PROJECT MUSE®

The Seven Deadly Virtues and Other Lively Essays (review)

Wendy Rawlings

Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall 2009, pp. 155-157 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.0.0094>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/362778>

The Seven Deadly Virtues and Other Lively Essays

LYNN Z. BLOOM

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS, 2008. 212 PAGES, CLOTH, \$29.95.

I don't think I've ever read a book as earnest as Lynn Z. Bloom's *The Seven Deadly Virtues and Other Lively Essays*. It's disarming and perhaps a bit discomfiting to encounter in the book's introduction a narrator who claims she's out to dislodge from the American psyche the so-called "deadly virtues" of "duty, rationality, conformity/conventionality, efficiency, order, economy, and punctuality" and supplant them with honesty, risk-taking, independence of mind and spirit, originality, rigor, energy, and having fun. I felt a bit like one of the Von Trapp children in *The Sound of Music*, when Fraulein Maria shows up and flaunts the rules of the stern baron and his snooty fiancée by stitching the bedroom curtains into play clothes.

Even if I do feel a bit dopey in these play clothes made out of curtains, you've got no argument from me, Lynn Z. Bloom! I'll take fun over duty any day. But I was born 30 years after the author and raised by agnostic feminists (both mother and father) who relished thumbing their noses at the stifling cold-war culture and values against which Bloom struggled to thrive and develop—intellectually, emotionally, artistically.

Part autobiography, part academic essay, part pedagogical manual, part memoir, part family album (scattered throughout the book are family photos of the author, her husband, her children, and their grandchildren), the book's 15 essays constitute both an argument for the "blurring of literary genres in various fields" and an attempt to enact that blurring. As a fiction writer who holds a PhD and teaches at a university, I'm familiar with Bloom's argument (everywhere implicit in this book, though frequently explicit as well) that "academics should be receptive to blurred genres," that they should "engage

in a hospitable, collaborative dialogue rather than competition to see who can score the most esoteric points.” Certainly, Bloom argues, the jargon-laden prose predominant in academia could only be improved by the “voice, panache, and a broad perspective, in language that doesn’t grind gears on the uphill climb but sails up in overdrive.”

While I agree with Bloom’s claims, *The Seven Deadly Virtues* occasionally grinds gears as the author tries to figure out how to integrate the varied audiences, purposes, and disciplinary conventions of the genres she wishes to blur. In an essay titled “Academic Essays and the Vertical Pronoun,” Bloom inserts a photo of her son, his wife, and their young child right in the middle of a section called “On Academic Essays of the Future.” The photo doesn’t appear to have anything in particular to do with the topic at hand other than to remind us that, to paraphrase a line from the ’70s kids’ show “Wonderama,” “Writers are people, too [waka doo, waka doo, waka doo].” Bloom is such a passionate advocate for breaking down the dichotomy between academic and personal writing that I assume this is a gesture toward personalizing academic writing. But the gesture is so literal and so general that I’m left scratching my head; the academic and personal aren’t so much integrated here as shoved together into the same broom closet. Then again, I’d like to interpret the insertion of a family photo into an academic essay as a joke, but there’s not any tonal evidence in the essay to support that. If it is a joke, it’s a clunky one.

Throughout this collection, I had the sense of Bloom’s academic and personal writing achieving only an uneasy truce with each other. In spite of her professed love and respect for the personal narrative, she can’t yet let it exist for its own sake. For her, personal narrative must illustrate an academic claim and then be justified by academic argument, as if telling the stories of one’s own life isn’t valid in and of itself. “Living to Tell the Tale” contains lovely, vivid, heartbreaking passages in which Bloom describes her father:

My father has begun to drink every night, muscatel from green gallon jugs, while poring over stacks of blue books or page proofs of the technical compilations he edits and publishes. He is never drunk, but he is withdrawn, morose; the postwar world is going to hell, and no one will listen to his brilliant solutions.

Yet she brackets these with a somewhat plodding analysis of the ethics of writing creative nonfiction that most readers likely to choose to read this book would already know. The academic orientation of so many of the essays in this book may simply be a result of the audience for whom/which Bloom was originally writing; 12 of the essays originally appeared in academic journals, which have narrow and highly articulated disciplinary conventions that, as Bloom explains, some of her essays, with their autobiographical passages, challenged. Yet Bloom notes, “I have fought my impulse, doubtless born of writing so many academic papers, to analyze, interpret, and explain, particularly to justify my own behavior.” Bloom’s self-diagnosis strikes me as right on target. When Bloom is writing about food and cooking, she’s never fully immersed in a narrative about food and cooking. Instead, she’s also talking to us, professorially, about the function and purpose and mechanics and history and ethics of food writing. She’s also susceptible to clichés about food and writing: “As with any artistic performance, good writing, like good cooking, must appear effortless irrespective of the work required to attain it.” Yes, I’ve heard that before: *Never let ’em see you sweat*.

The great strength of this collection is, in fact, the strength that Bloom conveys through her narratives about being a working woman in a time when it was rare for women to make a living off their intellects. Born in the ’60s, raised with the privileges of Title IX and a working mother and people around me who, for the most part, took women seriously, I was most affected by “Teaching College English as a Woman,” in which Bloom recounts her experiences as a woman in academia in the early 1970s. This essay achieves a seamless synthesis between the personal and the academic, perhaps because it’s an essay about work and the exercise of power, subjects that lend themselves equally to personal and academic narratives. In telling us the story of how she told her students the story of how she averted a man’s attempt to rape her, Bloom shows that a writer’s work achieves the greatest power when she can take the ordinary materials at hand—scholarly, pedagogical, personal—and transform them into something we couldn’t have previously imagined, like play clothes from curtains.

—Reviewed by Wendy Rawlings