

DAYS I MOVED THROUGH ORDINARY SOUNDS
THE TEACHERS OF WRITERSCORPS IN POETRY AND PROSE
edited by Chad Sweeney
 City Lights Foundation (\$17.95)

by Rachel Mennies

Concerned in 1992 with the state of American poetry, poet and former NEA chair Dana Gioia wrote the now-famous essay "Can Poetry Matter?" In this essay, he claims "the rest of society has mostly forgotten about the value of poetry," citing academia's inaccessibility and the related national rise in the number of M.F.A. programs as culprits of this forgetfulness. Next, Gioia poses a piercing question: "What possible relevance does this archaic art form have to contemporary society?" One answer to this question came in 1994—two years after the publication of Gioia's essay—in the founding of WritersCorps.

Modeled after similar government-funded programs like AmeriCorps and Teach for America, WritersCorps recruits writers to teach for hourly wages in disadvantaged communities in New York City, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, where the program—and this collection—originated. *Days I Moved Through Ordinary Sounds* presents the experiences, stories, and poems of WritersCorps workers. Integrating creative writing and mentorship provides an answer, for many participants, to Gioia's weighty question: "With each poem [my students] struggled to create," writes contributor Maina Minahal, "they showed me honest examples of what it really means to own the power of language, to be socially engaged writers—and I thank them for that." For Minahal and the anthology's other forty-nine contributors, the place of poetry and fiction in their students' lives proves indisputably relevant. With grit and sophistication, this collection chronicles the use of art as creative social instrument, and attests to literature's enduring contemporary importance.

Each writer's contribution follows the same format; a headshot and an essay on his or her WritersCorps experience prefaces an excerpt of poetry or prose. Writers who best make use of this format balance the essay and creative selection without defaulting to social soapbox. Jeffery McDaniel (*The Splinter Parade, The Endarkenment*), an early WritersCorps poet who participated post-M.F.A., writes of the contrast between the academic writing world and the social, instructional realm of WritersCorps: "It was invigorating to bounce between the world of my M.F.A. program . . . where 'accessible' was a putdown—and the world of WritersCorps, where the poems you brought into workshop had to be accessible if you were going to . . . inspire a population that wasn't fluent in the coded maneuvers of contemporary poetry." McDaniel masters both art and accessibility in his poem "Day 4305," which chronicles his addiction struggles with sharp introspection and unsparing, graphic language.

While some successful contributors focus inward in their selections, other strong writers examine larger urban conditions. Xicano poet Beto Palomar imagines the western United States without the culture and workforce of Mexican immigrants in "The Day the Mexicans Disappeared:"

at that moment
 350,000 white babies in wheelers

veered into streets
 losing the guiding force
 of caretaker Marias, Rosas, Carmelas
 the white babies alone
 pobrecitos
 lost under Range Rovers
 from Marin to Oklahoma City
 what a pity . . .

Palomar's call for the recognition of his people mirrors the need felt by many of his students for a place in North American society: "Writing is sometimes a lonely act," he notes in his essay, "but its meaning is not isolated." Far from Gioia's hermetic academy, Palomar's community informs both his writing and his cultural identity with immediacy and descriptive specificity.

The essay-plus-creative selection format finds other writers, in the wake of the ongoing debate regarding writing instruction in the United States, criticizing "established" or traditional modes of doing so. "I learned [from my students]," writes one contributor, "to let go of grammar, of the rigid order of syntactic sense." Another poet finds excitement in her students' "disrespect for intellectual distance." Though the goals of WritersCorps and MFA programs are wisely disparate for both students and instructors, rallying so strongly against a more traditional, prosody-based writing instruction seems to detract from the fundamental intention of WritersCorps: to produce new writers. Perhaps there is room for form and meter in a WritersCorps classroom; perhaps, even, these techniques could liberate these writers, and grant them fresh means of expression. The tension found in this anthology on the subject, however, certainly reflects the larger debates about creative writing pedagogy in the United States—not an easily solvable issue, and one that WritersCorps shares with many higher and secondary educational writing programs. Where WritersCorps, and this anthology, departs from this pedagogical universe is in its mission for social change; the urgency for this mission is palpable, and energizing, throughout the collection.

Seventeen years have passed since Gioia levied his concerns for poetry on the American public. In the interim, WritersCorps has labored to bring creative writing as literary and social tool to neighborhoods in need of visibility and support. This collection proves exultantly the importance of their work. Contributors look inside themselves, around the block, and across the nation to answer "Can poetry matter?" with a resounding, well-crafted "yes." ♦