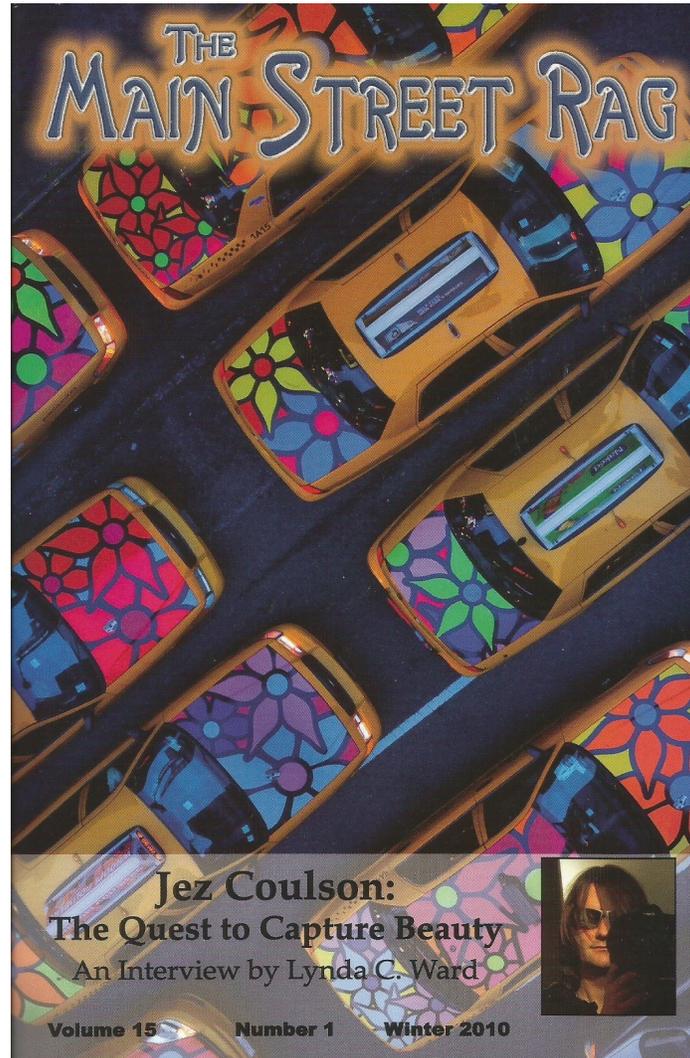


Review: *Voyeur* by Rich Murphy, Gival Press, Arlington, VA 2009  
Winner of the Gival Press Poetry Award



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Rich Murray's *Voyeur* takes the reader on a disquieting journey through the disillusionments and compromises of marriage. These poems, tightly formed and deliberately styled, contain startling imagery and provocative language, evoking a rich imaginative life simmering beneath the surface of conformity. The poems in *Voyeur* circle around two essential, related topics: the mystery of erotic love and the problem of power.

"The Ark of Oops" opens the collection, announcing the book's theme with the lines, "Pairs of people have accidents, catch / fevers, and get married." Sexual attraction, the accident of the poem, leading to the fever of romantic love and eventual marriage, pounces on hapless humans, unaware of its power. All the more tragic for its

predictability, the event completes in the next lines: “Later, the illness / cures itself, the injury heals, and there / is either divorce or braces-for-two for life.”

“Boxes of Lust” describes neighborhoods where base instincts masquerade as ordinary lives. “Leapt into by mating animals” – i. e., married couples, the boxes are “wooden cages” to which each of us owns “unique sets of keys.” The poem perfectly captures the conflict between the desire to belong to such a place, dreadful though it appears, and the desire to keep others out (“the most / the neighborhoods could offer other / crated covers and roaming singles // is a variety of private kindness.”) We can only imagine what those walls conceal, and the curiously incognito lives occurring behind them.

Power in relationships informs “Coat-Tail Living.” Murray takes a fresh look at the shibboleth “behind every great man, there’s a woman.” Were the man to look back, he would see a woman “with a shovel and apologetic smile.” This “personal secretary travels through / a life behind a man.” Likening the man to a “two-legged horse,” Murray leaves out sympathy for either participant, concluding that both man and woman trade their dignity for this arrangement’s security. The woman “offers the requisite blushes and scoops / the refuse of the grab and nab” while the man, a “work horse or thoroughbred / in shoes distributes the bonus of his return.”

In spite of Murray’s clear-eyed exposition of an eternal conundrum, many of the poems in *Voyeur* feel over-worked, highlighting technical achievements at the expense of emotional impact. His juxtaposed images often conspire against the reader, creating confusion instead of meaning. For example, “The Ways She Moves” veers too suddenly from “gem / and gym, lapis and lapdog, jade and maid” to “The manipulated yoga expert / hangs by one arm.” “The Guise” is more successful, carefully patterned around the image of women in houses, stores, and with children. Murray describes their clothing in unexpected terms: “teeth of the flies in / their pants were fashioned from // solid testosterone.” Even if women “wear the pants,” men still have privileges, they “enter and exit houses” that trap women. “The Guise” is a well-crafted poem about the ambiguity of power in relationships, how it changes day to day, and what the precise steps cost each player.

Sex, power, and passion vie with disappointment, domesticity and boredom in these poems. *Voyeur* is not without compassion, but Murray’s tone throughout the collection never approaches sentimentality. Although the book does not vary from its topic, the author teases out an amazing array of nuances from the endless complications of love and marriage.

- Erica Goss