

## A SONG FROM THE COMBUSTIBLE HEART OF PITTSBURGH

a review by  
Michael Gaspeny

Joseph Bathanti. *The Act of Contrition & Other Stories*. EastOver Press, 2023.

**MICHAEL GASPENY**'s latest book is *Flight Manual: New and Collected Poems* (Unicorn Press, 2023). He is also the author of the novel *A Postcard from the Delta* (Livingston Press, 2022; reviewed in *NCLR Online Fall 2023*) and a novella in verse, *The Tyranny of Questions* (Unicorn Press 2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online 2021*). Gaspeny, who lives in Greensboro, NC, taught journalism for nearly forty years at Bennett College and High Point University. He has won the Randall Jarrell Poetry Contest and the O. Henry Short Story Prize.

**JOSEPH BATHANTI** is MacFarlane Distinguished Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Appalachian State University. A native of Pittsburgh, he came to Huntersville, NC, as a volunteer with VISTA, working in prison outreach, and has served his second home state as North Carolina Poet Laureate. His numerous honors include the North Carolina Award for Literature, and he will be among the 2024 inductees into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame.

If you live in a grimy neighborhood pulsing with blood feuds, where every direction is menacing, how do you write an appreciation of Robert Frost's pastoral "The Road Not Taken"? This dilemma vexes Fritz Sweeney, the teenaged narrator of Joseph Bathanti's operatic, irresistible collection of connected slices of family myth, *The Act of Contrition & Other Stories*. Bathanti, winner of a multiplicity of awards for poetry and fiction, is the former North Carolina Poet Laureate and present writer in residence at Appalachian State University. In this, his twentieth book, blending realism and magic realism, Bathanti returns to his boyhood turf and frequent muse, Pittsburgh's East Liberty section in the late 1960s. This ghost-stalked Italian enclave inspired an earlier eponymous novel and the volume of stories, *The High Heart* (2007).

In the opening novella, "Fred," Fritz ponders dangers Frost's narrator never saw: hoodlums peddling heroin, aggrieved Blacks craving vengeance after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, and a bridge offering a way out for the leaping misbegotten. East Liberty bears an ironic name because its denizens are never free from the curse of *malocchio* (the evil eye) and the grip of vendetta. Fritz, the author's alter ego, is driven to tell the truth – that Frost's two roads cannot apply to the maze of his life.

Fritz's blood mixes the Italian fury of his mother, Rita Schiaretta Sweeney, and the Irish stoicism of his shrewd father, Travis Sweeney. A rarity in coming-of-age fiction, Fritz deeply loves both parents. In the

middle of an ominous, freezing night, he prays "for Travis and Rita Sweeney to barge from that impenetrable pall of snow through the kitchen door" (66). But the house is cursed because neither husband nor son can defy Rita's self-destructive will. They are handcuffed by love and terror. A femme fatale as dangerous to herself as she is to others, Rita lives on the verge of internal combustion. Her rage for violence is so dominant that during a high school wrestling match, she yells, "Kill him!" as Fritz grapples with an opponent (49). In addition, Rita trains her dog to play dead so long that the men fear the collie is never coming back. When she wields a knife while preparing dinner, they are ready to run.

Rita is consumed by the flaming specter of her father, Federico Schiaretta, a cobbler incinerated in a shop fire during Rita's girlhood. An all-embracing craving for revenge possesses Rita, deranged by visitations from the burning shoemaker. Moreover, the immolated old man has begun to haunt Fritz, born Frederick, named after his Italian grandfather. The spell has moved to the next generation.

Ironically, the last story in the book, "Rita's Dream," fingers the grandfather's ghost as directly responsible for the courtship of Fritz's parents and the boy's conception. After the old man appears in his nubile daughter's nightmare, she enlists bartender Travis Sweeney to play 311, the date of her father's death, in the day's lottery. Hitting the jackpot for four thousand dollars, the couple embarks on a wayward spree to Atlantic City so that Rita, immured in Pittsburgh all her



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life, can see the sea for the first time. That doesn't happen; Fritz does. In the end is the beginning, which threatens doom.

The author's robust love for his characters prevents this fate-filled chronicle from being a naturalistic depiction of a life-stifling limbo. In fact, it's Bathanti's song, a lyrical tribute to East Liberty where every character, even the cruel, receives understanding. When Rita castigates a brutal construction worker, her husband responds, "Nobody's just one thing" (134). Travis could be describing himself, a bartender with penetrating insight, resigned for all his natural days to serving drinks and his wife's demands. He lives to counteract Rita's demons.

Two of Bathanti's most haunting stories reveal the forces wrestling in Fritz's psyche. These tales, involving burials, invoke, without imitating, two masters

of short fiction. In "The Pall Bearer," the fourteen-year-old boy helps carry the coffin of Cuss, a neighborhood scapegoat addicted to sweets and bad jokes, who read to Fritz when he was little. Remembering Cuss's last visit, Fritz starts to break down. Then Rita gives him advice that

echoes the ending of Hemingway's classic "The Killers," when neophyte Nick Adams is urged to forget the doomed boxer he has just tried to help.

In the book's title story, Fritz, working as a hod carrier with a detested family enemy, exacts revenge after master bricklayer Kenny Fortuna bullies him and defames his mother. The teenager is utterly unqualified by physique and temperament to shoulder supplies and mix mortar in the stormy weather. Fortuna, delighting in Fritz's bungling, repeatedly calls the boy "Mathilda." At lunch, when Fritz's tormentor snoozes inside a chimney after drinking buttermilk and whiskey all morning, Fritz picks up the trowel of vengeance. Readers will feel a chill if they recall the climax of Poe's immortal tale of vendetta, "The Cask of Amontillado."

In this instance, Fritz becomes the instrument of his mother's

frenzy, but throughout his development, the boy is primarily guided by the wisdom of his resourceful father. When Fritz doubts his manhood after a humiliating pinning in a wrestling match, he's consoled by his father's code. Mr. Sweeney "understood what it took to be a man – not swagger or even bravery – but a kind of constancy" (39). In the collection's most moving scene, Mr. Sweeney embodies this devotion to duty when he rescues Rita after she has run amok in a snowstorm. Readers need to meet this workingman's hero blessed and cursed by selfless subservience to his wife.

Bathanti's compelling collection does have an occasional drawback. The stage lights dim when the drama shifts from the Sweeney family and focuses on Fritz's conflicts beyond the house. In addition, likely because the stories were published separately in journals (and not adapted for coming together in a collection), crucial background details of the grandfather's immolation and his daughter's madness are repeated. Now and then, the descriptions of the flaming Federico seem over the top.

All in all, Bathanti's best stories rank with such eloquent evocations of the explosive Iron City as Jack Gilbert's poetic tributes, John Edgar Wideman's sermon-like novels, and August Wilson's trumpeting plays. In this stirring portrayal of a blighted lineage, love cannot defeat doom, but it can bind and ennoble the souls battling annihilation. ■

ABOVE Joseph Bathanti at the North Carolina Poetry Society's commemorative 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting, Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities, Southern Pines, NC, 17 Sept. 2022