

A Candid and Dazzling Conversation

Patrick Madden. *Sublime Physick: Essays*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 244 pp. Hardcover: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780803239845.

Reviewed by Joe Plicka

Patrick Madden's second book of collected essays, following 2010's *Quotidiana* (which won an award from the Association for Mormon Letters and was a finalist for the PEN Center USA Literary Award), bears the mark of a writer hitting his stride. All the usual adjectives apply: the essays are at times witty, profound, charming, moving, playful (even cheeky), and wise. As anyone who has hung around a creative writing classroom knows by now, personal essays are grounded in a carefully curated friendship between reader and writer, a dialogue, an intimacy—a formulation probably most plainly expressed (recently) by Phillip Lopate in the introduction to his seminal anthology *The Art of the Personal Essay*. It is this quality of friendship, of candid and dazzling conversation, that engages and entices me as a reader throughout *Sublime Physick's* dozen entries. When Madden laments the inescapable arithmetic of time in "Miser's Farthings"—"the vast part of life is absorbed into the unremembered whole" (80)—I nod and sigh in unison. When he ruminates on the limits and value of his aspirations, his efforts, his art—"But maybe this is literature: to say what has already been said, or will be said long after, in words (even translated words) that sing" (58)—in "In Media Vita," I thank him for giving me the words to understand something I have so often felt. It is the strange and almost embarrassing alchemy of fine literature: we commune and enter into prized confidence with people who are often distant strangers and may even, in some cases, be dead. (Note: Patrick Madden is very much alive and teaching in the English Department at Brigham Young University in Provo. He is also,

full disclosure, someone I know personally, though I know him much better through his books than in “real life.”)

On his stroll through memory and mind, Madden has invited along many other amiable and compelling friends: indeed, a great pleasure of this book is Madden’s rich compilation of relevant passages from other (mostly) writers, (mostly) essayists, spanning the centuries and providing dense fodder for his own essaying. As many a blurb writer has pointed out, Madden is indeed a scholar of the form and combines the expert’s frighteningly vast knowledge of the field with the warm love and exuberance of a fan. He is the proprietor of the website quotidiana.org which is, among other things, an “online compendium of 420 public-domain essays.” Both Madden and the above-mentioned Lopate (along with countless other essayists) have pledged their allegiance to sixteenth-century Frenchman and godfather of the contemplative personal essay, Michel de Montaigne (you can read fifty of his essays right now on quotidiana.org), who famously wrote, “I have never seen a greater monster or miracle in the world than myself.” Madden continues in this vein, harnessing the energy of both the miraculous and the monstrous actions, reactions, and ideas that form the contours of our mostly banal and ordinary lives. (Admittedly, I think Madden is stronger on miracles than on monsters, but this is not a failing as much as perhaps a function of being a middle-aged American Mormon father, something I can certainly identify with.)

Montaigne makes many appearances in these essays, as exemplar and standard-bearer, and I think there is a decent case to be made that Madden is, for all intents and purposes, the Mormon Montaigne (he will probably hate and deny that moniker and I don’t blame him; forget I ever said it). The point being, however, that while Madden is not usually concerned with highlighting his Mormon-ness, he is exactly the kind of writer that Mormons need right now—someone whose interests, questions, and concerns, not to mention audience, transcend sectarian cultures and doctrines, but who still represents a recognizably

spiritual point of view, maintains hope in Christian ideas and ideals, and cultivates an openness and humility with regard to things like family, forgiveness, tragedy, friendship, creativity, and redemption. Madden is a seeker, a collector of fragments, and a generous companion in print, as his form practically dictates; those wanting a preacher may need to head elsewhere.

All this may sound very serious indeed, but it is vital to note that *Sublime Physick* is a fun and funny book. It is full of photographs and illustrations that add texture and depth to the prose as well as give readers that extra little connection to their capacious host. Madden is an encyclopedia of popular music and he has an uncanny ability to make offhand quotes and references by Eddie Money and John Lennon, as well as obscure rappers and one-hit wonders, a seamless part of his tapestry. He delights in tinkering with computer programs, in visiting psychics, in riding elevators. He analyzes court cases, advertisements, phone conversations. He isn't afraid of the pun or the parenthetical. He's also not afraid of the long essay, and I will notify you now about the penultimate essay in the book, "Independent Redundancy," that runs a staggering ninety pages (hard to place in a literary journal or magazine, as one can imagine). It is also one of my favorite essays in the book, a brisk and highly entertaining exploration of how we perceive originality and influence in art and culture, and how creation is more often than not recombination and repetition.

I look forward to sharing these essays with my own writing students and showing them what is possible in the shrewd and flexible essay form.