and the microcosm of family, children, and home.

Her poems that re-see Biblical characters strive to humanize them. The concrete descriptions especially bring this process to life. In "Mary Magdalene" the disciple remembers scenes from her past: "when / the dark-faced one left a halo of gold coins / on my pillow, and I stretched in a glad, empty bed, while the morning air smelled of tired donkeys / and laborers." These well-captured moments allow us to easily live within the skin of her pain: "I repented that my heart lay still among my ribs / and did not once / flap and break itself against the bone." Garcia's poem "Genesis Suite: Adam's Complaint" presents a similar metamorphosis. Adam's morning begins with him hearing Eve "pouring milk from bucket to pitcher / singing snatches of a song." From this experience, his musings bring him to realize the painful distance that now separates him from her: "I think of you in the darkening house, / how we never speak together." The poet's artfulness throughout the text makes us see these characters as both mythical and human.

The final third of the book offers characters springing from the narrator's family life. In "The Child Goes Missing" the sheer panic of losing a child in a public place is concretely described: "I asked a stranger to check the airport bathroom. / A stranger! He disappeared into that washroom

of strangers where / a seven-year-old boy could go stranger and stranger, and come back / on the back of milk cartons. . . ." The tension is powerful here as Garcia gives glimpses of the mind in panic-mode: "fourth-worlds or fourth wards of deviants and maladjusteds / whose mothers probably lost them in airports just like this. . . ." Fortunately, the narrative ends positively, and the poet's lines strongly make us feel the relief and resentment of the moment: "I am refueled with maternity gone mad, / and I can't decide whether I will kill my son and then his father, / Or strike first that charming snake." This piece, along with many others in the collection, works well to give us an intimate vantage point into the microcosm of family life.

The care the narrator has for family is perceptively illuminated in the collection. In "Coaxing" a mother monitors her young son as he explores the outside world: "You chewed stick and sand, / as I hugged my knees / to my chest on the cement bench. . . ." Though worried, she watches calmly as he tastes "every pleasure and plague / a public playground offers." When the boy bites into a suspicious plant, the narrator quickly digs from his mouth the "mash of red berry, leaf mould / and grit." The poem opens the reader into the mysteries of these small moments, how each one is "laid out in front of us, beckoning."

We are fortunate as readers to have a poet like Kim Garcia confidently and bravely offer us poems that reveal these mysteries via imagery that haunts and edifies.

— Michael Trammell

Breathing Under Water

Lu Vickers. Alyson Books: New York. 2006.

On any particular week you can click onto Publishers Weekly and feel overwhelmed — ten full pages of reviews display about four reviews per page, representing four books being published in one week. And these books represent only the brand news ones, and only the ones who made it to the top with reviews by PW.

Lu Vickers' first novel *Breathing Under Water* made it to the list, yet *Breathing* stands out from the crowd as a fine gift to the Deep South's great literature. This deeply felt, passionate and funny novel tells the story of Lily, a female Huck Finn growing up keen and curious in the tired tiny town of Chattahoochee.

Set in northern Florida near the Georgia/Alabama state line, Chattahoochee has an economy that revolves around a mental institution and the town's inhabitants who are at least as crazy as the institutionalized patients. It's the late 60s, early 70s, and we're introduced to the Dime Store, the Chattaburger, the railroad tracks, Happy Town where the black people live, the Lost in Space jook joint and the Renfroes' Country Store. We feel as much ennui as did Frankie in Carson McCullers' *Member of the Wedding*.

And that's not the best of it.

The powerful Chattahoochee River up the road baptizes Lily in a most peculiar way. Lily's family is its own mental illness boat drifting precariously along with Mama at the helm. Mama, overwhelmed with having three kids and a husband who hasn't met her glamorous expectations, nearly drowns Lily in a "dark green moccasin-infested lake" just past the river's dam. Lily has fallen in, and Mama watches Lily drowning. Lily says Mama's eyes are "flat as pennies." Then Mama suddenly jumps in. By the description that follows, you're not sure if Mama's trying for suicide-murder or just daughter-murder.

Mama is that crazy.

Each chapter feels like a short story, a bead on a prayer necklace that will lead you and Lily, somehow, out of this funny/grotesque carnival existence. Some chapters have hilarious descriptions. When Lily attends a Pentecostal church with friend Rae, she describes how the preacher's words poured out like scalding water. "You will burn in hay-yell if you do not take the Lord Jesus Christ to be your Savior ... you can be pretty as a peach or ugly as a bulldog, but GodtheFather won't have none of ya, less you take the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart."

In this unique-to-the-South gothic scene, Lily watches as one woman "in a faded blue dress threw her hands up to the ceiling and bawled, 'Oh Jesus.' Then something twitched in her and words starting gurgling out of her mouth. 'Oh gubba gubba, Jesus God, gubba gubba,' her whole body shaking like she was strapped to a washing machine going full tilt."

Sensuality shows up soon enough when Lily, who finds she's far more attracted to girls than boys, describes her first kiss with Rae this way: "I felt her leaning closer to me, felt her warm breath on my cheek, smelled the sweaty salt on her neck, the pine sap on her hands. She touched her tongue to my lips and it was such a strange, hot and wet feeling that I felt myself falling right through the ground."

When a wild-hearted, keen-thinking girl grows up in a suffocating town, devilry is bound to follow, and so it does.

One thing you get from novelist Lu Vickers is a surprise at every turn, from Mama's deciding to wear wigs to Lily's meeting of an "exotic" family that moves to town--a deaf woman and her son from a mysterious middle European country. Vickers is particularly good at her ear for odd dialect, and we hear it when the mother, Mrs. Lubjek says to Lily when they meet, "Look at by fase so I cad read your libs. I'b deaf you know. I cand hear you."

Lily, stuck in a dusty, unbreathable North Florida town begins to see as Huck Finn did on his escape down the river, that the culture at large may not have any answers at all, and that Lily must find her own.

— Mary Jane Ryals