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The Blue Tattoo: The Life of Olive Oatman.

By Margot Mifflin.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009. 280 pages, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Judy Nolte Temple

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Potential readers of *The Blue Tattoo* might fear an Oatman overdose, given that in 2005 the University of Oklahoma Press published Brian McGinty's *The Oatman Massacre* (see WAL 42.1 for review). In Margot Mifflin's work, the focus is on Olive Oatman as an "accidental ethnographer" who lived among the Mohave of Arizona/California during "their last decade of sovereignty" (6). Mifflin effectively describes the southwestern desert terrain as teeming with indigenous people who were themselves harassed by shifting political and territorial borders. This is the land over which the Oatmans traveled—or trespassed. In fact, neither Olive Oatman, nor Mifflin (nor McGinty) can definitively say which group participated in the initial killing of the Oatman party. Mifflin's treatment of Oatman's life among the Mohave, to whom she was eventually traded, is the more fully realized of the two accounts.

One strength of Mifflin's book is its lively narrative prose that is informed by recent scholarship but does not parrot it. *The Blue Tattoo* also contains unconventional insights about Oatman's body, from her vagina to her chin. Mifflin's earlier book was on the tradition of women's tattoos, so she is fearless when writing the body. The epilogue, "Oatman's Literary Half-Life," deftly explores reiterations of Olive, the most obvious being Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *Who Would Have Thought It?*, a *Death Valley Days* episode featuring Ronald Reagan, and Elmore Leonard's "The Tonto Woman."

Both Mifflin and McGinty faced the same problem when trying to find the "true" story of the Oatman massacre. In 1857, Olive's experience was overwritten (in both senses of the word) by the author of her captivity narrative, R. B. Stratton. Though McGinty and Mifflin scoff at Stratton's inaccuracies, they often quote his work as if Olive were telling her story. While Mifflin attempts to distinguish the sparse historical record of Olive's experiences from Stratton's hateful rendition of it, she (like Olive, who lectured with Stratton) is dependent on him. Judging from Oatman's own lecture notes, Mifflin observes, "For her own survival, Olive had publicly chosen between binaries. She was an Indian hater ... not an Indian lover yearning for her lost tribe" (179–80). Like Sophie's choice, Olive's "choice" may have entailed leaving behind her Mohave children. There were rumors, but even experienced journalists Mifflin and McGinty can only speculate.

If I were choosing between these two books for classroom use, I would select *The Blue Tattoo*. It provides a larger background of captivity narratives by women, including those who chose to stay with their tribes. Mifflin is most attentive to Olive's life among the Indians, while McGinty spends the first fifty-three pages

on Mormon history and its outgrowths that proved a fatal attraction to Olive's father, Roys. (Stratton dubs him Royse, while Mifflin uses Royce. Is there so little archival information that even his name eludes the authors?) Mifflin's treatment of Olive's sojourns among Indians would provide an excellent teaching opportunity about America's ongoing captivation with ethnic/gender crossings, where "truth" is held captive by enigma.

The Love Song of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

By Sharon McCartney.

Gibsons, British Columbia: Nightwood Editions, 2007. 101 pages, \$16.95.

Reviewed by Joanna Dawson

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For better or for worse, it is difficult if not impossible to find someone in the West who has not heard of Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series. From wincing memories of the nasal, shrill call "Pa!" from a young Melissa Gilbert and the illustriously coiffed Michael Landon on the television series to recollections of long afternoons spent with book in hand, this series has had one of the strongest influences on how people envision the West.

Sharon McCartney, poetry editor of *The Fiddlehead* and author of two previous poetry collections, pushes the reading experience of the series to the limit, refusing to ignore questions of what happened to the people and the places that the Ingalls family left behind on their many journeys westward. This sequence of fifty-four linked poems explores the *Little House* series and also relies heavily on new western history, highlighting the less mythic and more troubling aspects of the Ingalls and Wilder families' journeys. McCartney emphasizes the death of Caroline's first son, Freddie, who died as an infant and was written out of the series. She also emphasizes that the Ingalls family was not in grave peril of being killed by the Osage in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935) but was tolerated as squatters on the land. Cleverly adopting the voices of many of the places and characters in the series, McCartney demonstrates that there is no reason to read the series uncritically.

A major strength of the collection is its foregrounding of the natural world that is part of the series. In "Blackbird in the Corn," the bird-speaker begins with a pertinent question: "Who says it's their corn? Why should they / pump us full of buckshot just for eating?" a question that does not assume that the earth is a bounty awaiting human consumption, one of the beliefs that formed the discourse of western settlement (60).

McCartney's tone is not for those who do not tolerate a dry joke well (the Ingalls horse, Lady, wonders if her mate's behavior is "mere horsing around"). However, the collection is successful because this tone parodies that of the series itself, full of platitudes such as Ma's Prairie-Poppins-esque famous concluding phrase, "all's well that ends well." Aphorisms such as "Sewing means pulling / together as well as poking holes" picks up the tone of the series and distills it into poetry by exploring the boundaries of this voice (58).