

Book Review:

Cynthia Sample's *Forms of Defiance*

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Forms of Defiance

CYNTHIA SAMPLE

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Out of curiosity I asked my dad, a retired civil engineer of over 30 years, what the word “defiance” meant to him. His immediate reply was: “to rebel,” then another contemplative moment later he said, “to overcome.” Now, this is a fine enough response; but since all good poets remain ever hungry for that *something more*, I plugged the word “defy” into the omniscient, always-open mouth of the Internet god Google and fired away. I was immediately delivered 64 of the web’s best synonyms. According to Merriam Webster, “confront” was the #1 most closely related word. “Elude” followed shortly after, then “mock,” and near the end of the list – “withstand.” There it was: alpha and omega, manifesting in the mundane, answering my reflections by revealing themselves in the first and last of these most sacred search results. To defy means to *confront* and *withstand*.

Put simply, *Forms of Defiance* by Cynthia Sample is a catalogue of encounters. It is an unyielding investigation into the deepest depths of the human condition. The collection spans three distinct and unique sections, stratifying the experience for our understanding. Through the thoughts and emotions of each character, truths inherent to the pursuit of love, listening, and choice emerge. Slowly, or sometimes all at once, each entry faithfully and tenderly renders the good, the bad,

the unrequited, and the lost—keystone features of the first section, titled “Love, People All Around Are Looking.” Lula, the most oft-named character and the one readers come to know best, is introduced early on, but only in title. “On the Occasions that Lula Sought an Answer from Her Mother’s Bible Concordance” is a compilation of instances where the words “dance,” “lust,” “love,” “adultery,” “divorce,” “lie,” “forgive,” and “secret,” appear in scripture. The search for “love” is conducted twice, revealing contradictory outcomes—an indication that Lula has sought alternative discourse on at least two separate occasions. The words “adultery” and “divorce” leap off the page, as well as “secret,” especially when put in conversation with the adjacent entry entitled “Proof”—a sweeping sketch of a relationship on warp-speed. “You,” the unnamed character, are placed central to the rise and demise of an attraction turned relationship, turned marriage, turned affair; unwittingly complicit in a love disintegrating into nothing. “Proof” is where Sample asserts mastery over her characteristic gut-wrenching, “mic drop” ending. At the close, after a passionless coital entanglement, the nameless character “fist(s) the hem of the pillowcase. With proof” (19), delivering a devastating realization—universally characteristic of the precise moment in which the heart actually breaks—that love has officially and irreversibly atrophied. In “Special,” a young Lula transports readers out of her adolescence, through the death of her mother, and into adulthood. At the sight of a photo of herself in infancy, Lula discovers that she is both pretty *and* special, finally mending a long-held agony and confirming once and for all that she is loved. Equally memorable is “The Prayer Diary of Doreen Newton,” a humble and hilarious account of a widow’s candid requests of God, committed in writing. The entries range from the ordinary—“how do I fix my garage door for \$100?” (37), to the

sublime—"Speaking of Harry, God – I hope You bless him wherever he is in heaven" (39).

Section II is a master class in subversion; here, the entries become a meditation in thwarting assumption. Entitled "Listen, People All Around Tell Themselves Their Own Story," not only the characters, but the entries themselves subvert expectations of love, power, success, and ownership. Stories like "Eggs," a play on the classic nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty," where a husband's superiority complex inadvertently condemns him to a disastrous and proverbial "fall," or "Eyeglasses," featuring a woman's begrudging fight to preserve some small but deeply symbolic relic of her late mother's existence—serve as cautionary tales. In "The Cream Always Rises to the Top or The Hubris of the Envious Onlooker," readers receive a vision of God as a woman, seated in a realm detached but overlooking our own, tinkering and toying with the oblivious machinations of humanity's most famous icons, as a scientist manipulating her own inventions.

The third and final section, dubbed "Choose, Making Hard Choices Isn't Self-Help in a Book Store," contends mainly with the outcome of the first two sections (love and listening) finally colliding. The characters within "Choose" are the most explicit of all, analogous to the flow of life (the days growing shorter as the nights grow longer and vice versa). The stories reach an apex of consciousness; most of the characters suffer acutely from either pain or ecstasy of enduring existence. "Champ" reduced me utterly to tears—a testament to Sample's ability to render a character, in this case a *very* good boy, in stark and living detail. You feel you have experienced all of Champ's life in the span of a few paragraphs, feel in your throat the lump that crops up on his jaw. When a willful character bearing the namesake of the author herself

emerges, the borders between writer and reader, audience and interpreter begin to blur in earnest. “Learning to Write: Divergence Gets Slippery” is unquestionably brilliant in its employment of the unsatisfying ending; that Sample deliberately leaves the experiment unfinished is a striking reminder that *defiance* is always the driving and irresistible force of impact.

Through a divine network of both named and unnamed characters, Sample creates a universe teeming with people deeply and inextricably enmeshed in their own humanity. What *Forms of Defiance* renders with impeccable clarity is no less than unmistakable proof that connection through suffering, grief, love, loss, or self-discovery is at the core of the human experience. Within this universe, Sample creates a world where the inhabitants are not only strong enough to *endure* the outcomes of their lives, but brave enough also to *face them*. *Forms of Defiance* is a first-rate, unerring read, belonging on any self-proclaimed human’s bookshelf.

Reviewed by Karyn Stacey Panem