Crossings
by Betty Lambert

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Betty Lambert’s Crossings, reissued as part of the city of Vancouver’s 125th-anniversary celebrations, is a complex, layered novel that is both powerful and disturbing. Originally published in 1979, Lambert’s story of love, idealism, and madness is set in the early 1960s and recounted by Vicky Ferris, a writer and the first-person narrator, some years later, after her daughter Anna is old enough to read, write, and dance.

Crossings opens with Vicky arriving, with cats and typewriter, to live with her lover Mik in a logging camp. From there the timeline twists around to explain how she got to that point, and then, how she escaped. Vicky, after a breakdown, is reworking a piece based on her autobiography, including family history, a passionate affair with Mik, and a less-than-passionate earlier marriage to Ben. Thus, on the first level, Crossings is a novel of character development. Although the virile Mik seems to dominate, the real character being revealed is Vicky. Her “novel” with its self-reflection is a work of resistant memory, of growing self-awareness, of painful recovery, of re-visioning who she is and how she came to understand, to know, herself. Although she sees herself as a narrator obsessed with truth, she is aware of the unreliability of her memory, of gaps, missing pieces of the puzzle. The many supporting characters mirroring Vicky back to herself challenge her delusions, correct her facts and her interpretations.

The power of Vicky’s manic relationship with Mik makes it difficult for the reader to maintain a focus on “what Vicky learns and how she learns it.” When she chose to join him in the forest, she realizes later, she was still deluding herself, thinking: “I am going to put myself into his hands. It is irrevocable. It is final. I am committing myself. A woman at last” (253). Their sex life is documented in excruciating detail because, she explains, she is nostalgic for the passion, the time when she was living in such rapture; she equates “physical” with “real” and “real” with “truth”; she believes it is important to be honest, to speak of things never spoken of, to enable other women to be more aware of what they have or what they may be missing. Thus Vicky is liberating herself and her “sisters” from the repressions, the secrets and lies, of “Victorian” society. What Vicky does not say but Lambert suggests is that, even years later, we may not fully comprehend our own underlying motivations. To paraphrase Einstein, we may have free will, but we do not always realize that what we will is proscribed. The complexity of the novel’s themes is too easily obscured by the vivid description of the couple’s multi-orgasmic sex life, which includes violence. Violence becomes the tree in the reader’s face, the tree that prevents us from seeing the forest. For it is into the forest we must go, and into the forest Lambert takes us, dropping reassuring crumbs to guide us.

But this is not only a novel of character development and self-awareness. It is also a fascinating sociological study of one woman’s struggle to free herself in an idealistic society still dominated by the patriarchy. Between the affair and its telling, the world has changed; the civil rights and women’s liberation movements – with specific reference to Kate Millett (33) – have swept North America.
Crossings is also a powerful psychological study, a mystery really, exploring how issues from the past sneak up on us and sabotage our present. Vicky struggles with her father’s death by drowning. She idolizes him as the person who told her that sex was holy. “It’s like when you’re in church, see?” (258) She fears that his death was suicide and that the boy who drowned entwined around him was more than a friend. The idea of “weakness” is a problem for her: “He [their dead father] was weak, Vicky. Why won’t you admit it?” (260) The unanswered questions from the past never relinquish their grip from around the adult child’s throat. Mik’s ascending from the water triggers Vicky’s breakdown (263), which in turn clears the way for a breakthrough.

Crossings is also a triumph of modern literary art, incorporating mythological imagery and symbolism, especially Medusa, Zeus, and Hermaphroditus, as templates to help readers understand contemporary characters, to re-vision sex as hierogamy. From start to finish, Vicky associates Mik with a bull. “He comes in me, bellowing like a bull . . .” (23) Later, in one of his rages, he tosses a carving of a bull into her mirror (275). The couple’s rough sex seems to allude to the origin myth of Hermaphroditus, when the enamoured nymph surprises the boy, entwines herself around him in the pool, and the two became one body, male and female. The mythological allusions make their violent sexual antics a form of sacred marriage which results, in convoluted ways, in the birth of the “miracle” child.

Crossings is also a novel that crosses from modern to postmodern. Vicky, an extremely rational, logical female, is revealed to be blind to the impact her own one-sided character has upon others, to the way she uses vocabulary as a weapon, humour or logic to destroy a rival. She is heroic not in proselytizing orgasmic sex, but rather in finally learning what her friends, her therapist, and her subconscious have been attempting to force her to face all along, the darkness of the forest of her own unbalanced personality, “the part that hurts people” (162), the “terrib[le] violen[ce] underneath” (260).

Crossings is also about the crucial role the arts play in helping us access emotion. It is Lambert’s art, her writing style, that bring the characters to life. Vicky’s unfinished sentences, disorganized thoughts, stream of consciousness, tell us that the narrator is under some sort of stress, attempting to remember and to clarify. The repetitions, things that stick in her head, which she knows are important and she has to come back to, suggest that she may not yet understand their significance: “You can’t destroy me,’ he had said. ’I’ve been destroyed by experts’” (15, 17, 129, 159, 243, 292). The mantra returns us to Mik’s story, to Vicky’s story of Mik, until finally she/we realize just what she has done to him. About her own writing, Vicky says: “I never admitted anything. Sometimes, when I was writing, I’d get close and then it scared hell out of me. It’s like, in the writing, if you don’t watch, you tell the truth and then, you’re right there on the edge, and it’s all blackness” (158). It is only through art that Ben’s secret feelings are revealed, when he sculpted the head of his “ex” as Medusa slain by him, dead to him. It is only Mik who sees the emotion in the sculpture and in the draft plays Vicky shows him. And it is only in finishing her work, “I know it’s today I finish. My lover, my enemy, my killer” (291) that Vicky sees the truth about herself.

Finally, Crossings is a novel that suggests the importance of spirituality in healing, in overcoming the imbalance of logic, in making us whole. In Vicky’s espousal of “the teleological principle in art” (124), the quest for a design in the fabric of our lives, for “a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will,” as Hamlet put it. Vicky’s autobiography is really a quest to detect the underlying design, the creative intelligence, behind the surface of this story of her life. Her musings seem to combine God and the devil as a hermaphroditic entwining of good and evil: “A rainbow in the clear holy light, and the rain falling through gold like a blessing . . . like a promise.” Then, “I remember that first one, after the flood . . . and you said, It’s all right . . . Old arch-deceiver, with your rainbow full of promises, and everyone dead and drowned. For our sins” (291).
You could read and reread *Crossings* and come up with new revelations every time. However, each reading will conclude with the “new Vicky,” who has crossed over and back and is now able to accept her old self and to celebrate the new, “Athena couchant” (55) and “An old fat fool. Dancing” (291). The way she and her sisters had danced as children with their mother. “Just a brief and dancing minute for the sake of the dark and laughing god” (292).

Betty Lambert’s family maintains a memorial website at [www.bettylambert.ca](http://www.bettylambert.ca) and her biography is included in the *BC Bookworld* author index [http://www.abcbookworld.com](http://www.abcbookworld.com)

J.M. Bridgeman writes from BC’s Fraser Valley. jmbridgeman@telus.net

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