

Lloyd Ratzlaff, *Bindy's Moon*. Saskatoon:
Thistledown, 2015. Pp. 144. Softcover, \$18.95.

Bindy's Moon is a beautiful little book, with evocative cover art and aesthetically pleasing layout. From the succinct opening epigraph—" ... the events of childhood do not pass, they return like seasons of the year"—to the complex interwoven themes and story

lines, the book's unique blend of memoir, essay, confessional, and spiritual wisdom offers much more than its formal designation as "literary essays" or "reflections" might suggest. Genre labels are not adequate to describe the deep spiritual conversation that engages readers as companions in Ratzlaff's re-membering of his memories, some of which are regretful, a few angry, but all suffused with grace and overlaid with gratitude for all the stages of personal transformation from a limiting faith to a generous spirit of openness. That evolution of a sensitive self is what makes this book the tender experience that it is. Despite the occasional pained outburst against fundamentalism's small meannesses, simplistic vision, and everlasting guilt ("I'd still like to wring that religion's neck, roast and eat the fowl, and pull apart the wishbone,") the predominant tone is gentle understanding:

we were not well instructed in the passage of things, or in how to make love to the world. Our joys were sparse and stolen, hoarded rather than kissed on the fly. We wanted them to stay put, and seeing they did not, we clung to promises that a Lamb's blood would admit us someday to ... heaven.

Rarely does a book come along that illustrates so well the profound truth that language shapes content. Or, to use W.B. Yeats' metaphor, just as one cannot separate the dancer from the dance, so in *Bindy's Moon*, one cannot separate the stories from the art of the story-teller, even though said story-teller masks his magic in the plainness of his Mennonite roots. And magic it is. In Ratzlaff's world, the thingness of the world is vivid, alive. The very woodpeckers in the trees along the river nod their heads with interior wisdom. For Ratzlaff, the world is wonderfully alive, worth paying attention to for its own sake. Rather than ascribing significance to what he sees from the position of a detached, spiritually minded observer, he acknowledges his creatureliness and takes grateful delight in all that has being.

On one level, the essays concern themselves with the poignancy and pregnancy of language, in all its nuances and disguises. From the simple Low German phrases that shaped Ratzlaff's childhood perceptions to the technicality of psychological terminology and including all the ministerial phrases and love notes in between, language is magnificently itself in these stories and dreams and recollections. His parents may not have been smooth of tongue or versed in rhetoric, but Ratzlaff absorbed a reverence for the Word—"and a taste for the sublime"—that ever after gave him a vested interest in using language to its fullest. All his careers—minister of the gospel, teacher of psychology, and counselor—

depend on the wise use of words, and thus have an inherent potential for the misuse of words. Ratzlaff has negotiated his way through the pitfalls and glorious pulpit moments to his last career—writer of himself and of the world that made him. This account of the journey is worth every sentence-step of the way.

The book is organized around Ratzlaff's final journey with his "double cousin and soul-brother" Jim Ratzlaff with whom Lloyd grew up. Jim, now facing terminal cancer, is the Bindy of the title, the nickname inadvertently given by his half-deaf grandfather who misheard "Jimmy." And the moon of the title recalls Jimmy's childhood wish to hold the moon in his own chubby little hands. Thus is the core of longing in all humans made concrete in the forever unattainable moon; appropriately, the book is divided into four sections, one for each season, beginning with winter. Although the reader learns of Bindy's death near the end of the spring section, his presence remains strong throughout the second half of the book. Fall, Ratzlaff notes, "is the season of old themes returning: love's bitter-sweetness, arms open wide as the world, bearing the unbearable contradiction of longing to be in time while yet letting time pass." Symbolically dense, with a Jungian awareness, the book invites multiple re-readings.

Each section contains several discrete vignettes, linked by association, memory, dreams, thematic and aesthetic connections, and the deft unfolding of several stories: "I gather together all my memories and all my loves in a duration beyond tense or time. A small heart listens, but it listens indeed." Those who have read Ratzlaff's previous books (*The Crow Who Tampered with Time*, 2002 and *Backwater Mystic Blues*, 2006, with which *Bindy's Moon* forms a coherent trilogy [all published by Thistledown]), will already be familiar enough with the broad outlines of Ratzlaff's life to follow the time shifts with little difficulty. Yet *Bindy's Moon* stands on its own as a re-examination of a fundamentalist view of life through the lens of the imminent loss of a friend and brother. The essays, as a whole, refuse to draw conclusions, thus opening up the richness of the now of life, and revealing the weakness of Christian fundamentalism's focus on the afterlife. It will not do, Ratzlaff maintains, to narrow one's eyes and see only a selected sliver of the magnificent sunlit world. Always the unattainable moon reflects back to us an inner light of longing that will not diminish itself by demanding flat and unyielding answers, but waxes and wanes in the rhythms of the natural world.

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