

Becoming Human

Literary memoir of the 1980s

Scraping by in the Big Eighties, a memoir by Natalia Rachel Singer. University of Nebraska Press, 2005. Hardcover, \$24.95.

This spring Natalia Rachel Singer read from her book at several area venues, including Mother Kali's Books, where she held a two-hour writing workshop. I was particularly interested in Singer's ability to integrate personal narrative with social history. Her story of an idealistic young American woman's search for a place to live outside of the violent, materialistic culture of Ronald Reagan's 1980s touched me. An unconventional coming of age story, *Scraping By in the Big Eighties* speaks to Singer's yearning for the creative lifestyle of an earlier era as well as her desire to be free of the influence of a mentally ill mother.

The story begins in Seattle, to which 23-year old Singer and her boyfriend Joe had come from the Midwest to find a new way to live. Her "crisis of faith in Team America coincided with a parallel crisis of self," she writes. "...Mostly I wanted, in Seattle, to become a more evolved human." Singer learned to pay attention to the craft of writing, while she and Joe hiked the gorgeous beaches and forests of the Northwest every weekend. "Once while we were making love on a rain tarp in the Hoh River Rain Forest," she writes, "the forest floor quaked as though with thunder, and a herd of a hundred elk stampeded through, so close our hair riffled in their wind."

Later in her odyssey, Singer and a different boyfriend, Morten, briefly encounter some purple-garbed followers of the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. Then Morten dreams of being summoned by the Bhagwan to be his "top agricultural advisor" at the commune in Eastern Oregon. Despite Singer's misgivings, she and Morten go there, with her posing as a journalist. They cannot "crash" at the commune



but must stay at a motel 60 miles away in Madras and leave after the guided tour, disillusioned. Still looking for happiness, she marries Morten.

"An obese New Age priestess in a purple muumuu performed the service. I'll give her credit for one thing: she could smell disaster when she saw it. 'I prefer cash,' she told us and she almost refused to marry us when I wrote her a check for seventy dollars with Monday's date. 'A lot of people in the New Age are getting together briefly to do some short-term karma clearing,' she said to us, glancing toward Morten ... *Short-term karma clearing?*"

I will be happy if this short preview stirs you to pick up Singer's entertaining, insightful memoir. She teases out the truth for herself from each incident she chronicles, while struggling to be free from a mad mother. Perhaps next time Singer comes to Eugene from St. Lawrence University where she teaches, she will have a full day workshop to share what she has learned as a writer and as a still evolving human. **EW**

BOOK NOTES AND NEWS, JUNE 30 - JULY 14

Good news from **Tsunami Books**: Co-owner **Scott Landfield** reports a "miraculous turnaround" in which a consortium of poets (and others) got together and pledged to support the store. "We paid off our debt and signed a new five-year lease," Landfield said this week. Good work! That's the difference between an urban area and a community. ...Longtime campus booksellers **Mother Kali's Books** is moving to 18th and Willamette late this summer. If you want to help with the store's short-term needs, email info@motherkalis.com. ...Coast Impressions essay contest (details at www.coastimpressions.com) is accepting online entries through August 31. \$5 entry fee. ...Eugene writer **Erika Milo** received an honorable mention award from the CrossTime Short Fiction Contest for science fiction, fantasy and urban fantasy. ...Yoncalla writer **Shannon Applegate** (*Living Among Headstones*) reads at 7:30 pm on 6/30 in Powells on Hawthorne, Portland. ...Eugene writer **Bill Sullivan** (*New Hikes in the Central Oregon Cascades*) presents a slideshow at 6:30 pm on 7/01 in Eugene Downtown Library. ...**David Vann** reads at 7:30 pm on 7/01 in Powells Burnside, Portland. ... Art and Vineyard features 35 writers at the Oregon Author's Table from July -4: **Shannon Applegate** Sat. 11:30-3:30 pm; **Carol Ann Bassett** Sat. 3:30-5:30 pm; **Roger Beck** Sat. 5:30-7:30 pm, Sun. 11:30 -3:30 pm; **Joe Blakely** Sun. 11:30-3:30; **Jo Brew** Sun., Mon. 11:30-1:30; **Jane Capron** Fri. 3:30-7:30 pm; **Joe Casey** Fri. 3:30-5:30; Sat., Sun. 5:30-7:30 pm; **Lynette Chiang** Sat 3:30-7:30, Sun. 1:30-7:30, Mon. 1:30-5:30 pm; **Harriet and Charlotte Childress** Sun., Mon. 3:30-5:30 pm; **Norma (Bean) Camrada** Mon. 1:30-5:30; **Linda Crew** Fri. 3:30-7:30 pm; **Kurt Cyrus** Sat. 1:30-5:30 pm; **Carola Dunn** Sat., Sun 1:30-5:30 pm; **Eric Emery** Mon. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Rachel Foster** Sun., Mon. 11:30-3:30 pm; **Barbara and Dan Gleason** Sat.11:30-1:30, Sun. 3:30-5:30 pm; **Melissa Hart** Sat. 3:30-5:30 pm; **Ann Herrick** Sat.1:30-5:30 pm; **Mark Jackson** Fri. 3:30-7:30 pm, Sat., Mon. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Patricia Jacobs** Fri. 3:30-5:30, Sat. 5:30-7:30 pm; **Lauren Kessler** Sat. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Elaine Knighton** Sat. 5:30-7:30, Sun. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Robert Kono** Fri. 5:30-7:30, Sat. 1:30-3:30, Sun., Mon 3:30-5:30 pm; **Larry McKaughan** Mon. 11:30-3:30 pm; **Sam Melner** Mon.11:30-1:30 pm; **Kay Porter** Fri. 5:30-7:30, Sat. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Margriet Ruurs** Sun. 11:30-1:30 pm; **Maxine Scates** Sun 5:30-7:30, Mon. 1:30-3:30 pm; **Alan Siporin** Sat. 1:30-3:30, Sun. 1:30-5:30 pm; **Nedra Sterry** Fri. 3:30-5:30, Sat. 5:30-7:30 pm; **William Sullivan** Fri. 3:30-5:30, Sat., Sun. 11:30-7:30, Mon. 11:30-5:30 pm; **Bob Ticer** Sat. 5:30-7:30 pm; **Steven Ungerleider** Fri. 5:30-7:30 pm; and **Bob Welch** Sat. 11:30-1:30 pm. Support local writers. ... **Chuck Logan** (*Homefront*) and **Reed Arvin** (*Blood of Angels*) are introduced by **Phillip Margolin** at 7 pm on July 14 at Powell's for the Mystery Boys Tour 2005.

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