The Great Right Here, by Ellyn Touchette rev. by Hannah Schultz

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*The Great Right Here* by Ellyn Touchette is a poetry book about meltdowns, mental health, and the seemingly tedious things that happen to us every day. Most of the poems aren’t more than a page or two long and explore various forms, use excellent enjambment, and vary in imagery, language, and rhythm, and create very interesting and distinguishable tones. The poems in the book are raw and exposed but also have some comic relief and humor to them. The protagonist of the book is a kind of antihero that is still lovable and relatable to a millennial reader in all of the best ways.

One interesting form that Ellyn Touchette uses in this collection is used in the poem “Psychotic Break in Three Parts” where it is split into three sections titled I, II, and III. There are also a few poems spread throughout the course of the book that are titled “My Therapist and I Discuss …” that are read as conversations, (sometimes linear) between the speaker and their therapist. For example, in the poem “Hail 1969” the stanzas alternate between being right and left justified and include Catholic prayers that respond to stanzas of poetry. There are a few poems written in couplets like “The Last Monarch Butterfly” and some written in quatrains like “Lime Green Paring Knife” that are both aesthetically pleasing and fitting for each poem. Touchette’s extensive use of different forms keeps the reader interested and showcases her skill in creating poems that utilize forms that are unique or inherited, all while writing about unique topics.

Touchette is able to successfully manipulate language to create an image many times over the course of the book. For example, in the poem “Variations, in A Minor” Touchette writes “I can smell the bitters / on his breath as he plays bumper cars with the cast iron / chairs.” Touchette gives the reader some sensory details to think about but also manipulates language and describes a situation in an unlikely way by describing the chairs as bumper cars rather than saying that they “bump together” or using other language that is more common. In the poem “On Me, My Boy, & the Mobil Station” Touchette writes “My boy he’d sleep/ & sleep & sleep like I was gone / so I’d get gone, get cheap / beer and pound it across the street / while he slept himself into furniture.” The phrase “slept himself into furniture” is both an unlikely and unique way to describe a person oversleeping and an interesting image in itself. Touchette does this time and time again throughout the book and creates images for the reader that are new and exciting.

Touchette also works with rhythm in a lot of the poems in this collection. A great example of this requires us to go back to the poem “On Me, My Boy, & the Mobil Station”. The poem reads “I still love all he isn’t / & isn’t & isn’t & now the clerk knows / my name, knows all about who I am / here for, why I stare at myself / in the freezer glass, / why I shop for two, / knows all about the stone in my living / room.” In both of these excerpts from “On Me, My Boy, & the Mobil Station” Touchette exercises her skill in rhythm by using repetition of phrases like “sleep” and “isn’t”. She also uses near rhyme with words like “two” and “room” and “cheap and street” which works towards the rhythm of the poem as well with the repetition of sounds.

Touchette also uses excellent enjambment throughout the book. In many poems she focuses in on the importance of each line’s end words. A great example of Touchette’s use of enjambment is in the poem “Merry Clayton Sings Us Sterile” where she writes “Boys do not know how a woman sings / her body empty. They cannot be the ones / to tell us that our fury is caustic & our grief / leaves / us barren. When their women shatter, / they think the sound is beautiful.” The language that Touchette chooses to use at the end of each line is all meaningful and well chosen. Each line break is strategic and could have its own meaning if the second line did not follow. Touchette chose these line breaks very successfully and by doing so, she keeps the reader interested about what is to come next in the poem.

The poetic device that is most overwhelmingly efficient in this collection of poems is the tone. Touchette writes about difficult and painful topics in a lighthearted way that is still somehow taken very seriously. This comes off well to the reader and makes poems about heartbreak, mental health, and self harm the slightest bit easier to read.

*The Great Right Here* is Ellyn Touchette’s first and only book of poetry. I recommend this book to any millennial reader who cares about poetry, or anyone else who wants to read a collection of poems that are heartfelt and heartbreaking. A quick read at 87 pages, it is well worth reading every one of them.