

Complex Immediacy

Labyrinth by Sybil Pittman Estess. (San Antonio: Pecan Grove Press, 2007. 68 pp. \$15 paper)

Labyrinth is Sybil Estess' third volume of poetry, following *Seeing the Desert Green* (Latitudes Press) and *Blue, Canded in January Sun* (Word Tech Communications). I encountered Estess' work in a number of journals, and I even selected one of her poems for publication in *descant*, the journal that I edit. But my brief exposure to Estess' poetry didn't prepare me for the power of *Labyrinth*. These poems are direct as a blow to the head, as immediate as your next breath, and as real as the problems you are bound to encounter.

Labyrinth is a collection of more than forty poems organized in three parts, each part named for one of the poems in that section. Many of the poems in the first section, "Morning Star," address death and our struggle to deal with loss. In such poems as "Outside the Door at ICU," a parade of characters faces the inevitable, and the speaker receives a reprieve when "Mother responds, begins to breathe without machines. / We stop searching for her living will at home." The poem's conclusion deftly contrasts the expectations of those waiting outside the ICU with the expectations of "all the nine-month pregnant women" who "waddle in" to the hospital. Indeed, the contrast of ongoing life against the prospect of death informs many of the poems in the book's first section.

The second group of poems in *Labyrinth*, "How Heathcliff Misses Passion," focuses mostly on love and relationships. Estess artfully mixes the fictional Heathcliff and Catherine with contemporary people and places so that the romantic notion of love contrasts with not-so-romantic reality: "Catherine. She too would be graying." Estess continues the *Wuthering Heights* motif in "Withering Script" in which a couple, Catherine and Heathcliff, seek to determine exactly where they are in their relationship. This concern with love and relationships is also the subject of a lighter poem, "My Love Affair with Diane Sawyer," in which the speaker's husband is driven wild by Sawyer's raspy voice and "sees her, I know, for childish sex." The narrator notes that "Sawyer has everything a female should have / in the 21st

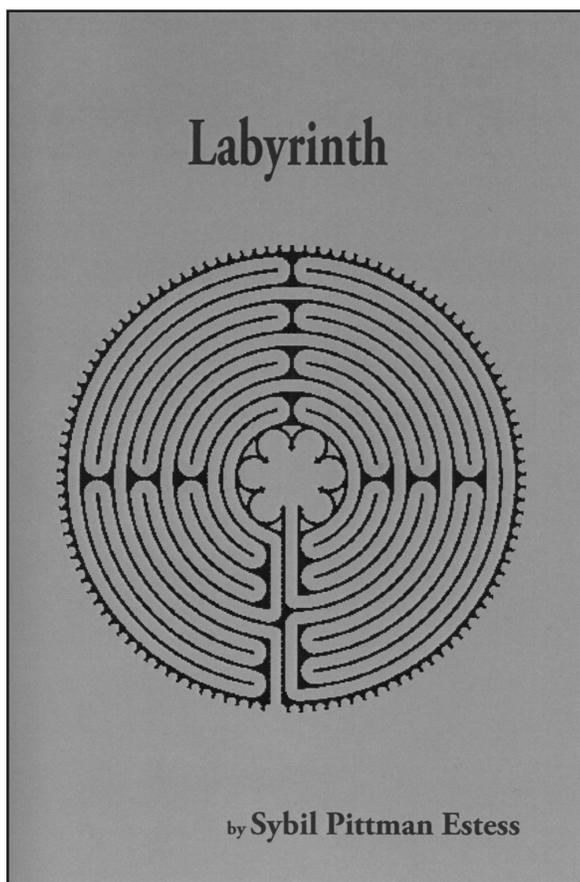
century: fame, money, looks, brains." But the concern with love that characterizes this second section of *Labyrinth* is best exemplified by one of the closed-form poems in the collection, "Sonnet on Conjunctio," in which the speaker considers the nature of a long marriage.

The poems in the final section of this collection are wide-ranging in their concerns, moving from public topics such as 9/11 and the Katrina disaster to poems about nature, adolescence, family, and the labyrinth itself. Among the best in this group are "Clear Day," which contrasts the events of 9/11 with expectations of the routine, and "From South Mississippi," which gracefully reminds us of both the destructive and regenerative power of nature: "of vines and brush piled high from Katrina, / one crimson cardinal against all the rest." Another outstanding poem in this group is the dramatic monologue "Rebellion: Teenage," in which the speaker of the poem "hates" everyone for being so kind to him. Mixed in with these messages about public and private life are soothing moments from the world of nature, as in "Colors and Wildlife: Grand Lake" and "Montana Moon." And Estess is not afraid to experiment with form and structure; she appropriately concludes the volume with a concrete poem titled "Labyrinth."

One of the strongest features of this book is the immediacy and directness of the poems. These are poems about issues both real and near—death, loss, and love, family, place, and nature—so the more abstract poems, "Legacies" and "S-Eros," seem a bit out of place in this collection. The reader of *Labyrinth* can look forward to verses that are deceptively simple and

straightforward in their language and structure, yet complex and sophisticated in content and theme. In *Labyrinth*, Estess invites us to enter a maze of image, juxtaposition, rime, and repetition; you will want to linger long before finding your way out.

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