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Beggar of Love by Lee Lynch

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Beggar of Love
by Lee Lynch
Bold Strokes Victory Editions
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Review by Joy Parks

After 14 previous books, including eight novels, in *Beggar of Love*, Lee Lynch makes a radical departure from the kind of stories and characters her readers have come to know. The change isn't obvious at first. Like the novels that have come before, this one is written in a more or less

traditional linear structure; the book is peopled primarily with lesbian characters, and a relationship - a difficult one (another commonality) - dominates the storyline. And like her other novels and much of her short fiction, the narrative is more character-driven than plot derived. But that's where the similarities end.

Due to this character-centric focus, reviewing Lynch's work is an exercise in character analysis. In a darker than usual book, Amelia Jefferson (introduced by the author in a short story in *Old Dyke Tales*) is Lynch's darkest character yet. She is privileged, self-centered, oblivious to the feelings of others, a drunk, and sufficiently shallow to assume that her looks (which are constantly commented upon) and athletic ability give her the right to walk all over anyone she pleases. As Lynch's characters go, she lacks the endearing humility of Annie Heaphy (*Toothpick House*, *Rafferty Street*), the innocent pathos of Frenchy Tonneau (*The Washbuckler*), and the compassion and earthy sensuality of Dusty Reilly (*Dusty's Queen of Hearts Diner*, *Morton River Valley*). In fact, Jefferson has so few redeeming qualities, it's difficult for the reader to empathize with what passes for remorse (and more closely resembles self-pity) in the later chapters of the book.

Typically, Lynch favors characters that would be befriended by the lesbian community. She is the master of creating the "everydyke," championing the underdog and providing a protagonist with whom garden variety lesbians can relate. Jefferson, on the other hand, is everything lesbians "officially" despise:

she has money and privilege, she wields her attractiveness like a weapon, and she can't be trusted with any woman, straight or gay. She's a predator whose wounded self esteem from mommy's and daddy's drinking and distance has molded her into a monstrous ego who thinks she has a right to objectify and judge women solely on what level of heat they spark in her.

Considering the book is set in the 1970s and 1980s, there is an eerie absence of the radical lesbian feminism that marked that period. Both Jefferson and her love interest/obsession, Ginger, remain isolated and closeted despite their coming of age in a relatively open, less homophobic era.

In Lynch's most recent prior novel, *Sweet Creek*, she created a wonderful wraparound story by allowing the main characters to share the narrative and weigh in on the story from their perspective. No one gets a say in *Beggar of Love* but Jefferson. And perhaps the most telling aspect of this constricted narrative approach is that Ginger, the love of her life, the cold and distant self-contained woman Jefferson simultaneously cheats on and pursues for decades, barely speaks. What we know of Ginger, we know through the filter of Jefferson—and most of what we do know is superficial: the length of her legs, the silkiness of her hair. We learn that her passion for dance takes time away from Jefferson and is offered up as an excuse for Jefferson's infidelities. We are told too, that she is critical, even cruel, cutting verbally at Jefferson with cat claw-like smacks over trivial matters. Perhaps this is justification; the suggestion that Ginger's self-absorption and her tendency to be judgmental warrants the humiliation she suffers at Jefferson's hand.

Ginger eventually runs off with a gay man on some ill-fated go-straight exercise, following several warnings to readers that she may have not been completely gay, the motive Jefferson assigns for her not being much of a giver in the bedroom. Still, it feels like we're missing something; it's as if Jefferson has decided that since she did not initiate this event, and because it doesn't glorify her image, then it isn't important enough to be assigned a greater level of detail. Frankly, due to Jefferson's *me-me-me* filter, Ginger doesn't seem real until she's no longer there. Lynch is too astute an author, too much a master of technique for any of this to be accidental; it's another means of revealing the totality of Jefferson's self-involvement.

As the story unfolds, Jefferson's self-aggrandizing turns to self-effacement, guilt and a conscious attempt to learn how to befriend a woman without sex entering the picture. This could redeem Jefferson if only we believed that she might truly realize that life is not about who you have on your arm or in your bed. But we don't because Lynch doesn't want us to. She can't allow Jefferson to give up that much, preferring her to remain the rogue, depicting potential monogamy as some sort of uneasy self-sacrifice. After all, Jefferson is a "beggar of love," someone who doesn't necessarily want to be loved, but lives for the pursuit of loving, someone for whom the chase is more important than the prize, someone who wants only what they can't have, the kind of woman with whom you're doomed the moment you say "yes."

Beggar of Love is dramatically different from Lynch's previous work—but different certainly doesn't mean inferior. While diehard fans or those who mistake Lynch for some sort of romance novelist may find Jefferson unappealing (or possibly too appealing), there's a lot to be said for a seasoned author of Lynch's reputation having the guts to portray lesbians like Jefferson. Could it be that Lynch is using her character as a lens through which to peer at some serious morality issues in the lesbian community? Is Jefferson, as the antihero(ine), a symbol of what happens to our silences when they internalize and rage against us, becoming booze- and ego-fueled weapons. Is Lynch exploring the impossibility of connection beyond the superficial if we're too fearful or ashamed to reveal who and what we really are? Is Jefferson the result of a steady diet of self-loathing? The author's allusions to internalized homophobia beg the question of who is really to blame for the Jeffersons of our world. One has to wonder how much internal debate and second guessing it

took to get this character on the page, but Lynch has done it so admirably that while we may not want her there, Jefferson will linger on in our minds for a very long time.

Joy Parks writes a little bit of fiction, a whole lot of marketing and pr, and reviews whenever she can sneak in the time. Her fiction has been published in various anthologies and her reviews have run in The San Francisco Chronicle, The Boston Globe, The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, Publisher's Weekly and many other publications.