

Review:

Tony E. Adams

Jane Speedy (2015). Staring at the Park: A Poetic Autoethnographic Inquiry.
Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press; 160 pages; ISBN 978-1-62958-122-4;
US\$39.95.

Key words:
autoethnography,
stroke, poetry,
personal narrative

Abstract: In "Staring at the Park: A Poetic Autoethnographic Inquiry" (2015), Jane SPEEDY uses poetry, drawings, and prose to offer an insider account of a stroke and post-stroke experience. In this review, I use both form and content to convey key ideas from Jane SPEEDY's book, as well as to represent my experience of reading her text.

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In "Staring at the Park: A Poetic Autoethnographic Inquiry" (2015), Jane SPEEDY uses poetry, drawings, and prose to offer an insider's account of a stroke and post-stroke experience. But to open this review with such an introductory sentence violates the spirit of SPEEDY's book: my sentence is too certain, clear, and coherent—characteristics antithetical to SPEEDY's project—because after a stroke, there may be only chaos, incoherence, and repetition. Do not expect much explicit analysis or definitive arguments—such tasks would rein, contain, and brutalize the lived realities of a stroke. Instead, expect a fragmented and repetitive text grounded in SPEEDY's personal experience, imagination, and fieldwork; a text that encourages us to focus, watch, and stare in order to curb the hustle of everyday life and attend to the mundane objects and relationships that surround us; a text infused with passion and insight, homage and gratitude—as SPEEDY writes, "I am so glad that I am not dead" (p.14). [1]

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Three questions that capture the essence of the book:

How do you language a stroke?

How do you write with/through chaos/incoherence/repetition?

"Why am I not getting my brain into gear?" (p.84) [2]

SPEEDY's text offers these responses:

Use sentence fragments/poetry/drawings

Riff off conversations/experiences/imaginings

Befriend the horse chestnut tree

make it a main character

wonder "who had ignored whom for the past fifteen years" (p.77)

call it a "friend and fellow invalid" (p.146)

Look out the window/stare at the park

Use the iPad to draw

trees in conversation

fox tracks in the snow

the horse chestnut tree [3]

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In this review, I use both form and content to offer a context for reading SPEEDY's book. But to write such a preview sentence violates the spirit of SPEEDY's book: my sentence is too certain, clear, and coherent—characteristics antithetical to SPEEDY's project—because after a stroke, there may be only chaos, incoherence, and repetition. However, in the spirit of the traditional (and sometimes sterile) "book review" genre, I should offer key insights and accomplishments of SPEEDY's book or else I may, like SPEEDY, be asked to mark, justify, and reclaim my severe genre-transgression. [4]

First, SPEEDY writes against certain, clear, and coherent stroke survivor narratives—narratives with tidy endings that, as SPEEDY demonstrates, can irresponsibly "leave out any disjunctions within the world" (p.27). Instead, SPEEDY shows how a stroke, and post-stroke life, can be characterized by chaos, incoherence, and repetition. [5]

Second, SPEEDY astutely shows the purpose and power of poetry, especially how poetry allowed her to present, represent, and understand the experience of a stroke and post-stroke life. She offers brilliant ruminations about the "economy and amplification" of poetry, including how poetry could capture "fragments of conversation as people passed by [her] hospital bed," as well as offer "shorter, cleaner and sharper excursions into other worlds than either novels, which were too long, or learned medical papers about strokes, which were too boring" (p.13). [6]

Third, SPEEDY makes a compelling case against compartmentalizing "'academic prose' from poetry, field notes, and shopping lists" (p.125). She adds, "[i]t became evident during this study that everything I was reading—in the feminist reading group, the newspaper and in the bath—was all slipping around in the mix and

providing scaffolding for staring at the park" (p.125). To phrase this argument a different way: throughout the book, SPEEDY "blurs and brushes edges between image and writing, fact and fiction, and research and novel writing genres" (p.91), and shows how any attempt to define and separate genres can be a vain and phony act. [7]

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Fragments of conversation/observation/inconsistency:

patients who cry
receive medicines;
emotions tamed
"why
shouldn't the
elderly
and infirm
be allowed to cry?" (p.53)
patients who will to not cry
receive no medicines;
emotions tamed

impersonal doctors/lost nurses/sterile hospitals
"Time spent in the company of nobody who loves you" (p.89)

staring at toddlers
learning to walk;
learning to walk by
staring at toddlers

wanting to replace limp left arm with
electronic left arm
being called "weird";
wondering how electronic arm
differs from a wheelchair? (p.132) [8]

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After reading SPEEDY's book, I am reminded of my great grandmother, who suffered a stroke while picking apples in the sun. The stroke left her with slurred speech, less mobility, and the need for rehab; she never regained the ability to walk. My great grandmother lived more than a decade in a care facility, and most

of the time she recognized me. "My Tony," she'd say with a thick Slovakian accent. [9]

After reading SPEEDY's book, I think about the staring and riffing my grandmother accomplished; the fragments of conversation she could not assemble or relay; the frustration of slurred speech and the inability to walk; the amount of time she spent "in the company of nobody who loves you" (p.89). [10]

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This review is too tidy. Strokes may not be tidy. There may be moments of

mocking mummies
murdering mayors
meeting guests [11]

simultaneous moments of

murdering mummies
meeting mayors
mocking guests [12]

simultaneous worries/wonders/wishes:

"I constantly repeat myself" (p.176).
"Why/shouldn't the/elderly/and infirm/be allowed to cry?" (p.53)
"Why am I not getting my brain into gear?" (p.84) [13]

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In "Staring at the Park: A Poetic Autoethnographic Inquiry" (2015), Jane SPEEDY uses poetry, drawings, and prose to offer an insider account of a stroke and post-stroke experience. But to end this review with such a conclusive sentence violates the spirit of SPEEDY's book: my sentence is too certain, clear, and coherent—characteristics antithetical to SPEEDY's project—because after a stroke, there may be only chaos, incoherence, and repetition. Do not expect much explicit analysis or definitive arguments—such tasks would rein, contain, and brutalize the lived realities of SPEEDY's stroke. Instead, expect a fragmented and repetitive text grounded in SPEEDY's personal experience, imagination, and fieldwork; a text that encourages us to focus, watch, and stare in order to curb the hustle of everyday life and attend to the mundane objects and relationships that surround us; a text infused with passion and insight, homage and gratitude—like SPEEDY, I too am glad that I/she/we are not dead. [14]

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