

One in Every Crowd

by Ivan E. [Elizabeth] Coyote

Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012, ISBN 978-55152-459-7, 238 pp., \$15.95 paper.

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Although the back cover blurb proclaims *One in Every Crowd* as “Ivan E. Coyote’s first book for young people,” don’t let this dissuade you. Every parent, every teacher, every school trustee, every candidate for election, every elected official will both benefit from and enjoy these stories about growing up.

Ivan E. Coyote is first and foremost a storyteller. A great storyteller. She employs her talent as an advocate and political activist, educating her listeners and readers about gender issues. The cover blurb further states: “Ivan’s sixth story collection is her first specifically for queer youth . . . it’s about embracing and celebrating difference and feeling comfortable in one’s own skin, no matter what the circumstance.” Although LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) is the commonly used term here in BC, this book seems to limit itself to “queer, gay, gender, and homophobia”; I suspect for reasons related to its admission to school libraries. Coyote promotes acceptance and anti-bullying at her readings in high schools and communities across Canada. She has become a role model, a “successful” writer who has remained true to herself and has taken up the mantle for “others like her” in the sense of being different from a mainstream stereotype.

Coyote says specifically that she wants to show how “gender is a spectrum, not a binary” (213); a range, not an either/or. She achieves this by sharing specific examples from her own experience; for example, her aversion to dresses and preference for jeans, boots, and neckties. The big issue of pronouns: “I have always felt this way about gender pronouns, that ‘she’ pinches a little and ‘he’ slips off me too easily. I’m often asked by well-intentioned people which pronoun I prefer, and I always say the same thing: that I don’t really have a preference, that neither pronoun really fits, but thank you for asking, all the same” (206). The challenge of public washrooms: “Not everyone fits easily into one of the two options provided on your standard public washroom doors” (213). She does not feel safe or comfortable in the men’s room. Women assuming she is male fear her presence in the women’s room. With her stories, Coyote is “humanizing” those who may be perceived as “different” in the hope that some sparks of recognition, of “we are all the same but different” will help the “different” feel they have a right to be themselves, and the “majority” feel that “others” are equally deserving of respect.

When I heard Ivan Coyote read several years ago I was concerned about her use of irony, the tongue-in-cheek ridicule of older men who approach and speak to her as if she is male. There was a sense of “I know something you don’t know,” perhaps with the additional “you fool.” In this collection, there is none of that type of subversive confrontation; rather, it demonstrates more of an understanding of where the other’s confusion is coming from, that people who make assumptions based on external appearance are also victims of societal stereotyping. Children at an early age are trained to see “either/or,” deviations are beaten out of us, either physically or by exclusion and hostility, and we are trained to be blind to possible differences.

Coyote attempts to speak to “the mean girls” too, those who aggressively dis non-conformity in all individuals, and who do not self-identify as bullies. In “Take That,” after being ridiculed by girls on a high school basketball team and a failed attempt to engage with them verbally, she turns to physical retaliation. This moment illuminates the crux of anti-bullying crusades, all of which stress

how wrong it is to bully, but none (that I have so far encountered) suggesting appropriate responses on the part of victims or bystanders. Say something, do something, they tell young people. But say what, do what? What is appropriate and what will be effective? “Turn the other cheek” is not “an appropriate response” to snarkiness and ridicule. Punishing both the bully and the victim who defends him/herself is not appropriate, but is still policy in many schools. What is the best approach to teachers and schools that permit exclusion of individuals in class or extra-curricular activities? To decision-makers who deny the rights of “others” to see themselves in the literature available in the library, in health and sex education classes, in all the ways school mimics real life, for better or for worse?

This book speaks directly to youth, saying that it’s all right to be yourself, even if the world seems hostile. That you are not alone. That things are likely to get better (even if you have to move). That some of you are lucky to have family members who assert that you are “exactly who God meant you to be” (68). This book gives readers faith in the power of stories to germinate change, and in the power of storytellers like Ivan E. Coyote to move us all. 🐾

J.M. Bridgeman writes from the Fraser Valley.
jmbridgeman@telus.net

Buy *One in Every Crowd* at McNally Robinson Booksellers:
http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9781551524597/ivan-e-coyote/one-every-crowd?bInBKM=1#.US_AzI4rhzU