BOOK REVIEWS

Lily's Odyssey by, Carol Smallwood. *(*All Things That Matter Press, Somerville, ME, 2010), 220 pp., $18.99.

Some authors use the word "odyssey" to simply represent a journey or a passage of time. In *Lily's Odyssey* author Carol Smallwood takes a more literal approach. Just as Odysseus spends years making his way home after the Trojan War, Lily struggles to find her true home in the world.

She has encountered her share of cannibals, lotus-eaters, sirens and monsters along the way, but it is her abusive Uncle Walt and his Cyclopic wife Hester (who turned her one good eye away from the incestuous situation years ago) that have haunted Lily's thoughts and dreams since childhood.

Smallwood's Homer-like use of a nonlinear plot is well-suited to the story since Lily's journey is rather like trying to piece together a jigsaw puzzle. With intelligence and humor Lily navigates the passages of her life which include marriage, motherhood, psychotherapy and education. She even spends time in Ithaca while working on a Master's Degree in Geology. In fact, geological references are abundant as Lily explores her lifelong fascination with the formation of the earth and her place on it. Readers can feel Lily's sense of frustration at the ever-shifting underground plates that prevent her from finding solid footing.

Orphaned at an early age and sent to live with her aunt and uncle, Lily later explores her obsession about abandoned animals and plants, and eventually discovers its root in her childhood. What may seem obvious to the reader is not as easily seen by Lily,
whose vision of the past has been obscured by the trauma of abuse, insensitivity and denial.

The book begins with the death of Uncle Walt and Lily's return to the house where she had spent her childhood. It is there that Lily begins to think about reinventing herself without the existence of Uncle Walt in her life.

The author's use of imagery is at times stunning. "*I heard the train whistle. I saw myself as a bird following the train as it wound its way through the landscape, leaving only smoke as evidence that it had passed*." Referring to her aunt, Lily thinks about "*Tulips closed as tightly as Aunt Hester's lips*."

Smallwood's many cultural, historical, scientific and religious references are a nod to her readers' awareness, intelligence and curiosity. They elevate the story and allow us to discover more about Lily's world and our own.

On a basic level the reader can relate to Lily's awkward attempts at relationships, and to her wickedly funny observations about people. We cheer for Lily as she leaves behind her dismissive husband Cal, the lecherous Dr. Schackmann and other toxic people whom she encounters. We understand as she questions the tenets that were instilled during her strict Catholic upbringing,

including "*the duties and sufferings of women as wives*." We yearn for Lily to find the illumination and peace of mind that she seeks.

In a particularly vulnerable moment Lily pens a letter to God. In the letter she writes, "*Women need new paths. To find our way out of the old labyrinths requires more than one lifetime."*

Through *Lily's Odyssey*, Carol Smallwood gives us hope that one lifetime might be enough for Lily and others to find their way.

Jan Siebold
School Library Media Specialist
East Aurora, New York

and then there were three by, Supriya Bhatnagar. (Serving House Books, Lexington, KY, 2010), 119 pps., $12.00.

The memoir, *and then there were three*…, is a slim book, a breathtaking look at a childhood in a diverse, changing India by Supriya Bhatnagar. The three refers to the family loss of her beloved father when Supriya was nine and her mother moves the two daughters from Bombay to Jaipur: "Even though Jaipur was a metropolis where streets had been paved, the city retained the inherent quality of the earth it lay upon."

Indian culture is deftly expressed by funerals, tea, shopping, street cleaners, and details such as her grandmother's hair: "This had been her hairstyle since the time she got married; it was just that the chignon was the size of a grapefruit when she got married, and the size of a walnut by the time she died." Supriya experiences the blackouts of the 1971 war with Pakistan, the heat and cold of India, and learns the significance of skin color. The haunting memoir includes universal types such as nosey neighbors, lecherous storekeepers--and what it was to be Hindu woman and not going into any temple during her menstruation: "Customs and traditions become ingrained in us to such an extent that to this day I follow this restriction without questioning its logic."

The author does not have an arranged marriage but after a long traditional courtship marries Anil who lives on the next street: "I loved the smell of Old Spice, his after-shave, and it was a familiar and strangely comforting smell as Daddy had used it every day." She concludes that the loss of her 39-year-old-white collar worker father from heart attack made her grow up sooner.

It reminded me of *God of Small Things* by the award-winning Indian writer, Arundhati Roy, with its insight into human nature, the portrayal of the enduring complexities of India, its touches of humor, life through a child's eyes. I enjoyed the author's sharing her wide reading and deep appreciation of the classics growing up and concluded how her well-educated parents couldn't but have had an influence on her becoming the Director of Publications for the Association of Writers & Writing Programs headquartered in Virginia which supports writers and writing programs around the world.

