

Hearing Voices

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(A review of *Apocrypha: Further Journey* by Stan Dragland)

When I was a kid, my piano teacher forced me to play two parts of a three-part Bach Invention. Dropping one strand, you hear the others more clearly. Good training for Stan Dragland's *Apocrypha: Further Journeys* from the series **The Writer as Critic**. Here my ear is pulled to the half-buried middle voice, sneaking around the outer parts. The critic does his job – describing Elizabeth Hay who “binds [her] words like an ancient Scots chariot: not solid like the more famous Roman model, but woven of willow withes.” The writer, too, reports on craft; but it is the personal that walks off the page. He retreats to the library: “as once we collapsed into flesh just inside the bedroom, too hungry to reach the bed. Flung myself into the first empty desk, in Reference.”

I knew a radio host who veiled her face in press photos; she hid her visage, but her personality leaked out on air. Dragland reverses the trick. He's full frontal on the cover, but covers up inside. Or seems to. Until we are startled by this announcement of emigration: “Home left me.”

Dragland quotes Humpty Dumpty: “When I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra.” How much did Dragland pay the tiny pronoun that jolted us mid-sentence: “On my first honeymoon, *our* honeymoon...” Small words shift us from literary critic and writer to the private country of a man who confesses he believed his own devotion would be enough to save his family.

His eye and ear rove generously over books, music, people, places, but he's tough on himself. I can't even tell a story, the story-teller claims. His anecdotes are greeted with: “That's it?” Here one says, ah, *that's* it.

In *Apocrypha* the critic vacates the library carrel, bearing language and lines of poetry, mulling over them on his journeys – by plane, train, car, – journeys sprouting from his father's scary ride across the east-west bridge. Ultimately, Dragland's mind roams to the final journey when, “that skin of soil” over him, creatures will “carry me by littles.”

After re-assembling the Bach invention, my ear still isolated the middle line. I return to *Apocrypha* putting writer, critic and man back together again, but what lingers is the tentative voice of the rigorously modest man.

Did I mention? If you're divorced, you gotta read this book.