

★ Yoke & Feather: Essays

Jessie van Eerden

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Jessie van Eerden's glittering essay collection *Yoke & Feather* is a work of exquisite longing marked by keen reflections on biblical tales.

Beginning after van Eerden's divorce, these intimate essays trouble through relationship shifts, unrealized goals, and connections between people across time. A foray into online dating becomes an opportunity to reconsider how we present ourselves to the world; van Eerden notes the limitations of digital checklists when it comes to capturing a person's whole being. A rafting trip down a desert river just after a snowstorm solidifies a developing relationship alongside sightings of hieroglyphs on cliff walls and a felled mountain lion. Magic abounds, found in ordinary prayers, everyday practices, and ongoing growth; the very act of being becomes a symbol of deep religiosity.

Among the book's throughlines are reconsiderations of the stories of women from the Bible, their lives reimaged in contemporary Appalachian contexts. Mary and Martha adopt a child, loving and forming her in their individualized ways; Elizabeth longs for the child she has not yet had. These are exercises in empathy, reconstituted stories of melancholy and desire in which the "currents" of the present can be "sense[d]." They run alongside van Eerden's own confessions: she, too, dreams of the daughter she never had, envisioning the girl dancing along her porch and wondering if it's too late to start.

Prayers run throughout the book, too, taking the form of panging love for neighbors and strangers and dreams unrealized. "We are defined by the unwritten, the unpossessed," van Eerden writes, "by this that we want which we did not know we wanted because it is unseen." Herein, such "blessings do not lead you out, but lead you in," toward spiritual transformation that makes space for new possibilities.

The essays in *Yoke & Feather* are gorgeous exercises in faith-filled, interconnected being.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November / December 2024)

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