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Personal History Meets Pop and Prose in *Daughters of Empire*

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In her newest book *Daughters of Empire: A Memoir of a Year in Britain and Beyond*, poet and essayist Jane Satterfield writes, “What surprised me most when I settled back in the States was an abundance I’d forgotten: rampant growth, suburban streets who jungles, heat snaking the stunted garden, fledgling vines faint on sticks.”

Though many of the essays in this non-fiction collection take place in mid-90s England, Satterfield, a dual British-American national, successfully taps the vein of American culture and society.

“Another Country”, the first essay, is the most emotionally-wrenching, sweeping, and concrete piece in the collection. The details are straightforward, and the narrative primes the reader for the emotional, physical, and intellectual struggles that recur throughout the book.

In these first pages, Satterfield sets her stage with conflict: an unhappy marriage, an unexpected pregnancy, a woman’s desire to forge her own career and life destiny, and a return trip to a country that’s partially home.

Immediately, the reader can sense that the first-person narrator is a deeply creative and intellectual woman, one immersed in literary history and popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic. However, she struggles with every-woman issues too. Thoughts about body image, difficult romantic relationships, career and finances, and child-bearing haunt her mind.

“Assignations at Vanishing Point”, a fragmented narrative of 16 parts, most artfully and poetically describes female hunger (stomach growls and sexual desire alike) and the narrator’s need for creative expression. Satterfield intertwines references to literary icons like Yeats and Kafka with contemporary institutions like organic grocery stores. Her ability to mend clashing cultures with both high and low-brow cultural references is truly impressive and refreshing.

Satterfield writes, “Who’d be tempted to enter this brave, utilitarian world, to mask desire and wander the aisles, looking for the possible partner, shrewdly consumerist eyes alert for a bargain, the perfect package to pluck off an orderly shelf?” She criticizes American culture harshly but never condemns the States, where she was born and raised.

Fans of mid-90s music and British pop culture will appreciate “When the Bad Boys Ruled Britannia”, an essay about Oasis, the band best known in America for the alternative hits “Champagne Supernova” and “Wonderwall”. Though she maintains what she refers to as a “punk attitude”, Satterfield’s “punk sensibility has been worn down in the passage of time by two exacting taskmasters: academe and motherhood.” Many music writers have criticized Oasis, but she maintains a soft-spot for frequently-feuding brothers Noel and Liam Gallagher.

Readers who appreciate photography will enjoy “Double Exposure”, the final essay in Satterfield’s collection. She describes photography as a medium that requires great control yet has the advantage of teaching a person to see. The narrator literally and figuratively frames the image of her relationship with her husband. She begins to understand that his need to control her conflicts with her need for independence and exploration.

“As I trained my attention and focused my gaze, I was forging connections between myself and the world.” She writes. “Making good pictures depended as much on myself as the inherent attractions of my subject – how I approached it or framed it mattered – and this was reflected in the finished work.”

The collection as a whole seems to be an album of snapshots. The narrator feels simultaneously ugly and glamorous in the lens of a camera: her own retrospect.

Daughters of Empire was awarded the Faulkner Society’s Gold Medal for the Essay, and selected essays have been published in prestigious literary magazines like *The Massachusetts Review* and *Seneca Review*. She is also the author of two poetry collections: *Assniation at Vanishing Point* (2003) and *Shepherdess with an Automatic* (2000). Purchase Satterfield’s book through her publisher, Demeter Press.