Michael McCarthy (he/him). 1,202 Words

110 Arborway Drive

Braintree, MA 02184

781-927-8068

[mccarthymichael118@gmail.com](mailto:mccarthymichael118@gmail.com)

**Night Rooms. Gina Nutt. Two Dollar Radio. $15.99.**

The personal essay flourished in the 2010’s, and its focus was the self. Indeed, the era spawned a new approach to memoir that was, though an echo of centuries-old traditions, new in its candor, brevity, and frankness. The reader related to the writer’s bluntly described their life’s struggles, but the format was often mere literary clickbait. It seemed that a nonfiction writer needed not only to excavate trauma for material but also had to condense it to 500 words. Magazines large and small sought out “relatable” pieces that could be quickly and cheaply written and read the same way, all to survive print media’s bleak prospects after the 2008 financial crash. Having begun online, the style has migrated to the page, where its trademarks will undoubtedly influence mainstream writing for years to come.

Gina Nutt’s essay collection *Night Rooms* is an heir to this newly sprung tradition. Of course, authors have inevitably written about themselves for centuries. *Night Rooms* embellishes the tradition the same way the modern personal essay does. It insists that her life—or at least parts of it—is uniquely worthy of examination and attempts to capture its most intriguing parts in the shortest form possible. Nutt’s subject is her own life story; she competes in childhood beauty pageants, obsesses over horror films, and earns an MFA for creative writing, all while grappling with depression. *Night Rooms*’ shtick is cross-cutting personal anecdotes with musings on horror tropes to show their parallels. The foundation of the book is their alleged relevance to each other. The result is disappointing.

Neither a traditional essay collection nor a memoir, *Night Rooms* inhabits an in-between space that primes the reader for her method of scouring her past. Instead of an essay, chapters consist of what might more accurately be called a prose poem cycle, each orbiting a childhood memory, horror movie, or a selected text that tickled Nutt’s macabre fancy. “I am making a lineage of what lingers,” she writes. “I am trying not to be afraid anymore.” Cataloguing what lingers leads to an approach to the essay form that forgoes discernible conclusions. Rather, they evoke an insight through juxtaposition. “I imagine a quiz that tells me which final girl I am,” she writes as she probes the many responses to trauma. “The blood-soaked woman screaming from the back of a red pickup; the woman standing in a swimming pool, fighting something only she sees; the woman who turns her back on a form risen from a mattress. Each says, in her own way, I am not afraid.” Her sleek style suggests poetry more than it does nonfiction, but the strange fusion functions, perhaps unexpectedly, to sap its poetic parts of their figurative power and the nonfiction passages their clarity. The in-between space becomes a curse. In trying to get the best of both mediums, she gets neither.

Similarly, *Night Rooms* ends up focusing on neither horror films nor its author. Nutt dwells on common, mundane experiences like watching horror flicks with friends or attending spooky museums. This may be an attempt to be “relatable,” but it bores more than it bewitches. She does manage to craft a space to wonder about how we are morbidly drawn into the fascination surrounding body horror. “If we attach ourselves to art,” she writes, “maybe art can attach itself to us.” Sadly, her brief paragraphs don’t provide much space for attachment. Rather, they function as a mirror, and the reader can only delight in recognizing themselves in these activities. For the reader who doesn’t recognize themselves—or who can’t keep up with Nutt’s countless pop culture references—there seems to be no reason to care.

In one chapter, Nutt juxtaposes home maintenance courses with haunted house narratives to pontificate about “How many ways may a house be a metaphor?” Mainly, she posits that houses blur the line between life and death. “Stairs, corners, and outlets” become reminders of “how dangerous a house can be.” Haunted electrical outlets and possessed stairs may be the subject of a fine essay, but Nutt’s handling frustrates the proclivity of the essay to draw tangible conclusions. Dryer vents carry the dust of past residents, a spooky thought when Nutt cleans them. When she finds assorted change and a plastic floss pick when cleaning them, she claims to see “a small world in each.” She devotes not a single word to describing these worlds.

The juxtapositions and parallels don’t always fail. I imagine Nutt must have felt a special need to make Chapter 13 her best, just to keep with her haunting tone. She succeeds. The chapter captures the combination of cold apathy and ravenous curiosity with which we approach violent death. Mourning on social media makes an intensely private struggle a public spectacle. Gory urban legends make gruesome deaths the subject of laughter and disbelief. Dark tourism, the industry devoted to touring the cites of serial murders, ghostly visitations, and the like, “satisfies concurrent curiosity and repulsion, while preserving audience safety.” Her approach works here for the same reason it doesn’t elsewhere. She draws no conclusions, only evokes them, but because her subject spans a commonly-shared plane of experience, her point is clear and understood.

Her poetic undertaking, then, suffers its greatest weakness and enjoys its greatest strength in one and the same facet: her structure. It raises the question of why she diverged from the standard essay at all. Embracing an experimental structure seems necessary under only two circumstances. One, the work is experimenting for experimentation’s sake, which *Night Rooms* is not. Or two, the story demands to be told in an experimental way. This may be true for some chapters, but most seem to crumble in her strange formatting. Nutt seems to have started from the reverse position; she chose a style and then set about finding a story. The end-product speaks for itself.

Nutt reserved a space to address potential critics (like me). She describes a poetry professor lamenting the way young people’s emotions are dismissed. “Is feeling a privilege unlocked at a particular age?” she wonders. “Or is the dismissal not of feeling but delivery, a disconnect between one person emoting and another person perceiving.” She never elaborates on this point. Nevertheless, I can see her going in two directions; one is an admittance of possible shortcomings and the other a critique of the critic for callousness. A good argument could be made for either. I would have liked to see her make it.

Of course, elaboration plays no role in the personal essays with which *Night Rooms* shares so many features. Some passages would seem more at home on a specialized magazine’s webpage, where the expectation of closure isn’t as strong as with a book. Nutt does manage to tease out one common thread from her favorite horror tales. Each deals with the abject, a central term in body horror’s growing academic literature. It pertains to the unwanted, the cast-out, something existing where it does not belong. Though abjection does not define every chapter, it defines the book. Nutt’s own story inhabits a structure in which it doesn’t belong. It is both an examination and example of abjection.