

Tending Truth, Telling Lies

Tending Memory by Marianne Paul
reviewed for *The Leaf* by Anne Duke Judd

Marianne Paul warns us, even before Part One of her new novel, *Tending Memory*, Gypsies lie. Michaela, the protagonist, challenges readers to “pick the truth from the untruth. . .swallow the story and leave only the lie.”

Sixty-one chapters later—some little more than a page or two—a reader comes to the end of the story, perhaps still puzzling over what parts lie, what tell truth. Michaela has invented not only the story, but her self.

If all fiction writers lie on paper, Marianne Paul surely has more skill than many. Like the Gypsies, she moves us with words from place to place, time to time, as at home in a university library as a Rom encampment, among street people or seminarians.

Michaela’s story comes as snatches of music heard from a passing car radio. Yet it brings instant hits of recognition as themes recur like the chorus of old ballads: leaving, risking, creating one’s life. Lives there any girl who does not remember a stage of believing herself not the child of the parents who claim her? Who thinks she is actually of royal blood, adopted by commoners?

Michaela plays with truth, spinning stories as did Scheherazade—tales to save her life, to borrow time. For all her Gypsy wiles, Michaela keeps readers wondering if she will survive the risks she takes. And Marianne Paul makes us want her to survive or, better, to heal childhood hurts.

The language of *Tending Memory* brightens even its darkest scenes. Ordinary words combine in ways that reward rereading.

*I will never leave you, my mother had said as I
watched my father’s back disappear, watched him
turn into a single black dot against the flat black*

pen line of the horizon. And I believed her. Felt her
hand engulf mine, as warm as truth.

Tending Memory also gives us books within books—gifts to Michaela the child escaping convalescence via the pages of an atlas. (“At last!” she calls it.) From it, she learns a traveller’s alphabet: not ABC, but NSEW. And then she begins to read to herself.

I follow the written words on the page as [Nana] says them aloud. Pretend I do, if nothing more. I recognize random words in the print that Nana reads. Come to understand that the words travel from left to right, and start over again, trek their way down the page, top to bottom. Then I realize it’s not the words that travel, but the story itself. A single word is fixed to its spot. The story, now, the story soars, sails the width and height and depth of a book. Travels far beyond. . .

Books remain significant to Michaela the woman in a relationship built on ideas.

Winner of the 2006 Canadian Aid Literary Award and long an advocate for literacy, Marianne Paul knows how to work words, play with words, toss them across oceans. Just when we think they will land on our outstretched mind, she sends them snapping fingers as they dance off to the horizon.

Tending Memory
BookLand Press, 2007
ISBN 978-0-9780838-5-4 204 pages, softcover \$26.95