

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Review of *Rescue Plan* by Stephanie Barbé Hammer

Kendall Johnson · Wednesday, February 17th, 2021

Suppose the proverbial genie popped out of the bottle and offered you the chance to lead a whole second life. “The catch,” the genie would laugh, “is that you’d have to go through being 15 again.” That might be a deal-breaker for you, as it would for me. As a former trauma therapist and high school teacher, this much I know: far too much angst. Yet that’s the deep end of the pool into which Stephanie Barbé Hammer tosses us, in her newly released *Rescue Plan*. This tight, 47 page tour de force is gifted to us by Bamboo Dart Press, a recent collaboration between Mark Givens (Pelekinesis) and Dennis Callaci (Shrimper Records).

Being fifteen is weird enough; your childhood memories and family pull you one way, your body and your friends another. You may have some idea about who you used to be, but who you are now is vague, and what you are trying to become is a fog bank. Add to that mix the major complications of cancer treatment, conflicts over sexual identity, and you have the recipe for impending train wreck. Or perhaps, more hopefully, a coming of age.

In *Rescue Plan*, Stephanie Barbé Hammer weaves a tale of young Gomer Faithcutt, a cancer survivor wracked by sexual identity issues and questions of whether his father and his best friend Mackie will support him—no matter who or what he turns out to be. As Gomer puts it, “People say they want to know things, but in the end they don’t want to know what they think they do.” And there you have it for all of us: the Russian roulette of self-disclosure. Being fifteen years old and trying to make sense of this disjoint world and of your own peculiarities in it, make it far worse.



Gomer Faithcutt is going into the eleventh grade following treatment. He has tiptoed around the edge and gazed briefly into the pool of non-being—the view from there tending to lend both perspective and urgency. To complicate matters, Gomer is attracted to the older male athletes and off duty emergency service folks who blithely swim in the public swimming pool. Even worse, He’s haunted by the specter of a feminine spirit—named Molly—and this, he really can’t wrap his head around.

Gomer just isn’t sure who he is and just what he’s about. Conflicted with mixed desires, Gomer faces the pressure alone. While he knows that others may voice support, he also knows the statistics of gay suicide. Having beaten death once, Gomer’s plan is simple: to survive.

Young Gomer faces formidable challenges in rescuing himself: an absent mother and in-adequate father, a bully disguised as his swim coach who seems intent on drowning him, an ex-con with a gun, a mystery religion in town, a billionaire who seems intent upon destroying his neighborhood, distracting spirits reaching out to him, and by far the most lethal—his fears of be-ing neither lovable nor capable. Gomer remembers a mother who left him and went back to Chi-na and left Gomer yearning to follow after her but this is no escape. He suspects it would be far more difficult being gay there.

Yet staying at home is no piece of cake, either. It's hard to believe in yourself when you still play with your old dolls to help you figure out things, when your mother has gone AWOL and your barely-there father needs fathering by you, when you know that the cancer can come back any time, and you're finding it hard to keep eyes off the local firefighters who come to swim in your swim team's pool. You're a mess.

Writing from the tradition of Borges and Márquez, Hammer wields her magic with the subtle precision of a brain surgeon's knife. No easy solutions here, though. The improbable shares space at the truth table with scientific fact and other opinions, and pretty soon you the reader find yourself nodding and saying "of course!"

Stephanie Barbé Hammer tells remarkable stories. The central dramas she cooks up for us focus upon important emotional truths unfolding in realistic, believable settings—enhanced with just enough alchemy to keep us wondering what lies on the next page. Giant post-radiation sea turtles, strapping firefighters in red Speedos, visions of seductive sirens and the Dali Lama in a street fight (this is Hammer, after all) abound. Yet it's the emotional truth I seek and find in *Rescue Plan*. Here is the 15-year-old Gomer in all of us—hungering, fearing, reaching—trying to find identity, reconciliation and salvation amidst this curious and aching territory of our own Narrow Interior.

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