

Punjabi Muslim family and community. The book's main achievement is the near-accurate, piquant translation of an elusive subculture, that often gives rise to tawdry and comic interpretations, into an international literary idiom—the breakthrough Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* achieved.



Black Diaries.

Jill Hoffman.

Box Turtle Press, 2000.

90 pages, \$10 (paperback).

Reviewed by David Need

Jill Hoffman's second volume of poems, *Black Diaries*, brings together poems published in a wide variety of magazines and anthologies, including *The New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, and Roth's *Poetry Annual*. The editor of *Mudfish*, Hoffman has taught at Bard, Barnard, and Brooklyn College, and currently teaches out of her home.

Aptly titled, the poems in this collection have the compact, unguarded, transgressive language of a relationship diary. Most explore erotic feelings and disclose both the tangles of desire and the scouring, complicated wounds that mark us, as in the brief "Regret":

Mother, when I dress him
as a woman I love him.
I wish I hadn't thrown away
some of your old girdles.

The danger of confessional poetry is that of aggrandizement and indirect ambition, and this collection is not wholly free of this. However, the expressionist lurch of Hoffman's syntax and imagery redeems what might have been lost to vanity. I found myself thinking of the hidden surfaces Rodin left buried when he worked two figures out of a stone, of the surfaces opened up between two people when they have touched, in which there is not articulation but a dense unfinished possibility. And I found myself thinking of the way honesty is often effected by the application of a tourniquet, as in the poem "2 Oct" which Hoffman begins in adumbration:

Laundry. Recipes. Mice. My daughter
is away and my mind begins to fill
the house. Unbelievable. I am happy.

And ends with precise, disparate description:

At dawn we swim in the pool of the college that fired me.
I wear my hair unbraided so that he will not pull it.

This balance of clean decision and difficult feeling is, finally, thrilling.



Daode Jing.

Laozi.

Thomas Meyer, translator.

Flood Editions, 2005.

111 pages, \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by J. P. Seaton

Thirty-some years ago, I made an absolute rule to turn down book review requests for any book that I couldn't give an unqualified rave. Thomas Meyer's *daode jing* has made me break my rule.

Let me *try* to simply list the reasons, the pros that made me want to break the rule, and the cons I had to overcome. Oh, it's not so simple. I read Chinese (more, at least, than most folks who have dealt with this particular book), and Tom doesn't, so there are quite a few places where I could point out words and phrases that are flat impossibilities. That's a con, certainly, if only because if I should choose to take that approach I would bore almost every reader who's not a vulture by nature, and more importantly, I'd probably fatally distract many readers from the good points, both small and large, that this work of understated art possesses. Example: although the author makes the daring, but I think excellent decision to leave the uninterpretable terms *Dao* (still more commonly recognized as *Tao*) and *de* (*Te*) un"translated." On the other hand, he chooses to write them as *daode* in the title of the book, *daode jing*. Most readers of this magazine, and a good portion of America's "intelligentsia" know what the two terms are trying to mean. Readers of Chinese know that the two syllable term *daode*, means *morals*, or maybe even morals and ethics. Though the book is neither immoral nor unethical (or even amoral, or *even* morally relativistic when read deeply), neither *dao* nor *de* alone means anything having to do with morals or ethics. I think this example is irrelevant, and I haven't found, among the many, many minor misinterpretations of the dictionary, anything that significantly distorts the Tom Meyer's take on Lao Tzu's message. It is an ambiguous, paradoxical message, open to many interpretations: as a translator of classical Chinese, I find this author's interpretations most often well within the range of possible readings. As a reader and lover of Chinese poetry and Taoist and Zen (Taoist inspired) philosophical works, let me move to the pros.

