

work—which takes at least one hundred pages—the tension, which Rumaker adeptly builds to a climax, opens like a flood gate. In fact, Rumaker's success in *Black Mountain Days* is his ability to make his memoir read like a novel of strained, familial relationships.

Because of its honest appraisal of Olson and the college in general, Rumaker's book will be useful to Black Mountain College and Olson scholars; it will be equally useful to literary critics interested in Rumaker's own development as a writer. And for those non-scholars who are simply enthralled with BMC history and lore, *Black Mountain Days* is essential reading.



A Book of Witness: Spells & Gris-Gris.

Jerome Rothenberg.

New Directions, 1999.

118 pages, \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Ricks Carson

Early reviewers of this book of 100 poems took their cue from the author's own "Postface." So they cited the way Rothenberg resuscitated the "I" from the layers of confession, concern, and autobiography (Robert Kelly) under which the late twentieth century was smothering it, and restored it to its age-old role as the vehicle of universal truth.

There is more than a little echo of Whitman, though without Whitman's vast range or music. Numbered like many poems in *Leaves of Grass*, those in *A Book of Witness* express Rothenberg's effort to find himself in all things and reach the prophet's paradoxical position as "one of you, yet distinct from you." In poem #79, "I fend off what was done before," Rothenberg writes, "I sleep / in thrall recalling times / I clamored for / atonement. I fend off / what was done before / & find it boring." His confrontational stance is clear. The lyrical impulse is touched and then dismissed.

Rothenberg spends a good deal of time and energy disavowing, even discrediting, the old God of our fathers. Poem #4, "I have paid the price and lost," begins boldly: "God of the universe / manqué, / you issue from my mouth. / I watch you dying." The title of the book's last poem, #100, "I am that I am," deliberately understates God's enigmatic response to Moses in Exodus. In this way Rothenberg asserts that his name, like God's, is a self-referential mystery.

In his epigraph he quotes Maria Sabina: "Language belongs to the *saint children*. / They speak and I have power to translate." So it is no surprise when he states, "Voices

are dumb until / I speak for them," and "This morning / all the voices in my dream / spoke with one voice" (#51, "I come into the new world"). This prophet comes not to dump failure and doom on us, but to celebrate us. He is no disembodied voice out of a burning bush or an imponderable God-man come among us, but as thin, tottery, and familiar as the pronoun he uses probably 500 times in the 100 poems, "I."



The Danger in Everything.

Jeff Walt.

Mad River Books, 2000.

60 pages, \$12 (paperback).

Reviewed by Cy Dillon

The memory of a wound, years after the shock has worn off, is sharper than the cut itself. Jeff Walt's narrative poems are rich with the sharpness of beauty and violation, taking us deep into his life and those of his subjects—family and lovers. Walt is especially deft at creating scenes, landscapes of personal interaction, where every detail is potentially beautiful or terrifying and where there is particular emphasis on the vulnerability of children and the oppressive power of the memory of abuse or loss. While these scenes vary from memories of childhood experiences with siblings to visiting nephews and nieces to cutting his mother's hair, many are centered on sexual relationships and their aftermath.

Poets notice everything but call the reader's attention to only those details that advance the logic or mood of a particular poem.

I've learned to cherish the familiar:
the pond black and ominous,
the lichened bridge rotting,
a cluster of siskins and goldfinches
traveling together gather
in the pines, how, last night,
I dreamt you beside me and awoke
To realize—again—that you left.

So, where is the danger? Walt writes of the double edge of desire. In his starkly realistic world, the force that builds families and lifetime relationships also fuels abuse, violence and self-abasement. Walt has a gift for making us feel that danger in our own flesh.

He threatened to crush my skull
and I said I'd cut off his cock
as he beat me against the wall
like a rug full of dust.