

Lynette Loepky, *Cease: A Memoir of Love, Loss and Desire*. Fernie, BC: Oolichan Books, 2014. Softcover, \$22.95.

We don't read memoirs only for an artistic experience. We read them out of curiosity and a desire for the vicarious experience of a novel life or lifestyle, or because we need companionship in our own processing of wrenching life and death issues. But they stand or fall by voice – the words of a smart, observant, and engaging guide. We want both a journey away from ourselves and a journey back into our own lives. “The good memoirs aren't just good stories. They are instructions on both life and form, considerations of shapes, shadows thrown up onto the wall. They are – they must be – works of art,” admonishes Beth Kephart, author of *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*. This may set a high bar for a writer's first publication in the genre, but it can also help us to see where Lynette Loepky's *Cease* comes admirably close to meeting these goals.

The premise of *Cease* – the sudden devastating illness of the eight-year partner, Cecile, whom Loepky had contemplated leaving – certainly meets the expectation of taking the reader out of her own life and into the vicarious experience of another. Fueled by relationship tensions, the book begins in a specific setting – the prairie hobby farm maintained by two professional women – and delineates a nuanced and honest portrait of a same-sex partnership. For some readers this will offer a welcome mirror into a little-represented topic; for others, it will provide a generous and unapologetic border-crossing experience. The struggle between staying with, or leaving, a difficult but beloved long-term partner – then being confronted with the terminal illness of that partner – is a human drama that will resonate with readers across the spectrum of sexual preference.

As a guide, Loepky – or Lyn, as she refers to herself throughout – is highly observant, aware of detail and nuance, and a master of describing awkward silences in intimate spaces. Her sentences, while concise and full of energy, seem deliberately and sometimes repetitively short. The strength of this style is the direct presentation of scene and image to the reader. However, I occasionally wished for a more complex syntax that made space for the writer's own ruminations on the book's many contradictory moments.

From the start, Loepky shows a sophisticated awareness of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction, between crafted narra-

tive and the people and experiences that inform it, between point of view and truth. An author's note interprets creative nonfiction as a form of writing in which "parts of the story have been fictionalized to varying degrees for literary effect" and reminds readers that "dialogue does not represent word-for-word transcripts." She refuses to define or speak for Cecile and claims the amnesty of "a single narrative perspective" – that "it is true only inasmuch as any one person's interpretation of experience is true to that person." Yet elements of the real show up in excerpts of photos, letters, journal entries, and medical records. The descriptions of Cecile's medical condition and treatment are graphic, and late in the book Cecile says, "I think I've figured out why we have to get sick before we die. . . . To shed every bit of ego, every last shred of vanity." Such passages will resonate with anyone who has spent extended time in a hospital with a loved one, yet I couldn't help but wonder whether the portrait of the beloved hadn't overemphasized the vulnerability of this once-intimidating woman.

Through the lens of her commitment to show up and be present for her partner's excruciating final months of life, Loeppky offers a clear-eyed view into the complexity of a relationship already unraveling. We see her admiration for Cecile's toughness and farm know-how; we also see her increasing discomfort with her own somewhat passive role in the relationship. Fourteen years separate these partners – not quite a generation gap, but enough distance to evoke a suppressed mother-daughter conflict pressing up against the emotional field of the relationship. Thus the story of the relationship is also a story of Loeppky's own struggle for voice and independence – the birth of the self shaped, but ultimately muffled, by the power dynamics of the relationship. Whether those issues of control belong more to Cecile, or to Loeppky's inner stories about her relationship with Cecile, is not entirely clear. She evokes her own Mennonite heritage casually, both through her friendly farm neighbors and her mother. She is surprised that her mother, steeped in Mennonite hospitality, would at first be reluctant to invite Cecile as her partner to join the family at holiday celebrations; she then portrays her mother's growth and acceptance of the relationship.

Cease is a courageous and vulnerable book, yet at times the narrator hesitates to use the full register of her voice, to interrogate more deeply how and why she stayed, and what she dreams of now. At its best, however, it offers a vivid setting and a riveting, fast-paced narrative that refuses the clichés of resolution and asks readers to ponder what binds us to relationships, as well as the re-

wards of long-term commitments. “If I’d left I wouldn’t have been able to be here, beside her, to know this, to live within this gentler, kinder way of being together for however many moments we had left.” The relationship is one of teaching and learning throughout, yet both characters remain somewhat of a mystery at the end. But this, of course, is true to life.

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