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The Book of Beginnings and Endings , and: *The Body: An Essay*
(review)

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Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall
2009, pp. 159-162 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.0.0092>

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The Book of Beginnings and Endings

SARABANDE BOOKS, 2007. 128 PAGES, PAPER, \$14.95.

The Body: An Essay

SLOPE EDITIONS, 2002. 88 PAGES, PAPER, \$12.95.

both by JENNY BOULLY

The French word *essai*, from which the English *essay* derives, means an attempt, as well as a trial or test. Jenny Bouilly's first two essay collections, *The Body: An Essay* and *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, try the form of the essay aesthetically at the same time they test our readerly expectations and desires. Her compelling aesthetic consists largely of offering narratives that seem to be, if not incomplete, often operating as if they were incomplete in spite of their completeness.

John D'Agata, in his introduction to *The Next American Essay* (Graywolf, 2002), calls Bouilly's essays lyric essays; but what strikes me more is the way Bouilly's work challenges generic conventions and forms by interrupting narrative modes and reading practices that we take for granted. This distinction may be subtle, but as I see it, Bouilly's work is not defined so much by her lyric flights of language (though she can write lyrically) as by the absence that haunts the center of her essays—the way in which she uses the missing and untold, the omitted. *The Body* rests on the seeming denial of narrative data. Its single, book-length essay unfolds in a sequence of footnotes to a missing primary or main “body” of text. Above the footnotes a thin black line announces their separation from the rest of essay, which, on each page, looms above that line as white space. The 79 footnotes excerpted in D'Agata's anthology vary in length and sometimes have footnotes of their own. There is one footnoteless, completely blank page in the essay, as well as pages that are

replete with footnotes from top to bottom. Many footnotes directly confront the absence of the text to which they refer, or at least cultivate a sense of the absent through snippets of anecdotes, musings, quoted passages, and information that purports to extend our understanding of the text we lack, the text that inhabits (or seems to inhabit) the white space. For instance, the first footnote reveals that “everything that is said is said underneath”; the footnote is at the bottom of the page and seemingly there is nothing “underneath” it. Another footnote refers to and supplements an illustration the essay does not provide, and another is itself a blank space.

So how do we read the empty space of this essay? On the one hand, the space where we would expect to find the body of the essay functions, in this instance, as the complementary text—complementary in the way that footnotes usually are. The white space has become a *tabula rasa* on which we are invited to produce an absent story or stories, but we must construct these narratives on our own by following the leads that the footnotes provide. The footnotes invite us to imagine a “him” who is merely mentioned, or imagine an illustration that is referred to in another note. This kind of reading foregrounds the way in which readers of any literary work, nonfiction or fiction, act as coproducers of the text. To use Barthes’s terms, Bouilly’s text is *scriptible*, or writerly—not *lisible*, or readerly.

Bouilly continues her exploration of the unfinished and the absent in *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, a collection of fragments and segments that focus on various personal, aesthetic, and scientific issues. On the opposing pages of each spread in this chapbook-sized volume, Bouilly offers a beginning and an ending. Between the new beginning on each odd-numbered page and the ending that follows on the subsequent even-numbered page, the reader is caught in a network of brief narratives that never resolve, or resolve without us knowing fully what is at stake in the resolution. We get the beginnings and the endings, but once again, the bodies are absent. While the beginnings begin with a complete sentence and often end in the middle of one, the endings often begin mid-sentence, suggesting the degree to which this collection performs the fragmentation that paradoxically binds its essays together. A fundamental dynamic of narrative, even those that strive for plotlessness, is repetition. It helps hold a story together and is part of what allows textual significance to accrue, and Bouilly’s collection is no different. Although the title of the collection reflects a concern for narrative points of entry and exit,

ironically, for all the energy Bouilly puts into crafting a clever and engaging series of beginnings and endings, I cannot help but think that this book is also very much about middles, even if she approaches these middles ironically.

As with *The Body* (the first page of which is included as a beginning in this collection) we feel compelled to construct some kind of narrative from the glimpses we are given or that are hinted at: images of winged creatures, systems of various sorts, the story of Aboullie, and the state of being in between, or ajar-ness. It is from these suggested, absent middles that the collection draws much of its strength and beauty. The onus is on the reader to make sense of the essay, to establish relations among its segments.

But the text does not exactly abandon us in this task. Its narrative energy may be sparse and dispersed, but the writing in this collection is full of verve. Powerful and suggestive imagery abounds. Readers can use those repeated images as prompts in the attempt to overcome the textual space between a beginning and an ending to which we are continually led, in which we must confront and somehow negotiate this middling space in which segments collide but do not necessarily cohere. The many images of winged creatures, for instance, may link disparate segments, but they also serve as a clue to the essay's aesthetic.

The ending titled “. . . torn, cut, and spliced” in the table of contents (all endings are listed by their last words) suggests even more explicitly the guiding logic of Bouilly's aesthetic. In this ending we are told that “the poet must be the director of staging, what is allowed to be seen and what will remain unseen.” A few lines later, readers are compared to viewers, and poets are urged to give readers “something to see, something to sense, unless of course, jump cuts are needed for metaphoric, symbolic reasons.” We are also reminded that each line of a poem should stand on its own while at the same time relating to the whole, and that the creation of poetry necessitates transfiguring language: “moments and eternal renderings, impressions and longing, the semblance of movement and the flight along the sense of forever being grounded.”

The book's intriguing index also reveals the origins of the pieces that make up the collection. For instance, Bouilly extracts the phrase “. . . of the symbols of fecundity and hope” (an ending) from another essay of hers, “An Art of Fiction: An Essay.” In so doing, she suggests that by parceling them out in new contexts, one can transfigure not only language but also entire essays. To be sure, this collection, like *The Body*, stands on its own considerable merits,

but I cannot help but think about the body of Bouilly's work in relation to larger wholes—how it emerges as a creative and critical intervention to our conception of the essay form, indeed of narrative more generally. While those interested in lyric essays (as well as lyrical essays) will find much to recommend in Bouilly's work, its appeal extends beyond those readers to everyone interested in issues of literary form. For all who want to be challenged when reading and who are interested in the possibilities of the essay form, Bouilly's groundbreaking work is a must-read.

—Reviewed by Brian Olszewski