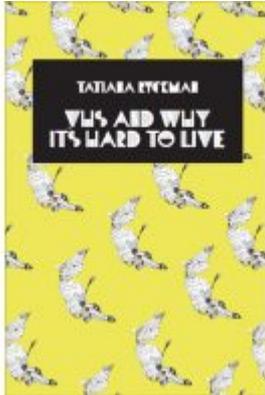


VHS and Why It's Hard to Live by Tatiana Ryckman

written by Shannon Perri | July 8, 2016



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[Zoo Cake](#)

Confession: I often judge books by their covers. Hey, aesthetics matter, right? Or, if nothing really matters, why not gravitate toward something good-looking?

When judging the cover of Tatiana Ryckman's latest chapbook, *VHS and Why It's Hard to Live*, out with Zoo Cake Press, I want to clutch my hand over my heart and say: People, I have reached a verdict. This cover, with its lemon-yellow background and zebra print pattern—the animals' strangely jointed, possibly severed limbs folding like ragdolls to cover their privates—is outstanding. Not only is it fun, a little creepy, and overall visually pleasing, it is a time-machine. It calls me back to the [fruit stripe gum](#) I relished as a girl, until after too many cavities, my dentist banned me from candy. The jarring realization that my favorite treat, the rainbow-colored pack of gum with the zebra mascot, was also rotting my teeth out was devastating. This sort of disillusionment, the loss behind understanding The Bigger Picture, is exactly what Ryckman so deftly examines in her new flash-nonfiction chapbook.

Take for instance the opening essay, "VHS vs. Beta." Growing up in Ryckman's household meant that T.V. consumption came from plopping pre-recorded shows and videos into the family Betamax VCR. In the debate of VHS vs. Beta, her family went Beta. At the time, kid-Ryckman didn't know this wasn't the norm. She didn't question why she was watching the same two episodes of *Gilligan's Island* over and over again, as these were the two her parents had recorded. However, when she did discover that her family's habits weren't necessarily the same as others, she was shocked, embarrassed even. The Beta family preference affected her ability to relate to mainstream culture more and more. For instance, she was not able to borrow her friend's copy of *Fern Gully*, out on VHS. And yet, her alternative, Beta-life defined her. She watched films no one else she knew did. But, of course, Beta died out. VHS

eventually, too. Her essay questions, what does this all mean, both for a self and a society? Ryckman asks, "Will future generations miss out on the acid trip-esque experience of suddenly realizing everything they believed to be true has always been something else entirely? Isn't that what growing up is?"

Perhaps, as the thesis of the collection, she writes, "I have a deep, sickening nervousness every time we face a new VHS v Beta, like Blue-ray and HD, because one side always has to lose, and with each great advance we're losing something we can't or won't recognize except by the shape of its absence."

Her entire book serves as a meditation on this loss. When a child discovers something new, when a teenager finally crosses a sexual threshold, what happens to The Way of Things before? Change, of course can lead to growth, or so the motivational posters say, but change also inevitably means something is left behind. When you reach a fork in the road, and you go Right, you are saying no, or goodbye, to Left. Sometimes it's not even a choice. Sometimes greater forces have conspired. The Left road is flooded. The cavities keep coming, and your mother is sick of the cost of crowns.

Or perhaps not.

In Ryckman's essay, "Virginia Woolf, III," Ryckman states, "time doesn't pass, it accumulates." Memory is weird. Her collection, which starts by peaking under the rocks of change, particularly the ones faced in childhood, pivots to a new, yet related, question: Do we ever really let go of our past selves? Do our prior understandings truly vanish, or are we just tacking more and more on the shelves, until our brains are giant warehouses, where we can both remember how much we savored watching the same Gilligan's Island episode over and over, and also understand there was more to see? In the story, "Paint Job," Ryckman recalls spotting an old Doritos truck. It's been repurposed for a new use, but she can still see what it used to be.

In response, she reflects: "Was someone hired to paint in this specific and obvious and not at all subtle way? Maybe it's exactly what the customer wanted? Maybe the goal wasn't to hide the fact that this truck once carried suspiciously colored snacks to pimpled teenagers all over the country, maybe it was a commentary, a riddle, a statement about the evolution of our culture and our values and our needs and the way some needs never leave us, no matter how we cover them up. How even if we stop watching Wayne's World (both I and II) every few months, we can't escape the fact that it shaped us."

What makes this compilation so special is how well the pieces converse with each other. Some are as long as a couple of pages, others as short as two-sentences. Yet the tightness and specificity of the prose and the crystallization of the ideas makes this book so affecting. Though there are differences, Ryckman's book reminded me of Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*. Maybe this is because I was reading both at the same time, but I also think it's more. Cisnero crafts her novel in small, flash pieces told through the perspective of a young girl growing up in the Latino section of Chicago. In both works, each piece delivers on its own, but when combined,

the themes and questions build and complicate themselves as we tear through to the end.

Ryckman's collection is one I will read again, and one I will place into the hands of others with great urgency. It takes a rare talent to articulate so clearly some of the more subtle, yet hugely defining, perils of being human.