Carol Smallwood
Poet

Contemporary American Women: Our Defining Passages, compiled & edited by Carol Smallwood & Cynthia Brackett-Vincent, (All Things That Matter Press. Somerville, ME, 2009), 250 pp., $18.99.

This well written, easily read, and interesting book is a compilation of articles by women, all well-educated. The themes of the book cover passages of the average woman's life. This includes physical, emotional, family, career, empowerment changes and challenges, reconnecting, dealing with, and accepting parts of our lives and histories. Importantly, it also covers the relationships women have with others, friends, family, and foes, that cause us to change, or evaluate our options. Some of these topics, such as one's aging body, or the stress of career choices, difficult relationships and positive, affirming relationships, are those to which all women can relate. Other topics, such as surviving sexual abuse or the loss of a spouse, and the accompanying emotional traumas, are topics some of us have suffered, but all of us can feel empathy for those who endure.

Why read this "women's book" and not another? Hope. The hope that is so affirming and omnipresent in this book is an essential thread that runs through the entire work, binding the stories together. Through all the changes and challenges of life, all the people who help and affirm, and those who seek to denigrate women, the authors not only endured their experiences, but moved forward into the future with hope.

This is not a depressing victim story from the past, and while the stories are autobiographical in nature, it is more than that. A strong sense of spirituality, and of empowerment, accompanies hope throughout the book, encouraging the reader. *"That despite what weighs us down, even the tiniest movement or the smallest decision moves us closer to the light."* (p. 152, "Closer to the light," Hope Payson) This is what the book is all about: that each of us, with hope, can make a choice that empowers us to move towards a brighter, happier, more fulfilling future.

Two of the stories which I continue to ponder long afterwards are "I couldn't walk, talk or read: becoming a crow again" by Katie McKy, and "Returning to Russia: Returning home" by Yelizaveta P. Renfro. Both of these stories illustrate a turning point in the life of a girl or young woman. Katie McKy notes the moment she chose not to ridicule, but rather to befriend, a girl who fit in neither physically nor socially at school. Previously ostracized because of speech and walking challenges into a lowly school reading and social group called the crows, McKy chose to befriend another crow. As she notes *"Suffering can bequeath us compassion. Of course, it can also curse us with bitterness. We get to choose. Of course, choosing well might mean becoming a crow once again, which I did. Rather, I just admitted to what I'd always been."* (p.7) McKy became

a teacher, helping damaged children who had themselves become crows, and their parents.

The second story, "Returning to Russia: Returning home" by Yelizaveta P. Renfro, is the story of a self-destructive fifteen-year-old girl who is drinking, using drugs, smoking, destroying her bedroom, and flunking school. With her mother, Renfro traveled home to her ill Russian grandparents. She lived with them for a summer in a tiny, cockroach-infested apartment, lacking air conditioning or privacy. Here, she became aware of others and their dismal living conditions. Renfro kept a detailed diary and, later, typed her observations. She returned to California greatly affected, began writing, and left her old ways behind. Later, with her own daughter, Renfro recalled returning to her destroyed teenage bedroom to find her mother had cleaned it and spread a bedspread on her bed to welcome her home. *"Only now do I realize that through such small actions we impose order, which is a kind of love…* [Of her daughter, Renfro notes*] "She will run away from me, too, literally perhaps, but certainly figuratively, I can only hope that she will return home again."* (p. 95) To me, this story demonstrates another individual making a choice, becoming aware of others around them, and choosing hope for the future, and hoping for the next generation.

Too often, the books I read in college women's studies courses were about a woman's endurance, and acceptance of an unhappy life with a father who did not appreciate or respect his daughter, a husband who did not understand her, or a dream abandoned. Her life was misery. It was all about negative relationships with men, no options for work or life, not having choices, working for less pay than a man, working in an unsatisfying job, and being discriminated against in many ways. It is a new century since I took women's studies, and clearly the women in this book are more self-aware and have more options than the suffering women of the past. Part of that difference is education, providing women a chance for a quality job with pay and benefits, and laws preventing gross discrimination and allowing a vote. Like the book's cover image of a woman looking towards the rising sun, the authors figuratively and collectively look towards the new day with hope, for an improved, empowered life, not just for them, but for all women.

Overall the writers tell us that highly educated, modern American women have options that allow us to determine our future and follow our dreams. It would be interesting to read stories from the life of women who are not as well educated as these writers. What do the women without a degree working at WalMart think of their lives? Or, the women who make negative choices? Do they find their lives inspiring enough to write about for the benefit of other women? Do they have hope? Perhaps that is a topic for a future book.

Marian Matyn, Assistant Professor at Central Michigan University and Archivist of the Clarke Historical Library.