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The Book of Feral Flora by Amanda Ackerman & Skeena by Sarah de Leeuw

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Speaking As River, Speaking As Plant

The Book of Feral Flora by AMANDA ACKERMAN

Les Figues Press, 2015 \$17.00

Skeena by SARAH DE LEEUW

Caitlin Press, 2015 \$18.00

Reviewed by EMILY MCGIFFIN

Amanda Ackerman's *The Book of Feral Flora* is a thick, nondescript book with title and author printed in orange block capitals on a plain teal cover. The design is jarring: the garish letters lift off the dark background as if they don't want to be there, they cast shadows, shape-shifting; the plain text isn't what it seems. Leafing through, I saw a raft of prose poems of varying lengths, many of them experiments in language, several written in capitals. I prepared myself for dense reading of difficult poems that I quite possibly was not going to enjoy.

Instead, the collection is not only beautifully creative but a delight to read. Ackerman's wry, unadorned style makes her surreal narratives deeply intriguing, rather than merely puzzling, and very often funny. I enjoyed the interactive "Weed Course" that offers selections from an offbeat questionnaire: "The temporary versus the permanent: which is more greatly desirable?" (5) and "Are Humans and Nature adversaries, partners, child/parent, husband/wife, business colleagues, peers, gods/minions, collaborators, friends, inextricably linked, or extricably unrelated?" (5). The "language" poems were fascinating as well. Here the shifting patterns of words are a result of interventions in the original texts by plants who have been invited to rewrite them. In

her process notes and in an accompanying article on the Poetry Foundation website, Ackerman describes using digital technologies similar to those developed to create plant music with the aid of binary code and amplifiers. Discussing the notion of enabling plants to use language to communicate, Ackerman states, "I don't want to simplify this process and say that plants were having to use a human language. Although in reading through their pieces, one can definitely get a sense of their occasional struggle to accommodate us and adapt to the way humans use language" (Ackerman, 2014). As well as providing a unique opportunity to reflect on plant intelligence and communication, the poems offer a fascinating study of how patterns of words have been rearranged by Iris, by Gerber Daisy, by Peppermint and Rhubarb according to their various moods at different times of the day.

Like *The Book of Feral Flora*, Sarah de Leeuw's *Skeena* gives voice to a non-human entity that doesn't communicate using human language. Like plants, rivers lack representational agency in a linguistic sense; *Skeena* addresses this silence with a single, long, reverberating ode to the northern river that is the poem's protagonist. *Skeena* is the voice of the Skeena River telling its own story in a verse constructed from "historical newspapers, highway signs, First Nations band newsletters, tourist websites, local testimonials, museum chronicles, stories, and scientific reports" (6). The compendium builds a polyphonic version of the river, combining a multitude of voices, anecdotes and perspectives. In an era in which we so desperately need new organizing principles, new values, fundamentally new ways of thinking about and orienting ourselves on the landscape, de Leeuw, as with her

previous book of poetry, *Geographies of a Lover*, offers a courageous new vision.

Certainly, as an informative and thought-provoking piece about this majestic northern river, its modern history, and the multitudinous threats to its continued wellbeing the book does a very fine job. Yet the book strives for more than that, presenting the Skeena as an entity with its own agency and voice. To me this endeavour seemed to be at odds with the structure and content of de Leeuw's verse, which is laden with the detritus of western capitalism. It drags our attention towards the bridges, the highways, the canneries, giving these structures and the society they represent the very power the book perhaps seeks to question while undercutting the strength and timelessness of the river itself. For instance, the book opens with a photo from the *Prince Rupert City & Regional Archives* that illustrates the 1912 construction of the Grant Trunk Pacific Bridge at Skeena Crossing. The event marked the first crossing of the Skeena and was, according to the text that follows, "That day oh the day I / became small" (12). Here the poem reflects on the impact of human activity on the natural landscape and its power to cause irrevocable harm. At the same time, it opens the Skeena's story not at the beginning of time, not in the ice age, not with the devastating burial of the ancient village of Temlaham, but with the arrival of the railway, that seminal moment in the colonial history of Western Canada. In this way, the text ratchets up the importance of that moment as it adopts—and forces the river to adopt—colonial

reference points and values. The Skeena measures time according to the Christian calendar. It catalogues the dimensions of A.Y. Jackson's Skeena Crossing in tenths of centimetres, notes latitudes and longitudes, lists mountain peaks named for missionaries.

Arguably, these are all part of the life of a river wending its way through a peopled wilderness that is far from untouched and it is clear that de Leeuw strives to honour all of its inhabitants, past and present. Crossing that landscape, I felt that the book shone when it moved out from under the shadows of block quotations and into the full beauty of the river and its familiar-yet-strange, sploosh-thunk world of slick banks and devil's club, alder-leaf rot and soft glacial till. A world in which a giant beaver shot arrows and felled a chief while the moon hung overhead, that "single vertebrate / washed ashore years after / the chum salmon rotted away" (64).

Works Cited

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EMILY MCGIFFIN is a doctoral candidate in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies where she is examining the cultural politics of South African oral poetry. Her most recent poetry collection, *Subduction Zone* (Pedlar Press, 2014), was awarded the 2015 ASLE Environmental Creative Book Award. She currently lives 107 kilometres downstream of Skeena Crossing.