
Davida Allen’s Close to the Bone is not one of those books that inspires you to write a precious and brilliant review, in fact it just doesn’t inspire — not like the way you were inspired years ago by reading To Kill a Mockingbird or by seeing your first Robert de Niro movie. No, Close to the Bone is not even as thrilling as watching When Harry Met Sally on television the other week — which is probably why I read the book in the commercial breaks. It is rather sad that a book which is all about escaping boredom and reading orgasmic levels of excitement should leave you with such a “Yeah, so what?” feeling...

Close to the Bone as autobiography reconstructs the life of an artist, artistically of course, in montage. Vicki Myers, whose autobiography the text claims to be, is quite obviously Davida Allen herself. Allen presents the autobiography as a “portrait of the Artist As Ordinary Housewife”. But despite this claim to ordinariness Vicki delights in showing us that she is in fact extraordinary, as she invites us to wallow with her in the “unique creative mind” of an “Artist”.

It is when Vicki is most threatened with becoming merely ordinary — like all other housebound mothers — that her “unique creative mind” comes to the rescue, rising above the seemingly insurmountable mountains of nappies and taking her to the dizzying heights of artistic imagination. Vicki’s art liberates her, her “rage at being a woman” explodes into, and is somehow resolved by the sexual fantasies she plays out in her paintings. But Vicki’s paintings and her relationship with Greg (the husband who encourages Vicki’s self-liberation through art) suggest a sexual violence and objectification in which Vicki revels. “I like being the one ravaged. I don’t ever want to be [Greg’s] equal sexually” she says. Vicki likes the “idea of a woman as a vessel of love and passion. Being Greg’s vessel is very important to me”.

Apart from being dubious about the nature of Vicki’s self-liberation, I was disappointed by Allen’s failure to make the connection between Vicki’s “rage at being a woman”, and the rage of millions of other women trapped in “domestic horror”. But perhaps I am being overly critical — why should Allen’s portrait also represent images of other — women? Autobiography/self-portraiture is, after all, by its very nature, self-obsessed. And why should the self-portrait be of a self which is like others; for isn’t every “Artist’s” greatest fear the fear of being thought not brilliant, not genuine, not extraordinary?

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