*Monster Portraits* by Del and Sofia Samatar reviewed by Selena Cordar

Rose Metal Press

Del and Sofia Samatar, the authors of *Monster Portraits,*are a brother and a sister who came together to write a book referring to their shared life experiences regarding the idea of the monstrous through the lens of magical realism. Sofia Samatar is an award-winning author whose emphasis on writing is in novels and short stories. Del Samatar received his Bachelor's in Fine Arts from Rutgers University and is a current tattoo artist in training in the state of New Jersey. Together, the siblings created a piece of writing that conjoins their backgrounds of both writing and visual artwork. For each story of the book, a drawing is attached that represents the topic being discussed.

The book, *Monster Portraits*, is a collection of short autobiographical stories told in a fantastical manner. Each story has a centralized theme of interjecting the idea of a monster’s prevalence in an aspect of the two authors’ life experiences. In addition, the word “monster” is used rather metaphorically and not something consisting of an unworldly concept. In this context, there is mention of several monsters that are often symbolizing the notion of being “othered” due to racial indifference within society and the strong impact it has had on the authors’ livelihoods.

One of the strongest aspects of this book is its' use of structure. The format of every story varies with each monster topic that is introduced. For example, the story “The Field” follows a chronological format and has a clear portrayal of the topic. The story “Notebook (I)” feels more like a journal entry rather than a story being told with a distinct start and finish. The structural differences do play a role in how the stories are read, as the more chronological pieces seem to have a greater sense of depth in comparison to the almost diary-like pieces. The forms of the stories do, however, connect to its’ topic well and assist in portraying the heavy emotional nature of each piece. To add to this aspect, the drawn images that tie into the individual stories themselves are also a very unique structural element this book withholds.

The use of sensory detail is prevalent within all pieces of this book. The extensive amount of tangible description portrayed the true emotions the siblings had once felt when they first engaged with each “monster” or were faced with a moment of blatant discrimination. An example can be taken from the story “Beauty” which is as follows:

“After a moment I accepted the chains. Secured to the battlements, I enjoyed the sensation of snapping like a kite. Afterward I couldn’t stop touching my neck. All monsters, I though, express relationships: not the ones we dream of, but the ones we have” (34).

I find this element to be effective because of how successful the sensory detail was at relaying an experience felt by the authors onto the reader. The authors’ feelings and what they went through are clearly expressed and reflected through their use of engaging language.

Overall, I would recommend this book to anyone fond of non-fictional stories based on the idea of otherness that is being told through metaphorical language. In addition, this book differs from the average piece of published writing because of its inclusion of detailed artwork that visualizes the intricate concepts of the stories.