

## A YEAR OF COLLECTED NOTES: STORYTELLING SUBLIME

a review by Donna A. Gessell

Kat Meads. *Dear DeeDee*. Regal House Publishing, 2020.

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**KAT MEADS** is the author of twenty books, most recently, *Miss Jane: The Lost Years* (Livingston Press, 2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019). She writes fiction, poetry, essays, and plays and has been recognized by two Independent Publisher (IPPY) medals, an NEA fellowship, a California Artist fellowship, and two Silicon Valley artist grants. A five-time *ForeWord Reviews* Book of the Year finalist, she has received four *Best American Essays* Notable citations and writer residencies at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Yaddo, Millay Colony, Blue Mountain Colony, and Montalvo Arts Center. A native of Currituck County, NC, she holds a BA from UNC Chapel Hill and an MFA from UNC Greensboro. She currently lives in California. Read interviews with her in *NCLR* 2009 and *NCLR Online* 2020.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SANDY CARAWAN

According to the United States Post Office, the number of pieces of first-class mail for 2020 was only about half of its 2002 high.\* We seldom mail and collect personal letters anymore, choosing instead digital means of communication. An unintended consequence of the switch, personal communication has become largely ephemeral, lost to posterity as soon as it is sent, read, and deleted. Significantly, we have lost a means of storytelling, losing the personal and family histories made available through collected letters.

Enter Kat Meads's *Dear DeeDee*, ostensibly a collection of a year of correspondence to twenty-something DeeDee from her Aunt K. Beginning tentatively with a mostly crossed out list of greetings – "Dear, / Dearest, / Darling DeeDee, / Darling niece, / Greetings, // DeeDee," (1) – on Monday, February 5<sup>th</sup>, and lasting through Christmas Eve, the collection

allows the reader to become privy to 139 letters from Aunt K to DeeDee. Termed "notes," the letters consistently run a page or less. As Aunt K pens the notes, the reader reads the letters in their immediacy. We only gradually become aware that the missals have been saved, reread, and then reordered into a collection. The collection appears whole, until we find that she inconsistently omits "August Notes [Missing/presumed lost]" (109) and "October Notes [Destroyed]" (131).

Reading the remembered anecdotes, we center on Aunt K and her family and friends living their lives in North Carolina as well as occasional reports from Aunt K's current West Coast life. For instance, the May 21<sup>st</sup> note starts by reporting, "Whereas your grandmother preferred to annihilate copperheads and cottonmouths with a .22, the fat tires of a heavy-ass car were my weapons of choice, 'smushed

flat' my best assurance of snake FUBAR." It shifts to "the backyard of your parents' starter house, above their makeshift hot tub, [where] your mother strung an overhanging oak branch with lights; nature strung it with a snake that plopped into the hot tub with them one evening as they soaked." However, the notes are as much about the identity of the author. While telling stories about snakes, "Aunt K" reveals herself: "Far less confident outside a vehicle, I constantly scanned the territory around my feet for slitherers. In retrospect, it's a distraction I sorely regret. I could have been observing so much else!" Her reflections expand the experiences far beyond the individual. She ends the note by observing, "The most proficient snake killers in our family were the women – no question. I'm ashamed to admit how long it took me to realize snuffing out vipers counted as the least of their braveries" (63).

As with the rest of her writing, Meads does much more than offer insights into what it means to grow up in rural North Carolina during the 1960s and '70s, expanding her remarks to comment on the larger human experience. For instance, when she writes about "'next year' people – as in people who believed their situation would / had to improve the following year" as not only "Coastal Carolina farmers whose fields regularly flooded shared the same

hope, the same reasoning" but universalizes the experience to ask, "Is there a farmer anywhere who doesn't?" (10).

The collection reveals a realist, as Aunt K discusses "the deal I struck with myself when I started these notes," which was to avoid "progress where there'd been none" and "describ[ing] my own twenties as a period of pure nirvana." Instead, she admits, "I spent most of the decade unhinged and terrified" (11). The stories are not romanticized: she shows events for what they are. On a road trip on the West Coast, she does some "co-snooping" with a friend at the compound in "Henry Miller's post-Paris neighborhood," complete with its "time warp": "Here the Sixties came, settled, and refused to budge. No locks on any doors (bathrooms included), dining communal, clothing optional (but scorned) when taking a dip in the hot springs." The list continues, but concludes with the wry observation, "As with other free-and-easy enclaves, there were plenty of rules – they just weren't posted" (24).

Through the act of reading the collection to enter the ever-expanding world the one-sided notes create, we increasingly wonder about DeeDee's reactions. Meads shows the reader her hand only at the end of the collection, in the "Ephemera" section. "DeeDee," she opines, "I like to think that, had you existed, I'd have written to

you precisely as I've written in these notes" (165). The note, still signed "Love, / Aunt K," then provides insights into what Meads hopes to achieve with the collection:

I like to think that writing about semi-ancient family history to a figment of my imagination isn't solely the result of my brother and me being the last of our line, no one after us to tell our stories to, no one to remember those stories, no one who will pass those stories along. I like to think that the motivation fueling these notes to a nonexistent niece can't be chalked up to mere ego, mere sentiment, mere regret at not being anyone's aunt or mother or the sheer dread of being closer to silenced as a storyteller myself. But I am not quite that shameless a liar. Not yet. (165)

Despite her disclaimer about why she writes "about semi-ancient family history," Meads presents the materials in a way that makes that history fascinating: its honesty, pieced together across the collected letters. As Aunt K admits to DeeDee, "My new working theory pimps nostalgia as connection, a connection with who I was and therefore am." Her harsh judgment is tempered by the honesty readers have come to expect from Meads: "Unfortunately that face-saving spin ignores a basic horror. The past is set. No revising or improving it" (30). Nostalgia may be pimped, but its seeming lack of pretentiousness and sophistication makes it sublime in its simplicity in representing human nature. ■

\* "First-Class Mail Volume Since 1926," United States Postal Service, [web](http://web).