

Proud Gods and Commodores: Volume II

James McMillan

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James McMillan's personal anthology *Proud Gods and Commodores* contains poems, essays, and short stories about human experience. Demonstrating comprehensive knowledge of twentieth-century American history, Greek mythology, and human anatomy, the pieces are connected by riotous linguistic flourishes and narrative arcs that begin in conflict or hardship and end in character-based resolutions.

The poems' forms include traditional verse, free verse, and explanatory prose poems. Lively tones are achieved, as in the bawdy entry "Whatever Happened to Zeus and the Gang," which imagines the sexual exploits of aging gods and goddesses with musicality and playfulness. And distinctive persona poems encapsulate their specific times and places well: "The Old Woman on Haight Street," which is written in the caustic, cynical voice of Stormi, a resident of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood during the 1960s, is an epic tale of a tumultuous life, moving through the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition, and World War II. The dominant voice of the collection, however, is editorial. Individual works come with prefaces and explanatory notes that do not add to the narrative momentum or lyrical power of the entries themselves.

Still, fresh imagery appears in entries like "Preface to 'Sometimes a River, an Adolescent Romance,'" in which high school is described as a stage in life wherein someone "opens a can of upheaval for lunch every day." And "The Periodic Table of Character" appears as a chart in an essay of the same name, with the image of the chart used to explain and exalt the character trait of magnanimity while also functioning as evidence that character is superior to emotion when it comes to evaluating people's worth. It is ironic, then, that the essay itself is carried away with emotion in a diatribe against "snowflakes," whom it characterizes as too sensitive and emotional.

The short stories are grouped together as "Epic Tales." They are often subversive, humorous takes on mythic stories. "The Maiden and the Hag, An Arthurian Tale" makes tongue-in-cheek use of tropes from the legend of King Arthur: Swords, shields, and spooky forests make their appearances, as do riddles and strangers who turn out to be siblings. These literary allusions help to ground the book's idiosyncratic versions of old stories in familiar mythic traditions.

A personal anthology of poetry and prose, *Proud Gods and Commodores* is linguistically playful, humorous, and informative.

MICHELE SHARPE (March 4, 2025)

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