

Ruby Hoffman

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Final Project Critique

This piece by Ruby Hoffman is a series of short essays (some shorter than others) discussing the role of the author's Japanese ancestry on her identity. It mentions her Japanese grandmother, half-Japanese mother, and the author herself. The tone of the work is personal, much more entertaining than academic, but it is about sincere topics given a light-hearted treatment. The collection of essays is overall simply hesitant, which is in some ways understandable and even fitting, but at times weakens the power of the work.

The overall structure is rather disparate and choppy. In some ways, this is confusing and slightly exhausting. But it also seems that this might be part of the point of the piece, that Hoffman herself does not have a particularly strong grip on the subjects she discusses and is discussing them because of her inability to grasp them. It resembles a stream-of-consciousness style, except that the different "episodes" are not piggy-backing off of one another, or somehow leading into each other. Perhaps this is slightly reflective of consciousness itself, random and without destination... but still searching for one.

The tone is also confusing because of its inconsistency. There is a very clear voice, but the mood is somewhat erratic. There are lots of jokes, it can be sarcastic, but also there are

moments of genuine feeling. It is not always clear where this line is drawn, which makes certain parts seem too callous and insensitive to very real issues. It is difficult to walk that line delicately, and it is not always achieved in this work. However, the clear voice gives it a strong sense of genuineness, like it is from the heart, and that is often redeeming.

However, Hoffman seems to be apologizing within the work for the work, like it is a fruitless endeavor. This is at times charming but at times a bit arrogant, because to apologize for the work while still actually creating that work makes it seem ingenuine. If creating it is really not helping you the way it is supposed to be, then why are you still creating it? This tension could probably be fixed with more confidence in the writing, or more ownership of it. But again, the tension could also be a result of the hesitancy that Hoffman has regarding her identity.

The pictures that precede each essay too add elements of uncertainty. While the pictures are an integral part of this work, it is not completely clear what each one is about, who is in it, why it was chosen. The photographs would perhaps be more meaningful if they had more of an explanation with them. The inclusion of almost sentimental anecdotes, however, gives the photos some of the emotional power that I imagine they have over the author, making them relatable.

The separation of each essay from the others is also a bit mysterious. Why are some about Hoffman's grandmother, and some her mother, and others about herself? It seems a haphazard collection of accounts, anecdotes, and musings. In some ways it seems to be cherry-picking stories for no reason in particular, and it seems there may be more stories and ideas hiding in there that are not being addressed. In particular, the idea of names comes to mind.

Since the name typically follows the male line, there is probably some significance in having the Japanese bloodline be carried by women, without the name to accompany it.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of these short essays is that they almost seem too simple. They touch on difficult topics, but it falls short of grappling with them meaningfully or providing any real answers. This reflects the apologetic and irresolute feeling mentioned above. Hoffman never seems to come down fully on any side of an issue, which gives a sense of incompleteness, but then at the end, there is somehow still a sense of closure, like something was actually answered or discovered. It seems almost formulaic, like girl goes into world and does not understand her place in it, meets a friend, experiences life, and then feels good about not understanding her place in the world. The conclusion of these “episodes” leaves the reader unsatisfied, looking for more.

It seems that if this piece were more straightforward, with the photographs, the authors ideas and opinions, it would have a bit more of a punch. Leaving so much to the interpretation of the reader is risky, as it leaves a lot to be misunderstood. Perhaps Hoffman is putting too much faith in the audience, hoping that the reader will be forgiving and kind, and understanding of her plight, even more understanding than she can be to herself.