

Book Review
Rykov, M. (2020). *some conditions apply*.
Inanna Publications.

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some conditions apply is Mary Rykov's first published collection of poetry, but music therapists may already be familiar with her writing. The book is published by Inanna Publications and Education, an independent feminist press in Canada, dedicated to feminist voices that provoke discussion and speak to the diverse lives of women.

Puerto Rican-Canadian María Helena Auerbach Rykov, practised as a music therapist for 35 years with individuals from birth to death, and is one of the voices that urged music therapists to strive for poetry. She told us: "We need poetic method to bring us closer to knowing and communicating the essence of being, particularly for instances of nonverbal, embodied experience such as music and music therapy" (Rykov, 2011). Her doctoral research was an arts-informed thesis, titled *Music at a Time Like This* (Rykov, 2006), and explored the meaning of music therapy support groups for cancer patients. *music at a time like this* is also the title of a song collection that Mary describes as "intended for 'times like these' when the sea is rough, the road bumpy, and the spaces between the rocks and hard places grow tight" (Rykov, n.d.). A fascination with the ways in which people story and re-story their lives, whether by choice or through necessity, is a theme that runs through Rykov's writing. She strives to place the individual voice at the centre of her music therapy writing, disrupting the "traditional discursive-scholarly format of journal writing to privilege better the participants' accounts and communicate these experientially" (Rykov, 2008, p.190).

In this collection of poems, we are brought closer to Rykov's voice. Threads of music and music therapy practice weave alongside poems relating to culture and identity. *some conditions apply* traverses themes from the domestic to the existential, and presents them with beauty, rawness and poignancy. Rykov writes in response to what she experiences; what she sees, hears and feels. It is this curiosity that opens up a playful space for language, and results in poems that are intended to be spoken or *sung*.

Some poems such as “this song” and “I am” have an easy rhythm evocative of the Scottish and English ballads after which they are crafted. One of my favourite images in the collection is held in a verse from “this song”:

I take the threads
of a young spider’s web
and make you a cloak
to hold you from cold

(p.39)

For me, the image of the cloak will always relate to working in palliative care and the origin of the word *palliate*, meaning *to cloak*. The juxtaposition of the delicate young spider’s web, combined with a magic spell to shield the poem’s subject from harm, is evocative of the care and compassion I encountered in palliative care work. Many of the poems touch the subject of death and dying, sometimes gently as in “cottonwood” and “music while dying”. At other times, the observations of ageing and end of life have a piercing reality as in “Bubba” and “How to have a good death in Canada circa 2020”. “Case Closed”, which concerns the death of a patient, reminds me of the music therapist’s task to hold boundaries and manage the emotional intensity of working with others.

Rykov also writes about culture and identity. Reading “roads to refuge”, I was reminded of Bernice Rubens’ book *Brothers* (1983) and the theme of continual exile of Jews to other lands, remembering their dead:

Help us: we need,
we need comfort –
our safety stolen
by this past we carry

parched and blistered,
stopping only
to pile the cairns
for our dead

(p.72)

Autobiographical poems such as “*puertorriqueña*” and “bless with promise each sunrise” speak of both individual and collective experience. The references to Puerto Rico made me want to find out more about this archipelago, and I had a small smile when I encountered the *coquí* in this poem. I recalled the recording of this native tree frog played to me recently by a music therapy trainee from Puerto Rico, who was trying to explain how this sound had a unique influence on the ways that music is infused into Puerto Rican life. I could imagine the rich soundscape Rykov describes:

I will tell you in luscious color
how Yiddish and Spanish merge
in the ear as lullaby
while the surf drones
and the *coquí* sings
through thick air
warm like a blanket

(p.9)

Identity, remembrance and domestic life are present in other poems too: “it all starts at the kitchen table” and the affectionate “Apple Cake” evoke memories of family relationships. Those seeking a little more context may find it in Rykov’s essay *Abyssinian Maid* (2017). After reading it, I was struck by the powerful and evocative way in which Rykov blends personal experience with broader cultural discourse.

I cannot finish this review without mentioning the dandelion that is the subject of the poem “*Taraxacum officinale*” and graces the front cover of the book. Mary Rykov loves dandelions so much that she cultivates them as house plants so as to enjoy their bright yellow blooms throughout the year. She wonders if the reason she loves them is because they were the only flowers she was allowed to pick as a young child (Rykov, 2020). I too picked dandelions as a child, but for a very different purpose: they were good food for the rabbits and tortoises! Function and beauty are qualities found in Rykov’s poems, and we need both to be nourished.

Poetry for me serves many purposes: it can be a place of refuge, it brings delight and wonder, incites curiosity, takes me into my imagination and leads me to explore further. Some poems in this collection, I wanted to discuss with others in an effort to elucidate meaning and intention. Others, I was content to savour in my mouth and body, sitting with the questions, feelings and responses that rose in me. My experience of editing the collection *Tales from the Music Therapy Room: Creative Connections* (Molyneux, 2018) revealed the myriad ways New Zealand music therapists engaged with poetic method. Rykov’s book invites us to immerse ourselves further in poetry, and I encourage music therapists to allow themselves a little space and time to explore this collection that will resonate and inspire. Rykov can be heard reading from the book at the Pulp Literature Press Pandemic Reading Series (Pulp Literature Press, 2020) and at the replay of the online book launch (Inanna Publications, 2020).

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