

BOOK REVIEW

Knives on the Table: A Review

Susan C. Waters

Knives on the Table is Peter Mladinic's fourth book of poetry. In this work, he delves into the world sometimes explored by Ai and Charles Baudelaire in *Flowers of Evil*. The inhabitants of Mladinic's new book are not only hidden in deep shadows of night, but also appear in the glare of full sunlight. Most of the characters' lives have gone so wrong, sometimes on purpose. Often, Mladinic's tone is objective, observing that which we hope never to see, the broken lives no-one wants. At other times, Mladinic employs persona poems.

In "Tweakers," the poem probes the awful and predictably bad life and death, of an abuser. Ironically, the abused, a woman, is still desiring his love. "Mike Tyson Inside" is a persona poem which touches upon the details of Tyson's life. Tyson was managed by Cus D'Amato, won any number of fights, was in a reckless driving accident, and spent time in jail for a rape. Mladinic captures the brute energy of the boxer in this poem. In another poem, "Damp Wallet," a man wishes he had the life of a hero, a man who saved the life of a drowning child. Instead, his wallet contains a secret police card and an invisible card for the Lon Chaney Club. Lon Chaney was an actor who portrayed tortured and often grotesque characters.

In the 1980s, the Tylenol Murders frightened people and changed the way medications are sold (they now contain a seal). An unknown person had taken Tylenol from shelves and tainted the pain killer with potassium cyanide, a lethal concoction, and then placed the poison

back on shelves in the Chicago area. Probably many wonder what type of person would do this, and this is the theme of “Tylenol Murders,” committed by an everyday person, probably, who will never be caught. The persona in the poem “The Broom” imagines that he would write cautionary essays, and he would write about Cold War school violence. Instead of the remembered kindness and patience of Ward Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*, students are kicked, faces slapped and forearms bruised by teachers.

Mladinic’s book illuminates lives that are hopefully on the periphery of our existence, the convicted and unconvicted murderers, the emotional felons that live behind convincing facades. Many countries have been fascinated for many years by criminals. French novelist Eugène Sue was highly successful in his portraits of the seamy side of humanity, as witnessed in Paris during the 1800s. Even today, TV teems with crime features. The side of human existence that we hope does not exist does, and people are fascinated.

Peter Mladinic has published three books of poetry: *Lost in Lea*, *Dressed for Winter*, and *Falling Awake in Lovington*, all with the Lea County Museum Press. He lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.

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About the Reviewer

Susan C. Waters is the author of *Heat Lightning*, a chapbook of poems published in 2017 by Orchard Street Press. She lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.