OLYMPUSVILLE: IllUSTRATED, by Ron Koertge rev. by Jessika Dunn

illustrations by Alicia Kleman

2019 Red Hen Press

Ron Koertge is a poet and professor at Hamline University in the MFA program for Children’s Writing. His recent works in poetry include *Fever*, *Indigo*, “*Lies Knives and Girls in Red Dresses*”, “*The Ogre’s Wife*”, and his latest besides *Olymousville*, *Vampire Planet*. However, Koertge’s range of literature has also been known to venture outside the realm of poetry. He is also a writer of teen fiction and has published several novels such as “The Brimstones Journals, Shakespeare makes the Playoffs” and many others. For his esteem, he has received grants from the NEA and the California Arts Council and currently has two volumes of Best American Poetry.

Koertge brings the realm of Olympus to life in his rendition of the world of the Greek Gods. This book of illustrated poetry features deities from the Greek pantheon. These characters are given life through sixteen uniquely written pieces, each one paired with a beautiful illustration of a specific deity. There's the proud and lustful king of the Gods himself, the regal and refined goddess of marriage Hera, the ever beautiful Aphrodite, the mournful king of the underworld Hades and several more. Each poem portrays the complexities of each deity's life and mythology but in a most realistic way. This book presents each piece not only as poetry but as a mystical yet realistic narrative that captures and entices the mind of its reader from start to finish. This is most definitely accomplished through the combination of poetry and illustration to create a dramatic telling of the Greek myths. Also, what both author and artist accomplish is the creation of a most whimsical world and setting while still including some of the key elements in poetry writing.

One of the best non-elemental aspects of this book is its realism. Koertge has found a way to add a sense of relatability into each poem, which works wonderfully with each graphic illustration. Each character and their poem presents an issue they've dealt with or are dealing with. Although unlikely to have happened in reality some of the problems presented are impactful beyond measure. These gods of the Greek pantheon in all their wonder and grace are also vain and selfish. For anyone who knows anything of the Olympians and their myths, they would know that these supreme beings are not always painted in the best light. Their actions were immoral, their reasons unjust and the extent of their hubris was so severe it brought suffering upon their very own children human and god. In contemporary works, they are often used as an example of satire or simply written off as a joke. They aren't always taken seriously in modern works, be it art, television, music, as well as literature. Yet here in this set of poems their existence is presented less humorously. In this instance, they are taken seriously. As the reader, one may have preconceptions about the Olympians, you may even make fun or pass judgment. However, once you read through the first piece it is clear that there is more to be considered. As it stands those preconceptions are all but shattered. Using Hera's piece as an example, she eloquently explains her reasoning for allowing Zeus's infidelity to pass. Most often audiences question her marriage with Zeus as it seems clear that he was less than devoted to her. Some even tend to judge her for her lack of action. Yet in her piece what she describes is the exact opposite:

 “And let’s be clear about that one and her so-called beautiful hair. I told Zeus to sleep with her once because in my wisdom I knew she would be the mother of a muse. I admit I didn’t think he’d stay a week and a half, but now we have nine muses thanks to me and they all celebrate me in poetry and dance and song.”

This idea or preconception of Hera as a somewhat passive figure in her husband’s affairs is challenged and thrown right out the window. This piece depicts her as an orchestrater in her husband’s lifestyle not a victim or a side character. Though you expect to see her that way, you are surprised to find that she disappoints you. This is what will truly hit the reader about these poems and the challenges faced by the characters; the fact that these characters correlate with the ancient myths while incorporating a sense of realism into each piece that is surprising because it does not present to you what you expect to read. The poems were written in such a relatable manner that it almost seems like these situations could have happened. Though It’s anyone’s guess as to whether or not Hephaestus's mother tossed him down a mountain, or if Hera turned Echo into a cow, the poems evoke so many raw emotions it is hard to simply look at them as parts of greek myths. Mysticism aside, they are wildly realistic and emotionally jarring.

