Julie Berry begins *the walnut-cracking machine* with one of the coolest little poems I’ve read in a long time. It’s a shout-out to David McFadden, I fancy. The title sets the reader up – “how to tell a good poem” – and the next five lines trample along like one of those martial Scottish bagpipe ditties Max Ferguson used to play on Saturday morning CBC radio:

a good poem is built like a rickety platform  
attached by a single nail  
to the last thing you know  

and it’s a really good poem  
if the nail doesn’t hold (7)

When Berry gets down to the bulk of the poems she writes in a talky style that resists exposition by ambiguity implants along the way. “worse than jesus christ” refers to words school children aren’t allowed to say on school grounds, but also to the main character in the poem, Ben, with the flat head, who continually gets himself suspended for rude language, which is what happens to Christ in the New Testament (the suspended part). Ben, a Christ figure? It is hard not to make the connection, but Berry doesn’t do any layering to assist in making it, and we fall back on the rather shocking phrase “worse than jesus christ.”

The poems lack gravitas, but they are not deceptively simple. They are provocatively simple. “concerning mr ambrose” is a little poem about a little man who does little, really. Ambrose’s artificial hand – a metal hook – will outlive his own organic flesh and bones after he dies. So contends the poem, and it’s a kind of guess and guess again to solve Berry’s intention here. Is she commenting on the exquisite passing of human life, or smartly noting the enduring life of human artefacts?

She stuffs her lines fat with concrete images that leave little to the imagination, and that becomes a strength. “the smell of needles in hot july sun / settled deep inside me / and would be a prelude to every paradise thereafter” (15) is written by someone who is intimate with the bush of northern Ontario, since the smell of those pine needles is not only etched into memory, but becomes as elemental as the Precambrian Shield, and the clean clear lake water of the North.

Berry is a local poet, yet she doesn’t sound provincial. She knows what she sees and probably invents what she doesn’t know. The poems occasionally border on the sentimental and one false step makes me fear we will be sucked into the sludge, but I do not see that happening here. This is required reading. ✔

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