

NEW DELTA REVIEW

MY OWN ALPHABET: STORIES, ESSAYS, MEMOIRS

by *Bobbie Louise Hawkins*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1989. 151 pp.

Who can forget the particular joys of Campbell's Alphabet Soup on a cool Sunday afternoon: scooping letters out of the broth, laying them on plate or table, creating words, or better yet naming all the words known in your particular world for a specific letter? Bobbie Louise Hawkins, who is a member of a group that performs jazz, story-telling and folk music, has done just that, going beyond words to concepts, illusions, stories, fragments, all evoked by a different letter of the alphabet.

My Own Alphabet, a collection of stories, essays and memoirs, is primarily a series of stream-of-consciousness snippets and quotes centered on such diverse topics as Abortion, Dogs Barking, Frogs, Gossip, Nietzsche's Sister, Optimism, Raisins, Spouses of Writers, and Zeal. The book reads like a journal; there are forty-nine entries in all, ranging from one sentence to nine pages in length. For the most part, Ms. Hawkins is an economical writer, often witty and philosophical. At times she tends to veer off, mumbling to herself about issues and events that the reader is hard pressed to care about. The collection is fueled by barely contained anger, and this self-focus creates a claustrophobic effect in several places. Two entries under different letters, about vacations in Mexico, are probably meaningful only to her ex-husbands.

She is at her best in the middle of the collection with entries that come closest to being stories. "This One's for Linda Joy" is about her cousin's restrictive marriage, continual nervous breakdowns, flight to San Francisco, return to Lubbock and to marriage, and her subsequent suicide. The

writing is tight, evocative and heartbreaking without becoming sentimental. The second story, "Maggie Maggee" is a hilarious account of the author's attempt at a mystery story, which she sells to the *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine* under a pseudonym.

There are other wonderful, shorter entries. "Raisins" is about the guilt daughters still feel, at fifty-five, about accepting the various forms that a mother's love can take. "Burnt Park" tells a gut-wrenching tale of a bitter old woman, her husband, and their dream of returning to Sicily. "Adieu" addresses the pain of endings; "the soil is so rich here that if a bird flies over and shits, there's a garden," the narrator wistfully recalls, waving her white handkerchief at the garden, the house, her marriage.

At the end of each entry there are quotes from writers, philosophers and common folk. A favorite quote, an anonymous Eighteenth Century suicide note, under A: "All this buttoning and unbuttoning." "Vicious Valentine," a quote by the author, sums up the central theme of this collection: "Here I sit all broken-hearted/ Loved a twit but now we've parted/ The present's grim the future's brighter/ He shouldn't have done it to a writer."

Unlike the soup, one should not consume *My Own Alphabet* in one sitting. The sheer self-focus of the author is overwhelming. But taken several letters at a time, the collection as a whole provides insight, humor and a personal account of one woman's journey into a richer life, a time where one can be "better . . . alone, and naked, on a bed late at night, in silver shoes."

-Laurie L. Drummond