On the subject of emotion, the piece excels. Once again praising the effectiveness of the illustrations, the art in this piece aids the poem to convey the emotions felt by each god. The artwork is lush with detail in the scenes as most include an object, specific to identifying the god. Titles and the items associated with them are extremely important. They help define each deity as the power they wield or the knowledge they hold. In these illustrations, their items are slightly altered. Zeus's thunderbolt is a car. Hades realm is a nightclub and Narcissus's reflection in a river has been converted to a pocket mirror. All these items seem more or burdensome than empowering. Hades realm keeps him away from Persephone, Zeus's car probably requires a wealth of maintenance, and narcissus faces the risk of breaking his most beloved mirror every time he looks at his reflection. These burdens contribute to the sense of misery throughout the book.

The poems themselves seem to have a pattern in content. Each piece includes problems or challenges the god is facing. Yet there is a sense of complacency in some as they do not discuss how to go about fixing their problems. Through this aspect of the pieces, the reader feels the level of discontent felt by each character. Discontent, this seems to be the overarching tone throughout the book. Zeus's life would be wonderful except he has to contend with the unwanted presence of his wife who "never shuts up" while enjoying the company of several female companions. Aphrodite is faced with the impossible task of having a cripple for a husband, all the while making him suffer through her frequent affairs with her lover, Ares. Hades lives miserably in the underworld awaiting the return of his wife who he is forbidden to see half the year. Persophone the wife in question is tended to by an overbearing parent and kept away from her most beloved husband. The woes of the gods seem dramatic and at times immoral but in this view of the Olympians, they are given a new light and perspective. Despite the unruliness of their behavior, one can truly see how their stations affect them and how real there problems are. Koertge attempts to bring about feelings of total misery with euphoric bouts of delight and pleasure. Of this, he most definitely succeeds.

Honing in on perspective there is a considerable amount of depth behind each poem. The problems presented are jam-packed with meaning beyond what is written in each piece. The mundane but fit Sisyphus, at first seems plane and pitiful but is revealed to be a most thoughtful character. He is condemned to reposition a boulder up and down a mountain for all eternity. Yet his punishment, although eternal seems to have been his salvation, as the cynically humorous god appears to favor this over anything else. In this, there are trickles of hope, hints that lead the audience to understand Sisyphus better. He is just a person trying to make the best out of an almost hopeless situation. Which is the case for all Greek gods, regardless of their crimes and abuses against each other. Then there is the obsessed Narcissus. Though hilarious his piece is worth further consideration. He looks to his mirror mesmerized by his very reflection. It seems self-centered and vane to the average person capable of at least a small amount of selflessness. However, in reality, it is a great turmoil. This deity, the father of all narcissists is in a prison. He exists in a world that would prefer he look beyond his mirror but to him, the very thought is torture. To peer beyond his likeness the thing he loves more than life itself is simply too great a task for this deity. Yet in the end, it is his downfall. He cannot look away, not even to view oncoming danger. So every day he chances death and all to be in the presence of the one he loves most.

One place the author leaves something to be desired is in the form and the lack of poetic structure. Yes, the book contains various meanings and ranges of depth and tone, but while they possess a poetic feel to them, most of the pieces take on more of a short story structure than that of an actual poem. Though one could also argue that each poem adds tone, depth, and reality to the overall story of the book; which in that case was Koertge's goal overall. He is world-building, re-imagining this mythical realm in a way that is visually and orally pleasing. Yet without again losing that mysticism, every poem adds to that complete picture. There are connections from one poem to the next, they aren't isolated situations but ones that impact each other.

*Olympusville* is a sarcastic, dramatic, emotional and fantastic joyride from start to finish. An impactful read seeping with depth and meaning that transports you into a beautifully imperfect world of power, hunger, and tragedy that both delights and dismays the reader enough to be repulsed but to keep coming back for more. I recommend this book to anyone with a love of fantasy and sarcasm. It is a fun read that will leave you recoiling, but with poetry so powerful you’ll be as enticed the twelfth time as you were the first.