Like the choice of using *dao* and *de* as counters for the

meanings that context gives them, on the macro level Meyer's decision to let the text run straight on, without cutting the text ceremoniously into numbered verses is a good one, if only because it escapes entirely the scholar's foolish hassling over where certain passages begin and end (and that is certainly not the only thing it accomplishes). At the micro level, the similar decisions, to do entirely without capitalization, and to do entirely without punctuation, seemed to me, at first, a little capricious. Of course the text has no capitals. Of course, the text, in pre-twentieth-century editions, also has no punctuation at all. So where's the problem? Well . . . good question, as the old Professor knows is what you say when you're caught out on a limb you're sawing off (in front of a room full of eager, or incredulous, students). Many of the ambiguities of the original are put back into play by these simple adherences to the *structure* of the original.

Bill Gates tells me that before I began this paragraph I'd already gotten to 527 words. So, fun as this is, I'll close with the real reasons, or just a few of the real reasons.

I chose to break my rule and review a book I'd have to say some negatives about. I love this book's well-chosen words, clearly transposed ideas, beautiful rhythmic phrases written in spoken English . . . I'm always happy to be astounded by these things, from wherever they come, *ripples from still water*:

its hard to handle
a cup filled to the brim

and better to know
when to stop pouring [9] *

That's singing simplicity, to my ear. Go to the book, pages five, six, and seven, to see how well the typographical decisions *allow* the ambiguity of lines, phrases, and joined verses to vivify and amplify the ambiguity and paradox of these passages, bringing the words closer to visible reality than many, or even most, translations.

Those who hold to the de know the score

While those who do not hold to the de
only know how to settle the score. [79]

At \$13.95, buying this book might be considered stealing. Dare it.

* The numbers indicate the order of the passages in the more traditional organizational scheme. They are provided, unobtrusively in another nice design decision, in the margins of the running text in the Meyer version.



Black Mountain Days.

Michael Rumaker.

Black Mountain Press, 2003.

544 pages, \$25 (paperback).

Reviewed by Mark A. Roberts

In *Black Mountain Days*, Michael Rumaker narrates his experiences while learning to write at one of America's truly experimental schools, Black Mountain College (BMC). His tale is peppered with humorous and interesting anecdotes of eccentrics who taught at and attended BMC—Lou Harrison, Robert Creeley, M. C. Richards, John Cage, and Jonathan Williams (among others)—and is salted with historical facts about the college's workings and its ultimate demise. These spices are skillfully rubbed onto Rumaker's main course: the tale of his own struggles to become a writer, a writer of whom his mentor, Charles Olson, could be proud.

What strikes me about *Black Mountain Days* is how Rumaker captures the character and tenor of that grand literary figure Charles Olson, while simultaneously painting the intricate emotional and intellectual ties Rumaker—the shy, young, aspiring artist—had with the dominant, authoritative Olson. Olson was not a lenient mentor. Brutally honest is perhaps the best description. Rumaker recalls, after turning in a particularly bad story, that Olson became “incensed” and tore into his work for not rendering a *lived* experienced. “What struck me most,” Rumaker recalls, “was the impact on me of the vehemence of Charles' anger, but one phrase in particular cut deep: ‘I'm not here to be psychologist to you!’” Rumaker, having been kicked out of his father's home for being “queer,” was certainly going through some psychological stress. But despite this harsh disciplining, Rumaker clung to Olson, and by Rumaker's own accounts, Olson became “a father figure” to him.

Throughout the narrative, Olson is animated, towering over Rumaker, criticizing the young man's work, prodding him to take creative and intellectual risks, and praising him only when the green writer offered some sign of potential. In many ways, *Black Mountain Days* reads like an artist's coming-of-age story. And although the narrative begins sluggishly, Rumaker eventually pulls us in when he recounts the tense relationship he had with Olson.

Admirably, Rumaker eschews romanticizing his literary mentor and yet, at the same time, honors him with statements like these: “I loved Charles for his shifting sensibilities . . . the flashes of tenderness and strength.” And: “Hard as Charles' fury was, his verbal slaps . . . awakened me to a new birth . . . his rage had been a cruel but necessary baptism.” When Olson finally praises Rumaker's