

Sonar

by Kristian Enright

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2012, ISBN 978-0-88801-391-0, 150 pp., \$17.00 paper.

Reviewed by Steve Locke

A beatific madness. An angelic genius, institutionalized. An epic library of reference material to anchor mental dissonance in fragments of beauty. A suppressed howl reverberating in eardrums and rippling outward, reaching for a distant “ping” somewhere in the black.

For ragged philosophers and artists, Kristian Enright’s debut poetic volume, *Sonar*, is that darkened echo: a navigation in and out of the framework of mental illness. Enright’s narrative is a veritable patient case file with fragments of journal entries, hospital reports and lyrical poetry that guide the reader through heaven, hell and everything in between. On the way, he challenges the conceptualization of madness and creativity, and might possibly provide afflicted readers with a guideline towards their own mental health.

In *Sonar*, we follow a modern Carl Solomon in Colin Verbanofsky in his struggle to form a rhetoric and identity that will, like Allen Ginsberg’s comment about Bob Dylan, illustrate himself and other inmates as “creature(s) against the whole of creation” (15). Beginning with Verbanofsky’s voluntary admission into Health Sciences Centre, we see his self-analysis organized into literary and artistic references that span the ages, from Shakespeare to Kerouac. Verbanofsky himself possesses the mind of an artist and philosopher, and through Enright’s theme of framing, he can begin to analyze his illness and still push the boundaries of what is rationally observable about madness and creativity:

In the imagination a wall prevents exploration, so that it restricts. . . . But in reality the wall protrudes. It hence reverses from the painting model it draws from. In this institution the wall *absorbs*? (10)

Enright encourages Verbanofsky, much as a therapist would a patient, to explore the psychological discourse of his illness by putting literary devices to use in describing and distinguishing emotional states such as sadness, melancholia, depression and misery (12). When one considers the difficulty in communicating complex and sometimes emotionally staggering concepts to an empathetic ear, one may consider a therapy session to be a creative workshop, where both the therapist and patient become artists, assembling and disassembling conceptual frameworks to create a fully realized character. That is to say, the best kinds of therapists might have to be artists themselves, in one form or another.

Despite the depressed artist/philosopher being an archetypal cliché, Enright successfully steers right into the heart of his central speaker by pitting the characteristics of his abstract mind against itself. In a mind where convoluted concepts and language may exponentially exacerbate mental illness, Verbanofsky deconstructs the framework of his identity to eventually come to a rational conclusion:

...my diagnosis was: a creative mind repressed by human disconnection. . . . My position was also a strange take on “I think, therefore I am,” which was meant to separate the thinker from existence. I tried to do this with much of my early life. In a strange way, I thought

complexly, convolutedly, therefore I really was, I existed and resisted, not just another fish going with the flow. (137–8)

When Verbanofsky strips down the labyrinthine frames of convoluted language, literary references and devices, not to mention the angry ego fuelled by bitter loneliness, he finds his beatific yawp, his legendary howl, or put simply, his voice: “I knew that it was expected that I would scream now” (140).

From a howl comes language, which then returns to a howl. Or is it the other way around? Either way, this is the essential sound of Enright’s poetry that resonates from *Sonar*, as a clear and deeply resonant “ping.” 🦉

Steve Locke is a writer, author and performance poet living in Winnipeg. Off the page, he is an active member of the local improv and poetry slam scene. On the page, he is a freelance contributor of articles on the arts while he works towards completing the first draft of his current YA novel.

Buy *Sonar* at McNally Robinson Booksellers:

<http://www.mcnallyrobinson.com/9780888013910/kristian-enright/sonar?bInBKM=1#.UTZX5Y4rhzU>