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Review: Mary Rykov: some conditions apply

Critique: Mary Rykov: some conditions apply

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## Book Review

*some conditions apply*

Mary Rykov

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I was delighted to review Mary Rykov's first book of poetry, *some conditions apply*. And, to be honest, I was also quite intimidated. Having spent little time with poetry thus far in my life, I really didn't know how to begin to do justice to this beautiful and meaningful first collection. Full disclosure: I've known Mary, who has been a music therapist, researcher, author, editor, educator, and colleague, for over 40 years. And now she adds poetry to her accomplishments.

I have a fondness for this little book. The appeal of the book's cover immediately draws me in—on a white background, a simple, tall, yellow dandelion flower stands straight up to speak to me, supported by a stem with one green leaf and a new bud. The title—*some conditions apply*—is in lower case. Already, before opening this book, this front cover image presents many metaphors that call for reflection. Sometimes dandelions—Mary's favourite flower—are weeds, growing wildly in wrong places. Yet other times they are gathered to make healing tea; this image reminds me of an elderly couple in our neighbourhood who trudge up the hill every spring and summer day with empty baskets, and return, smiling broadly, with their treasured find of dandelion greens and flowers spilling out from their containers. They know the special value of dandelions. Yes, some conditions definitely do apply.

Once opening the cover, we are invited on a poetic journey filled with creativity and skill. The poems are variously personal, topical, and sometimes witty. Often I was so deeply moved that I needed time and space to let particular poems reverberate and steep within me before I could read on. As with music, poetry can connect us deeply with the many layers and complexities of our humanity.

The book is organized into four unnamed sections, in which the poems' narrators seemingly interconnect and weave through four stages of Mary's life journey so far, "unpacking ... searching / the butterfly for the pupa's soul" (p. 13). In the first poem, "befor[e]wards & afters" with "songs inside eggs / like portals to always" (p. 3), María Helena Auerbach Rykov is introduced to us as *puertorriqueña*, a Puerto Rico-born woman. We are also informed about centuries of migrations to the Caribbean of Jews seeking refuge from persecution, including Mary's father:

My father would tell you  
Puerto Rican Jews  
live in a paradise  
far from Gestapo selections ...

I will tell you the connection  
for this *puertorriqueña* to Puerto Rico  
is like the *sabra* to Israel  
with irrational tribal ties  
that won't let go (pp. 8–9)

In many of her poems, Mary writes about the immense pain and suffering that accompany the immigrant experience. In “suite in the shadow of death’s valley,” for example, she writes:

We are a small family  
their daughter explains

*but what we lack in size  
we make up for in dysfunction* [emphasis added]

... that follows ancestors

From the Old World to the New  
Without stopping to clear customs (p. 22)

I think of today’s peoples of the world who seek refuge and don’t find the paradise her father experienced in Puerto Rico. The child crying, “take me home,” can’t go home:

Cry when they try  
to send me outside  
to play in cold slush ...

*Mama, tengo frío, tengo frío*  
She says she knows but  
she won’t take me home (p. 12)

Each new place leads to more desperation and possible family dysfunction that can result from not finding a safe home where culture and customs are respected—for example, as stated by the speakers in “roads to refuge”:

Help us: we need  
we need comfort—  
our safety stolen  
by this past we carry

parched and blistered  
stopping only  
to pile the cairns  
for our dead (p. 72)

Death and dying are addressed frequently in Mary’s poems, as in “the last time you phoned me,” “cottonwood,” “Bubba,” and “Choice.” The latter, quoted below, is inspired by “When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver (1935–2019), in which Oliver writes of her hopes for her own ending days to be free from painful self-recrimination:

Sometimes a life grows  
into its death;  
sometimes death  
takes a life  
and tears it asunder.  
On any given rain-soaked morning  
the choice remains ...

this choice to be songful  
and targeted  
*or full of argument* [emphasis added]. (pp. 23–24)

At other times, Mary addresses issues in health care, expressing systemic limitations and challenges for music therapists who must deal with those limits while also offering compassionate care—for example, in “Case Closed.” “How to have a good death in Canada circa 2020” is a sadly too-true list of 10 items beginning with “1. Don’t be poor” (p.74). In “routine surgery,” the surgery fails, which results in burning pain and the need to “make friends / with the patient compassion / only pain can teach” (p. 14). These words ring true for me personally, and contain great wisdom. Sometimes it can be a humbling journey to learn to befriend the patience and self-compassion that pain teaches us.

And of course, being a music therapist, many of Mary’s poems describe our essential human need for beauty and music for our healing and for our souls—“without music we die of meaninglessness” (p. 29)—and from these very moving lines in “homage to music therapy”:

Rocking and crying  
your soul in tatters, pain flows  
through a shattered mind  
We sing and bring you solace  
making music of your moans (p. 33)

The poems in the fourth section of Mary’s book talk about resolution, about the tying-up stage, to “reach for strength as courageous reboot” (p. 65), to find “the resolve to resolve” and to have the courage to face the complexities of “TRUTH” as in “a postphilosophy rant”:

Now as then  
the embodied paradox  
TRUTH = truths (p.70)

I feel challenged to remember that truth is often complex and can contain conflicting positions. The healing task is to hold the space for the paradox of these opposites where “Truth sprouts / like small-crevice wildflowers / after a rain” (p. 30).

Once again, I’m struck by the timeliness and timelessness of Mary’s poetry and how our understanding of truth is one of the “conditions that apply” to our human need to resolve our own lives and life on our planet, especially in these most difficult times. The issues addressed in Mary’s collection of poems reflect today’s urgent challenges of immigration, culture, health care, and truth.

I'm also now more aware that music and poetry are closely aligned. Senses are activated. The organization of the spoken sounds and rhythms are like listening to the various elements of music. The skill of crafting various forms visually on the page has the huge effect of sparking my interest to continue exploring to see more. Mary's creative talents and skills are clearly evident by simply scanning the various pages and seeing the diversity of forms, shapes, and spaces—sometimes words in a large ball on the page, or words that create weaving, flowing lines. Most notably, bold highlighting draws meaning from existing text in “Translation and Interpretation 101” (pp. 52–53), which I've learned is an erasure poem—a form of poetry that is mainly written in faint print, with occasional bold print words that are selected to create their own meaning when strung together.

As with music, poetry can also reach right in to touch my emotions. With a few well-chosen words, poetry evokes associations, memories, and images, allowing me time to reflect, to ponder, to stretch, to have more compassion, to “resolve to resolve.” And, if the time is right, to transform.

I note that New Zealand music therapist, Claire Molyneux, in her 2020 review of *some conditions apply*, points out that there are many ways music therapists use poetry in their practice. These two creative art forms of therapy are natural companions, whether it be in songwriting or in singing the lyrics of so many of the pre-composed songs that have lasted through the ages as sung poetry. They can connect to what really matters to us in this very moment.

Thank you, Mary, for the gift of this collection of meaningful poems. That dandelion blooms in me as a new appreciation for the power of poetry.

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