

## Songs of the Soul

Reflecting back at the reader are fears always carried, words never said, truths that cannot be forgotten. *Sing To It* by Amy Hempel is fire hot with the relief of resonation. The collection comprises short stories spanning over thirty years of the Hempel's career, which explains the spasmodic nature of the works. *Sing To It* acts as a foster home for Hempel's darlings. It is not a book one reads for a consistent, structured plot; it is an effortless enjoyment, a beach read, but certain stories will save it from being buried and forgotten on a shelf.

Hempel takes to narrative like an impressionist painter to pointillism - a million individual details creating a much larger scene. The conventions of a story are both acknowledged and disregarded. Readers are not given clear compositions with discernible purpose and quenching closure. Instead, pages are printed with fragments of a radical psyche. By focusing on everything, Hempel says nothing, but by saying nothing, Hempel conveys everything. A literary paradox, but an enjoyable, well-crafted one.

The overarching theme revolves around the banalities of life - both tragic and bizarre. "A Full-Service Shelter" exemplifies this analysis with its disjointed observations of the kennel and the social environment within. Hempel utilizes an anaphoric structure by beginning every paragraph with "They knew me as..." (they being the dogs) and strings together a variety of disconnected details. "They knew me as one who loved in them what I recoiled from in people: the patent need, the clinging, the appetite." Through the distancing lens of the dogs, Hempel creates a provoking tale of self-reflection.

The gossiping narrator's voice in "Greed" drips with animosity - immediately enticing the reader with the promise of some hot drama. Hempel's multidimensional characterization of

Mrs. Greed, the mistress of the narrator's husband, shines like a faceted gem. One moment biased cruelty bleeds through when she is described as "running on the fumes of her beauty." Then on the same page, a surface-level objectification is paralleled with stirring insight. "She traveled the world and turned into the person she could be in other places with people she would never see again." Hempel succeeds in subjective diversity by entertaining the reader before concluding with an open-ended interpretation.

Throughout the collection, some stories miss their mark, and some could be deemed pointless prose. A dedicated fan will look past the initial humdrum and focus on the impressive prose, gripping subtext, and unique metaphors. A commercial reader will not always be satisfied. Killing one's darlings is hard; flipping the page is easier. While certain pieces may distract, they do not detract from the overall excellence of Hempel's collection.

Ambiguity and specificity intersect within this collection - most poignantly in "Four Calls in the Last Half Hour." Hempel truly hits her stride in this single-page story. The subtext underlining the plot resonates with any person familiar with heartbreak, or at least a toxic affair.

"The relaxed relentlessness, the air of impersonal intimacy, the sense they create of having just been with you despite not having been with you for quite a while; of resuming a rolling conversation that you have not, in fact, been having, that was broken off rather dramatically, actually, by definitive pledges by both parties." (Four Calls, 59)

The prose is concise but masterful, detailing a romantic in despair. It is not quite a plea, not yet a firm rejection, but rather a moment of muddled weakness - painfully divine and instantly the reader's.

Those who enjoy looking into the sometimes unsatisfying mirror of reality will enjoy Hempel's post-modern literary collection. Her sardonic tone and transparent emotion cut deep, while her brutal honesty stings so sweetly. "All these women breaking glass ceilings, and I found one firmly in place."

Maybe that is the point of Hempel's collection. To allow those weaknesses and doubts, the drama and mistakes, without inflicting the consequences of reality. Take this collection as an emotional safari and the author as an armed guide. *Sing To It* is recreational chaos, and what is better than danger from a safe distance?