

## ***Single Bound: Krypton Nights/Amazon Days* by Bryan D. Dietrich (WordFarm, 2018)**

Like the superhero whose dedication to truth, justice, and the American way stands at the center of Bryan D. Dietrich's *Single Bound: Krypton Nights/Amazon Days*, some books of poetry are strong enough to survive even the most savage foe. Case in point: Dietrich's *Krypton Nights*, originally published as Richard Howard's choice for the 2001 Paris Review Prize in Poetry and justly praised by that distinguished judge as "a remarkable contribution to American literature." Unfortunately, its publisher—not *The Paris Review* (which merely sponsored the prize) but the notorious Zoo Press—imploded around 2004 when its editor, while continuing to invite submissions and collect reading fees, stopped publishing any actual books or, soon after, answering the panicked communications of sponsors, authors, and creditors. (An overview of the whole mess is available online at *Poets & Writers*, May/June 2006).

While *Krypton Nights* did appear before its publisher went AWOL, the ensuing chaos cost the author editorial support and the more lasting distribution that his debut volume deserved. For a long time, beside the original cover image, Dietrich observed wistfully on his website, "This is my first book. Zoo Press has since gone under...Perhaps some day a new edition will come out through another publisher." Thanks to WordFarm, *Single Bound* is the answer to this plea (one shared by Dietrich's admirers), and goes the first edition one better: along with the Superman-centric *Krypton Nights*, we now have *Amazon Days*, an equally inventive book-length sequence on the larger-than-life mythos of another DC Comics icon: Wonder Woman, daughter of Hippolyta, Zeus, and psychologist/polyamorist William Moulton Marston, eccentric inventor of the real-life lie detector and his most famous character's fictional Lasso of Truth. (Jill Lapore's *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, published in 2015, offers a fascinating account of Moulton's career and unconventional love life.)

Conceived as roughly parallel book-length sequences—*Krypton Nights* and *Amazon Days* open, respectively, with "I, Kent" and "I, Wonder," each followed by a loosely rhymed, loosely metrical crown of sonnets—Dietrich's twin books may be read separately or together. But their joint appearance underscores how our view of each character reflects the ways that we respond to gender. Dietrich uses this factor to

advantage. Reinforcing the heroes' kinship and tying their histories together, Superman resurfaces in the final section of *Amazon Days* in poems that imply a more intimate relationship between the heroes. These are largely narrated by a breathless Superman, overwhelmed by his secret crush (or, perhaps, their clandestine relationship): "Alone with her, I seem to understand / earth, its breath, better, the orgasm of ozone / that rushes out when she describes her own / flight" ("Superman's *Other Secret*"). Here and elsewhere, Dietrich masterfully navigates the difficult waters between our suspension of disbelief (these are, after all, outlandishly costumed comic book characters) and a more serious examination of the archetypes that they embody. To do so within the strictures of various shifting narratives, in poems often framed as dramatic monologue, is especially impressive.

The case of Wonder Woman presents unique challenges. Since at least 1954, when psychologist Frederic Wertham's *The Seduction of the Innocent* asserted that comic books (especially horror and superhero comics) were a key cause of juvenile delinquency, the sexual content of comics has been debated, their idealized—and ideally endowed—male and female protagonists subject to the jaundiced gaze of moralists and censors. At the same time, creator Marston filled Wonder Woman's early adventures with encounters unmistakably shaped by the bondage and submission fantasies he believed are widely held (see Lapore, among others, for further discussion). Dietrich responds in several ways. One is through the dramatic monologue that, taking its title from Wertham's book, features not Wertham but Marston claiming his mantle as "Lord of Lies":

..... Nothing  
could escape my snare.  
Not one woman. Not  
two. Not the one I  
made of my wives,  
gave a lasso to, bound  
with that other  
invention, my intention  
to save us all from men  
like me...

The male gaze that Marston and others bring to women's bodies—to women *as* bodies—raises unavoidable questions regarding a character so often eroticized. Dietrich meets these questions head on in "I, Wonder," a meditative monologue that

allows Wonder Woman to crack wise about her own erotic power: “It’s all about cleavage, and I don’t just mean / what I could do with an arrow and a dozen / ax heads.” Elsewhere, Dietrich examines the impulses and myths that resonate through Marston’s heroine. “Paradise Island” opens with suitably Miltonic overtones as Queen Hippolyta, Wonder Woman’s mother, considers the island’s history: “I sing of arms and of a woman who fate made / fugitive, who on her arms *wore* arms, bracelets, bonds / I forged myself from folly.” In a contemporary voice, she regrets her daughter’s departure with Steve Trevor (the officer nursed back to health after a crash-landing on the island) to join the war against the Axis powers: “This is how it’s always been, / some man leaving with the best piece. Even the myth, / the story you tell yourselves of who and where we are, / that too is part of your forgetting.” (The Amazons’ Themyscira remains beyond the reach of men due to various fictional tropes employed in the comics’ near eighty-year history.) In lines like these, Dietrich succeeds on multiple levels: he inhabits a character convincingly, reinvents the DC universe, invokes its basis in Greek myth, and asks serious questions about gender and culture, all the while ensuring that we suspend our disbelief. He is walking a tightrope (or magic lasso?) that Wonder Woman herself might envy.

