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English 1302.P22

09 February 2017

The Perspective of *Crush*

As one of the more abstract types of written word, poetry can often have many layers of meaning. Perspective in poetry is proved invaluable when considering the multiple interpretations a reader is allowed. In Richard Siken's book of poems, *Crush*, perspective is not only important when analyzing the work, but is essential to the story itself. The speaker is a gay man who punishes himself for his sexuality, literally altering his perspective as he tries to change himself. The reader experiences the fine line between self-improvement and self-loathing as Siken's speaker deals with different sides of himself as if they were other people. *Crush* presents a surreal look at the violence of self-destruction and the tragedy of internalized homophobia. It is a raw tale of the danger of denying the unalterable nature of one's sexuality. Through a barrage of different perspectives, *Crush* delivers its warning: the person you want to be is not always who you should strive to be.

Throughout *Crush*, the speaker interacts with lovers, enemies and strangers alike. In a majority of the book, the speaker recounts his experiences and memories by using first, second and third-person points of view. Other times he describes seemingly unrelated situations, such as two brothers' motorbike ride in "You Are Jeff". No matter what the subject of a poem is, perspective is constantly shared in *Crush*. A character's consciousness is not restricted to a single body and different points of view are often blurred together. The references to body swapping are persistent, "*I've been in your body, baby, and it was paradise.*" (Siken 48) It is not a coincidence that the speaker is all-knowing when it comes to other characters' lives and

feelings. The shared perspectives point to a more metaphorical interpretation: the speaker is interacting only with himself. Each character is a different side of the speaker. This allows the speaker to distance himself from the truth of his sexuality and to mistreat the parts of himself he deems weak. The constant reimagining of perspective in *Crush* displays the toxic effects, both emotional and physical, of rejecting one's sexuality.

Bodies, the ultimate vessels of perspective, are presented as oppressive in *Crush*.

the face in the mirror is a little
 traitor, the face in the mirror is a pale
 and naked hostage and no one can tell
 what room he's being held in. *He wants
 in, he wants out, he wants the antidote.* (Siken 26)

As seen from this excerpt from "An Unfinished Duet", the speaker sees his body as a prison, holding him hostage with homosexual urges. Freedom to the speaker is escaping his current body, his current self. The speaker continuously recounts his escape by means of self-harm and attempts to provoke others, "*Sorry / about the blood in your mouth. I wish it was mine.*" (Siken 7) Each of these painful rebirths are a chance for the speaker to purge himself of his sexuality. The speaker's description of what he intends to become is haunting: "I take the parts I remember and stitch them back together / to make a creature that will do as I say" (Siken 12). He is willing to stamp out every trace of individuality in order to quiet the one side of himself he cannot stand. Even the title of the collection points toward a destructive gambit for control. Along with many other meanings, 'crush' can be defined as to press against opposing bodies to destroy. By eradicating certain perspectives, the speaker is not only harshly changing himself, but wrenches the reader through the harrowing process as well.

If *Crush* portrays self-loathing as violent, then its representation of the journey toward self-acceptance is gruesome. The speaker realizes the two possible outcomes of his journey, as he says in “Wishbone”, “...This is where the evening splits in half, Henry, love or death.” (Siken 41) His fate is decided in “The Dislocated Room”. The poem highlights the futile nature of his never-ending cycle of self-destruction, “*Cut me open and the light streams out. / Stitch me up and the light keeps streaming out between the stitches.*” (Siken 48) The speaker’s hatred is represented in the appropriate form of a bullet. Siken portrays the speaker’s coming to terms with himself as a painful removal of said projectile, “A little piece of grit to build a pearl around.” (Siken 49) The reader is not shown the unique fate of the speaker, only the universal experience of accepting oneself. This omitted conclusion emphasizes the importance of the speaker’s journey, the transformation of his perspective, instead of his conclusion.

The use of perspective in *Crush* allows every reader, of any sexuality, to experience the inner turmoil of despising a core part of oneself. Siken uses different points of view to connect readers to an issue inevitably linked with being alive. Sexuality is interchangeable in the point being made; the true focus lies on humanity’s struggle with self-acceptance. *Crush* expertly uses perspective to bring to light how corrosive hatred can be. The speaker’s journey begins with the acceptance of another person’s perspective “...a boy who like boys is a dead boy” (Siken 22). As an adult, the speaker’s sense of self is smashed and reshaped throughout each poem. Such unstable transformations discourage the reader from trying to change merely to escape oneself. However, the persistent presence of the speaker’s true desire, to be able to accept himself, allows the reader hope. As seen in one of the last poems in the collection, *Crush* proves that while no one can truly change themselves, they can change their perspective:

You're in a car with a beautiful boy, and you're trying not to tell him that you love him, and you're trying to choke down the feeling, and you're trembling, but he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you've discovered something you don't even have a name for.

(Siken 58)

Works Cited

Siken, Richard. *Crush*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005.