

Anything but Orthodox

Matthew James Babcock. *Heterodoxologies: Essays*. Butte, Mont.: Educe Press, 2017. 204 pp. Paperback: \$17.23. ISBN: 978-0-9965716-3-0.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Tidwell

I was nineteen years old when I first learned about the essay form. I was enrolled in an introductory survey of creative writing, sitting in a middle row of pocked and drab desks in a windowless classroom when the instructor drew a daisy on the board to illustrate the agility of the essay form—how distinct petals of thought all encircle and emerge from the central theme and become something more beautiful in juxtaposition and conversation. That moment was a lightning bolt moment for me: *This is how my brain works!* And so I became an essayist.

The instructor that day was Matthew James Babcock, or Brother Babcock as I knew him at BYU–Idaho. That day was just a few months shy of ten years ago and my first lesson in the essay, but not my last. Before graduating from BYU–Idaho, I took a second class with Brother Babcock, this one focused solely on writing the essay. His lessons have stayed with me, shaped me. So, when I heard about his recently published debut essay collection, I couldn't wait to learn from him again. Within minutes of opening *Heterodoxologies*, I felt Babcock's presence almost tangibly. The collection is reminiscent of my classroom experiences with him at the helm: moments of profound insight sprinkled with healthy doses of goof. But this time the only prerequisite for the course is being human, of any variety: a music lover; a seventh grader; a bowler; a thinker; a dad; a dreamer.

These essays span time and experience in satisfying and surprising ways. From the relative barbarism of elementary and middle school

in “The Handicap Bug” and “Boogaloo Too” to the poignant, aching reflections on fatherhood in “My Nazi Dagger” to the quotidian scenes of community in “An Evening of Mortality at Teton Lanes,” nothing is out of Babcock’s reach. He includes dream scenes, imagined scenarios, letters with no hope of an answer. His “Short Address to the Assassins of the World” zings with a pestering playfulness: “First, why the three names? Must everyone in the club be immortalized as a black-hearted triptych? . . . James Earl Ray. John Wilkes Booth. Lee Harvey Oswald. Mary Kay Letourneau” (29). We’re set up with expectations for the essay with Babcock’s wit and faintly surprising depth of knowledge on the subject. By midway, we’re hooked in this conceit. “Consider Mehmet Ali Ağca: socked his killer stock in the three-name thing, ignored presentation and reputation, and after flubbing the papal dustoff got taken down by a nun. If you get body-slammed by a vigilante nun, you might want to turn in your assassin license and take up pigeon breeding” (30). But Babcock isn’t finished with us yet—this isn’t a quick commercial break from our regularly scheduled program of essays in the collection (even if at first glance his brief lighthearted essays may appear as such). He takes us deeper and deeper into a conversation with the assassins of the world, getting more and more personal with the masterful use of second person point of view, investing us with a humanizing, jolting leap into his own shoes on a day when he witnessed a girl enter a public library asking for help but was turned away by the indifferent librarian: we peer into Babcock’s own mind as he debates jumping in to offer help, worrying about being “taken for a creeper”—until we stop short at the ending, breathless: “Maybe the day you let your victim live is the day you start thinking for the rest of your life, *God, I hope she’s alright*” (31). We are left far more than simply entertained. We are enlightened.

In fact, it’s this nothing-out-of-reach quotidian approach that strikes me the most. Babcock is not afraid to take a roundabout path

to insight. He is unapologetic in offering his quirks, transcribing his dreams, discussing scabies, analyzing the objective value of virginity, and disclosing his struggles in connecting with his daughter amidst her own struggles. “Hey, I want to tell you something” (38) he says to his daughter, but also to us. And here is the beating heart of this collection. Babcock wants to tell us something, anything, to connect. And we can’t help but lean forward and listen.

Babcock invites us to not only listen, but look. “Aficionados of nineteenth-century American art history will tell you that the Hudson River School . . . became known for their sweeping landscapes that inspired awe and filled viewers with a limitless expanse of vision. Somehow, these painters walked into the world . . . and found that art was a matter of recording what you saw, and that what you saw in the outside world could enhance your inner life” (102). Amidst the skating rinks and hormones and road trips, this is what Babcock offers us: a look at life. There’s something artful and exalting here.

Before inviting us into his world, Babcock includes a Tolstoy epigraph: “If then, I were asked for the most important advice I could give, that which I considered to be the most useful to the men of our century, I should simply say: in the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, look around you.” And this collection delivers on all counts. We stop and look around us at the world and truly see. In the name of God. This isn’t the latest Sheri Dew or Gerald Lund—no, nothing that overt. These are other praises to God: bold, bizarre, unapologetic heterodoxies. Babcock’s essays show there are countless ways to see the divine in this mash-up of a life. You don’t have to spell it out or even look hard. I am that I am.

In “Poetry and the Art of Rulon Gardner” Babcock describes a transcendent moment for the future Olympic wrestler: “Minute by minute, it became clear that Gardner had become a different entity inside, that he had remained the same physically but that his spirit had

flown the limits of the physical” (115). I can’t help but think Gardner isn’t the only one experiencing this flight of spirit. Through Babcock’s frank and wondering takes on the small but expansive moments in a life, we glimpse the sublime.

The daisy Babcock drew on the board that day in creative writing class was a representation of beauty, but not the deep red rose or elegant symmetry commonly associated with aesthetic pleasure. This simple, two-dimensional daisy had petals of different sizes and shapes and scribbled notes tendriling from it. But the daisy represented the truest expression of beauty I know: authenticity. And in this collection, Babcock is a master of the authentic beauty in the everyday. Although there were moments when I wished he’d take a more direct approach to his subjects, mostly I wanted the collection to hold more than these eleven essays. Matthew James Babcock taught me the essay twice before. With *Heterodoxologies*, he’s taught me the essay all over again.



Judith Freeman: A Remarkable Memoir of an Unremarkable Life

Judith Freeman. *The Latter Days: A Memoir*. New York: Pantheon, 2016. 366 pp. Paperback: \$8.64. ISBN: 978-0-345-80608-6.

Reviewed by Darin Stewart

Judith Freeman’s *The Latter Days: A Memoir* is a remarkable memoir of an unremarkable life. The American novelist ticks all of the standard