

Making the Shadow Conscious

Rachel Rueckert. *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage*. By Common Consent Press, 2022. 344 pp. Paper: \$12.95. ISBN: 978-1948218634.

Reviewed by Mel Henderson

One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light but by making the darkness conscious.

—Carl Jung

I'll start with both a declaration and a disclaimer: *East Winds: A Global Quest to Reckon with Marriage* was a delight to read, in storytelling, content, and craft. In fact, I found myself slowing my pace as I neared the end of the book because I didn't want it to end.

And the disclaimer: I am precisely the sort of person this book appeals to. I've long been fascinated with marriage as a universal tradition, social construct, joyful gift, and ineluctable struggle; I love to travel and I fancy myself an amateur anthropologist; and perhaps less relevant but similarly fun to discover: Like the author, I too left home for the first time at age fifteen.

That said, Rueckert gently plucks up and studies some guarded pebbles and gems that may hide in all human hearts, and her account records these explorations skillfully and with unusual honesty. I admit I thoroughly enjoyed the book, but I can objectively say that this memoir will reach and interest a diverse band of readers.

I loved that her story takes us to several continents to interact with many different people and that much of the narrative covers her pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, "The Way," a trip I've never taken but often thought about. (It would round out the trifecta of essential pilgrimages for Christians, according to the Vatican: I've traveled to both Jerusalem and Rome, but not yet The Way.) After Rueckert's firsthand

account of the rigor of walking the Camino, I'm not sure I'm still up to it. But her book allowed me to walk it by proxy.

Rueckert wastes no time setting up the problem and project of the narrative. After bringing us into a midnight scene where stranded travelers and newlyweds found themselves in a sketchy quarter of Bogotá—she and her new husband standing in the dark—she recalls the interfaith discussion group in Boston where they met. A Quaker woman in the circle had asked a difficult and uncomfortable question: “I heard [Mormon] women can’t get to heaven unless they have a husband. Can people get divorced?” Rueckert dodged the first part by addressing only the last. She assured the woman that divorce happens, it’s no more stigmatized than in other faiths, and her own parents, in fact, are divorced.

It was the handsome young man sitting across from her that offered the Quaker woman a more orthodox reply. Rueckert writes, “I avoided him after that.” She’d later marry him, and they’d walk The Way together.

The secret ingredient in any good piece of personal history—whether a memoir, essay, or just a friend sharing a story over a plate of tacos—is the beautifully executed double perspective. When a writer can bring their most wise and experienced narrator to the telling of the past, readers get the gift of a guide to help them experience the event as it was, along with the gift of a guide who interprets the past with an informed, mature lens. A reader can better understand and appreciate the distance between *this is what it meant then* and *this is what it means now*. (The topic of double perspective requires me to happily credit Phillip Lopate, one of Rueckert’s mentors at Columbia, who articulates this so well and from whom Rueckert was fortunate enough to secure an impressive blurb for her back cover.)

Rueckert approaches the whole narrative as an experiment in this dual perspective. She allows us to share in her youthful worry that she’s not good enough at being a “Mormon girl” when she just needed

someone to tell her that being amazing at being herself is what matters. She describes herself, her husband, and the cast of characters they collect along the way with frankness and love, and she shares the lessons she has learned from them in a way that makes us happy to adopt the lessons, too.

I appreciate that Rueckert never apologizes for the truth, and never tries to strong-arm the reader into accepting it. She simply places the truth gently on the table and tells you how she found it. There is no sense of anxiety around convincing you.

East Winds explores a tapestry of themes, so I must be selective here in the interest of space, but I cannot skip the concept of suffering as currency. Volumes have been written on the complexity of the human tendency to revere personal (or even inflicted) suffering as holy, redemptive, cleansing, or sacred. Most adults, if we're honest, hold dear at least one painful experience somewhere in our past—a trial or experience of suffering we didn't ask for—and today we wouldn't trade it for the world if trading meant losing the lessons it brought. This is what makes the idea of suffering so complicated. Trial and error is how we learn; the pain of failure is therefore both welcomed and avoided. But "pain" and "suffering" aren't perfect synonyms. Pain is inevitable, but *suffering*, it's been said, is optional. Reading Rueckert's personal evolution, I revisited the question of whether suffering actually makes us more like the Savior, as I was often told growing up. Or does suffering just generate imaginary "morality points," a contrived license to tell others they don't deserve to avoid suffering either?

I love a short passage near the end where Rueckert explores this paradoxical safety in suffering, questioning what she really worships, as revealed by her own behavior:

Who was this murky god of suffering, and what did that god grant me in exchange for my constant loyalty? Certainly not the end of pain. Certainly not relief from anxiety. . . . Perhaps that god's name was Failure. . . . Who would I be without fearing the wrath of Failure?

If I wasn't afraid, who was I? If I wasn't sad, where was life's meaning? If I wasn't the accumulation of all the hard things I had faced and overcome, how would I measure the value of my life? I feared that if I stopped suffering or if I reexamined my narrative of struggle, I'd be left with something worse: Grief. Real grief. Grief without any meaning. . . . I worried that accepting grief, even for a moment, would risk me never getting back up again.

But she accepts it, and she does get back up again, because her whole global quest is perhaps most centrally a journey from self-doubt to sovereignty. Even in failure, which is never permanent, personal sovereignty can remain intact once we are well enough acquainted with it. Though this can be an easier thing to conceptualize than to practically enact, perhaps, especially for women in conservative faith communities. Self-governance, as Jesus Christ taught it, can be at odds with implicit community codes, where "good women" are the agreeable ones with few personal ambitions and an inexhaustible desire to keep sacrificing them. Rueckert's recognition that her spiritual spine must be self-defined is one of the treats offered in her book.

An idea that runs like a golden thread from start to finish is the beauty of "the shadow" as both starting place and vital passage. It was not lost on me that the first lines of the book position the couple standing uncomfortably in the dark, and the last lines recall the couple walking together, quite comfortably, *into* the dark.

I remember as a Mormon girl growing up in (mostly) Utah too, I was peculiarly rooted in the idea that darkness of any kind was the *opposite* of God. I could not appreciate the phenomenon as innate to the cosmic beauty of creation. All darkness was sinister and meant to be overcome, like a sunrise overcomes night, like Christ conquered death. I loved going camping in the Uinta Mountains and seeing the stars precisely because they were points of light. Today, I love the night sky because I know I only see trillions of miles into the distance when the sun is tucked away, allowing the beautiful moon to cool to earth. And I

know the life-giving sun will always come back. It is my knowledge of the whole that makes it so beautiful.

Rueckert's narrative begins with a healthy curiosity about the darkness, about the shadow side of all her cares, including a seeming resentment that the shadow has to exist at all. But all the flights and hikes and train rides and passages along the Camino begin to reveal that the shadow is not a substance that comes and stays and accumulates, the way sand keeps migrating to the corners of a beach house floor until it is swept up. Darkness can't be swept away. It is meant to be transformed.

It's another truth she gently puts on the table: that darkness is not necessarily a dungeon. (Although by now, she could trust herself to find her way out of a dungeon, too). New things begin in a shadow, in a cave, in a cloistered darkness—a seed in the earth, a life in a womb, even a star in a galaxy.

Uncertainty and darkness reveal countless specks of light filling the sky. Darkness may be the place where the seed cracks open. Darkness may simply be the inside of a chrysalis.

You get to choose, once you trust yourself to handle whatever finds you along The Way.

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