Along with the gift of *Amazon Days*, the restoration of *Krypton Nights* to print is both welcome and long overdue. In poems whose references reflect the author’s immersion in influences as wide-ranging as Homer, Dante, Yeats, and Joseph Campbell, among others, Dietrich expands the poet’s standpoint: he is protagonist, myth-gatherer, cultural critic, bard, archivist of popular culture, and seeker of enlightenment. In fulfilling this last role, the title poem, “Krypton Nights,” is especially moving, evoking spiritual transcendence despite the burden of fatal knowledge:

When the last Krypton night simmers over  
the rim of your world, when we meet in the sky  
to find ourselves sharing stars, when what was  
once familiar slinks away, disoriented,  
hungry for the next clarity, remember

shadows cast from nothing in the dark.

The poem appears in “The Jor-El Tapes,” a section in the voice of Superman’s father as captured by Albuquerque’s Very Large Array radio telescope and later transcribed—a delightful conceit. (Throughout the book, cosmic messages and prayer

often connect in serious play.) Jor-El is dead by the time his voice has spanned the light years, destroyed by the same apocalypse that brought his son to Earth, only to come of age as the hero who, as Gary Engle observes, flies and wears a cape that “doesn’t so much drape his shoulders as stand apart from them and echo their curve, like an angel’s wings” (Gary Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?”, an essay widely anthologized). Engle points out that the suffix of Superman’s Kryptonian name, Kal-El, suggests a Hebrew origin with multiple meanings: for example, “God” in masculine singular form; also, “of God,” often the ending of angels’ names in the Apocrypha. Having monitored earth from Krypton, Jor-El’s persona reflects on the metaphysics of myth, and in poems such as “The Else,” “JHVH” (the name for God in Hebrew consonants), and “The Mysteries of Azazel” (one of the fallen angels in the non-canonical Book of Enoch), the poet explores religious traditions for the ways that they prefigure Krypton’s semi-divine son—a stranger whose powers promise rescue and protection: “My son will be your Moses. He came from a red sea. / Crossing the dark channel between folds between worlds, / . . . / articulate, astute, uncanny for his age, able / to leap tall buildings in a single bound” (“The Curse of the Pharaohs”).

In their humor, learning, and humanity, both halves of *Single Bound* are challenging, urgent, and, often, deeply moving. Whether or not the success of Patty Jenkins’ 2017 hit movie helped nudge *Amazon Days* into print, with *Krypton Nights* thrown into the bargain, both popular culture and literature have long prospered from the inspiration of comics. Think of Michael Chabon’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, or poems like Lucille Clifton’s “note passed to superman,” Jo Shapcott’s “Superman Sounds Depressed,” or Simon Armitage’s “Kid,” that famously trochaic dramatic monologue from the viewpoint of Batman’s Robin. In *Single Bound*, transposing the cosmology of two DC comics characters into another medium allows Dietrich to interrogate the double awareness of readers who know that their beloved characters have no life between panels or beyond the page but who, nevertheless, love to imagine that they do. Fortunately, Bryan D. Dietrich is one of those readers. His imagination has brought us two books that manage to strip away the colorful costumes that entertain us while raising timeless questions—about human aspiration, the need for selfless compassion, and the importance of questioning the place we occupy in Creation.

**Ned Balbo's** most recent book is *3 Nights of the Perseids* (University of Evansville Press), selected by Erica Dawson for the 2018 Richard Wilbur Award. *The Cylburn Touch-Me-Nots*, selected by Morri Creech for the New Criterion Poetry Prize, will appear in the fall of 2019. His previous books are *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems* (Story Line Press), awarded the Donald Justice Prize and the Poets' Prize; *Galileo's Banquet*; *Upcycling Paumanok*; and *Lives of the Sleepers* (University of Notre Dame Press), awarded the Ernest Sandeen Prize and a finalist for the Arlin G. Meyer Prize of the Lilly Fellows Program. He recently received an NEA translation grant, and an excerpt from his version of Paul Valéry's *La Jeune Parque* recently appeared in *The Hopkins Review*. See more at <https://nedbalbo.com/>.

## ***Stichomythia*** by Tyler Farrell (Salmon Poetry, 2018)

*Stichomythia* looks small and much like a typical-looking volume for poetry, yet it is a huge book with a huge heart. And not to worry, it comes with the OED definition of /stɪkəʊ'mɪθɪə/ on the title page. Those of you expecting something academic or perhaps just another typical book of poetry, may be surprised at how tough this book is to read and yet how tough it is to put it down.

Even though there are no family pictures, sketches, hand-written notes, or other memorabilia here — reading *Stichomythia*, I felt as if there were tons of photographs, maps of cities and countries, histories of the world, even Lives of the Poets, some Lives of the Saints, parts of The Apocrypha we've all been looking for, and many of the letters we've been meaning to write — this is one man's down-to-earth story, over a hundred pages, almost a hundred poems, and it's all in here.

As you would with a family album or a stack of letters found in a box, I encourage you to jump around, just dump everything out, go back and forth, make your own sequences; you'll find yourself drawing maps, piecing together lives, loves, and histories, and if you stick with it all, enjoying the drama, some music, the colloquial narratives, the dreams, the prayers.

St. John of the Cross says, "In prayer, come empty, do nothing." Martin Luther says, "The fewer the words, the better the prayer." And then, there is the Zen saying: "Complete attention is prayer."