

HOMESPUN TAPESTRY

A collection of essays, on the experiences of life and the acquisition of wisdom by Brenda Eldridge. Published by Australia: Ginninderra Press. 2016.

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Abstract of Review

Reviewed by Adrian Rogers

This is a review of a collection of essays written by Brenda Eldridge, the wife of my publisher Stephen Matthews, of Ginninderra Press. This small company publishes poetry, essays, short stories, novelettes, chap books, and historical memorabilia. This collection—Homespun Tapestry was launched on the same day as my latest poetry collection. Having read these essays I was so impressed by their homely wisdom and scrupulous honesty, a wisdom gained by living life with all its lights and shadows that I felt inspired to write the review I am now offering. Brenda looks back over her life, from the perspective of one who has suffered, learnt from suffering, and thus learnt how to triumph over it. I heartily recommend to anyone who is interested in life itself, and how it may be lived.

Review

Homespun Tapestry is a series of life centred, reflective essays in an elegant, yet emotionally penetrating style. I think, for many older folk the very word ‘essay’ conjures up images of school homework, of being told to write an ‘essay’ on some particular subject, yet it was not always thus. In the preceding three centuries distinguished writers such as Addison, Smollett, De Quincy, and Hilaire Belloc, to name just four all cultivated the essay form, writing on a wide range of subjects. Then with a perhaps more restricted palette, there was the equally accomplished Joseph Conrad, whose book of essays, ‘The Mirror of the Sea’ stands comparison with all that has gone before. Brenda Eldridge has no need to feel intimidated in such company, indeed I think her collection deserves to stand with theirs in natural accomplishment and distinctiveness of idiom.

Is Brenda a philosopher? I think the titles of the concluding essays in the collection give the answer. ‘Immediate Joy’, and ‘Wholeness’ are philosophical in the only way that truly matters, in that they reflect upon a life lived, not an intellectual proposition entertained. I think the following from Immediate Joy make the point...

I had the constant pattern of sunrise and sunset filling my home with colour. I had the stillness, and the sharp crack of bark breaking in the heat, and the sound of strong winds through the trees and the tension of wondering if the trees would fall on my roof. I have woken in the night to my house flooded with moonlight so bright I could sit by the window and write a poem about it.

Yes, I wept a lot, but I had all those moments of immediate joy too.

Then there is this, another example of sheer living...

I seem to have come back to love. Not romantic love. Dare I say a love that is deeper because its roots are in nobility? We have a greater appreciation of the fragility of life. We know the finality of death. We have fought bitterness, grief, and anger, and come through.

And how indeed could one be a philosopher in the truest sense of the word if one had not fought ‘bitterness, grief, and anger, and come through’?

A word that captures the spirit of these essays for me is ‘awareness’. I now quote from ‘Wholeness’, regarding leaving home, and the forming of new relationships among ones children...

They have done what I believe is right for them. They grew up and entered relationships of their own. No doubt they have each looked to someone who could create a warm and loving home for them. I did this for myself too, and have at last achieved that with someone who shares the same wants and needs.

That surely is an example of ‘wholeness’, yet the philosopher knows it cannot be achieved until one has confronted ones fears, and been honest with the inner self. Fear can strike at any time, regardless of ones supposed maturity. Brenda has experienced it as such, and come through...

It has been years since I felt the need to flee from a place. Stephen has kept me safe. He has done so much in the few years we have been together, to ease the fears and terrors I have lived with all my adult life. So why has it all crumbled this afternoon?

Perhaps there's nothing like memory for shattering ones complacency. Broken relationships, and the suicide of a son are surely reason enough for fears, and terror perhaps at the possibility of reliving those times of haunted suffering, when there seemed to be no way out of the impasse of despondency.

...My son despairs of ever getting out from under his father's control...

So he took his own life. Anyone who has experienced the emotional pressure (some might call it emotional blackmail) of an over controlling parent will understand, that
...fear breeds fear. It is hard to break the cycle.

These essays reflect on how Brenda has lived her life and come through it all to a point of repose that yet leaves no room for smugness or arrogance, because courage is another requirement of the would-be philosopher in search of fulfilment. Not everyone has the courage to admit in print that they have, at one time or another behaved badly, whether on account of a particular relationship or for any other reason. We all have of course, but how many of us would be honest enough to say so openly? As a reviewer one is challenged to ask oneself if one would have been as honest in admitting to ones mistakes as Brenda has been.

So the essays unfold, dealing with such topics as home and what makes it, ones children, understanding life itself, education, true friendship which is—one might argue the purest form of love, in that it has no hidden agendas, grief, and fear of course. All of which unfold into the flower of wisdom, when one admits that to some of life's problems there are no instant solutions, maybe at times no perfect solutions at all. Times surely when we do the right thing, times when we do the wrong thing, and times when we do the only thing possible in a moment of unprepared for challenge, whether right or wrong.

All in all there is a pattern in these essays, as in all of lived experience, one whose design only becomes apparent as we look back over time. When living or suffering in the moment we do not see it, but when we reflect on life, "Through the arches of the years", as Francis Thompson so aptly put it, we see how the various strands and colours fit together in the tapestries that make up our life's history. We see that it all meshes, that life truly lived has a purpose, that only our individual self can tell us what this purpose is, and that when we perceive this truth we have acquired wisdom.

Let me say then before concluding that I heartily recommend this beautiful collection of essays, these reflections on a life lived, through all its lit and shadowed moments. I will let Brenda have the last word...

I am a complete and whole person. If the gods are kind, there will be other people who will come into my life and add to this wholeness, but I am not less because I haven't met them yet.

Bio by author

My name is Adrian Cedric Rogers; I was born in England, trained as a teacher in Ireland, teaching in that country, then in Scotland, The Shetland Islands, England,

Australia, and Papua New Guinea, before retiring in 2005, thereafter devoting much of my time to writing. I have six fantasy novels in print, four published by Double Dragon in Canada, and two by Mountain Mist in Australia. I also have two novels issued (also by Double Dragon) as e-books. I have contributed poetry, articles, and short stories to numerous periodicals and anthologies. I also have three collections of poetry published by Ginninderra Press, Port Adelaide, Australia, the latest being launched on 20th November.

EPISTEME