

WORDS WORTH HEARING

a review by Julia Nunnally Duncan

Mary Ricketson. *Stutters: A Book of Hope*. Redhawk Publications, 2023.

JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN is an award-winning author of twelve books of prose and poetry, including a new poetry collection *When Time Was Suspended* (Redhawk Publications, 2024) and a new essay collection *All We Have Loved* (Finishing Line Press, 2023; reviewed in this issue). Her upbringing in a Western North Carolina textile town plays predominantly in her work. An alumna of Warren Wilson College, she taught English and Humanities at McDowell Technical Community College for nearly forty years before retiring. She lives in Marion, NC..

MARY RICKETSON has published several poetry collections: *I Hear the River Call My Name* (Finishing Line Press, 2007), *Hanging Dog Creek* (Future Cycle Press, 2014), *Shade and Shelter* (Kelsay Books, 2018), *Mississippi: The Story of Luke and Marian* (Kelsay Books, 2019), *Keeping in Place* (Finishing Line Press, 2021), *Lira: Poems of a Woodland Woman* (Redhawk Publications, 2021), and *Precious the Mule* (Redhawk Publications, 2022). In 2011, she placed first in the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest 75th anniversary national poetry contest. Ricketson is a mental health therapist in a private practice in Murphy, NC.



COURTESY OF PATTY THOMPSON

Mary Ricketson's *Stutters: A Book of Hope* is a poetry collection about struggle. It is a book about people's cruelty to someone who is different. And yet it is ultimately a celebration of endurance, growth, and the ability to look beyond oneself to help others. As the subtitle asserts, it is indeed a book about hope. Still, in these poems, beneath the surface of light, shadows lurk.

In David A. Shapiro's foreword, he calls Ricketson's stuttering her "lifelong companion" and defines stuttering for the readers as "a universal disorder of speech fluency." He also notes the striking statistic that "In the United States alone, there are over three million people who stutter." So, while stuttering is not a rare disorder,

for many readers, this book provides a keen insight into the life of a stutterer and expresses vividly the repercussions, personally and professionally, of existing with this disorder.

Communication, a human ability that many take for granted, is at the heart of *Stutters*. Of course, the poems in this volume explore much more than altered communication, including familial relationships, peer pressure, and professional aspirations. Yet the aspect of disrupted communication is what compels me most. Perhaps my response is tied to my forty years as a college instructor of communication skills and as a public speaker myself. I am aware of how important clear, precise communication is, especially for a critical audience.

So, as I read Ricketson's poetical account of her lifelong struggle to understand and overcome stuttering, I vicariously experienced this struggle with her.

Stutters is organized in five sections, chronicling the poet's life from age eight to seventy-five, with flashbacks throughout. Section I begins with the poem "Trouble," noting "I'm eight years old. Other people talk for me." This first line draws the reader into the conflict that will be fully realized throughout the course of the book. The final line of this first poem, "I believe in miracles," also gives us insight into the personality of the speaker and the hope that permeates the poems.

Another poem in section I, "Where I Belong," finds the poet, from the perspective of her child-self, observing a spring crocus:

This small purple crocus pops up in my yard
every year a surprise . . .

. . . .

Might last a week or just a day, take it as it is,
useful for unique beauty, however its display.

And in the final stanza, she says, "I hope my life is like that crocus, one of a kind, / to hear and accept, however I speak and bloom, / purpose and function profound, far from perfection." She attempts to see her uniqueness, like that of the crocus, as valuable. Such an inclination to validate herself in the face of opposition reveals much about her strength and optimism.

A section II poem, "Never Give Up," finds the poet in college, learning "to never leave myself, never give up," and in the final line she concludes, "finally I believe / I'm worth the wait." The poem that follows, "Turning Strong," suggests a passage of time: "I'm twenty-one, soon to finish college . . . / . . . Stutters still dominate my speech." In this poem, the speaker asserts, "Even if embarrassed, I connect. I can help." She has determined to enter social work to help others, despite the impediment that her problematic speaking might cause in this career.

This desire to help others, regardless of her hesitation about herself and her speech dis-

order, is a common thread in the poems. She exhibits this perseverance in "Career Path," in which she notes, "Insults and cruel words pierce like arrows, sudden sting, / cut to bleed. Learn to bend, breathe, stand again / Speak again." And in "Trauma and Telephone," she questions, "How have I grown, acorn to oak? Branches broken, twisted, / gnarled and knotted, still hold strong, bear fruit, rise to beauty / of their own. Now those treetop crows speak magic to me, / seem not to care what sound I create." Nature clearly remains a comfort and enduring friend to the poet – a nonjudgmental companion. After reading *Stutters*, I wasn't surprised to learn in the book's biographical note that Ricketson, a western North Carolina resident, likes "hiking mountain trails, and her garden of vegetables, flowers, and blueberries." Reminiscent of nineteenth-century Romantic poets, Ricketson seems to turn to nature for inspiration and solace.

In section III, the poem "Baby" finds the poet "thirty-eight years old, seven months pregnant." Understandably, she is concerned that her child might inherit her stuttering: "Will I pass the gene, the shame / fights and struggles of a too-hard life?" But optimistically, she makes a vow "to find the way to make life good for my child, / Count on wild woods to inspire, heal scars of forest / fires, bloom pretty mountain laurel and rhododendron / like magic when times are right." As she will discover, her son does indeed inherit her stuttering, but in "Turtle Talk" she notes, "Harsh winds still blow, and storms have their way. Seasons / change and change again. Hope becomes a sound to believe." Again, hope is at the forefront. And in the final poem of section III, "Totem," the poet turns to nature, in the form of a metaphor. She sees herself as a lion that will protect the wounded child inside of her, a child who was injured "from a red arrow / that pierced me young."

Some of the poems in *Stutters* capture the rhythms of stuttering, such as spelling out of words with repeated letters (*B-b-b-bu-bu-but*) or structuring the lines in clipped phrasing

ABOVE, Mary Ricketson reading *Stutters: A Book of Hope* at Taste Full Beans, Hickory, NC, 11 Apr. 2023

("Children tease, mock, mimic"). However, the first poem in section IV, "Stutter into Spring," surprises me with its elongated and relaxed first lines: "When redbuds bloom soft purple along Joe Brown Highway / and forsythia sports wild spires of yellow bells, days grow / longer." No stops and starts here, as before, suggesting perhaps a moment of reprieve from stuttering.

Section V, like the earlier sections, has the expected glimmers of hope, despite flashbacks of dark memories. "Phoenix Rising," the first poem in this section declares, "Wait for sprouts / of hope. Watch sunflowers rise after rain." Still, the old fear and torments of the past continue to appear in flashback, as in "Like an Extrovert in the Rain." In this poem, in striking italics, the poet confesses, "*Always scared when I wait my turn to tell my name, fear / the shock or laughter when I M-M-M-a-ry my name.*" But in "Uneven Rains," the final poem in this section and the concluding poem in the book, the poet declares (again in italics): "*Make my talk worth the listen, / my sounds worth the patience, / and let my love of life ring past / falters, stutters, and uneven rains.*" Here, in the face of past trauma and after a lifetime of struggle and hope, is a resolve to be heard, not judged, and to say words that are worth hearing.

I think Ricketson has accomplished her goal in *Stutters*. It is *A Book of Hope*, a stirring and enlightening hopeful book. ■