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How You Lose: A Novel in Stories
J.C. Amberchele
Carroll & Graf Publishers
Paperback, \$12

J.C. Amberchele's *How You Lose* moves from "Melody," the book's first story, to "Mel," the last. The reader meets Melody – a young woman who witnessed her father's murder, and who was shot herself, in an attempted robbery – a year after the shooting. We leave Mel more than a decade later, as she visits the man who shot her, not to "convict you again" but "to tell you what it's like for me." Mel visits Alex to ask *why*.

On the journey between *Melody* and *Mel*, the reader meets a dozen characters whose lives are connected. Each one has a story, and Amberchele has created a form – a novel in stories – that gives room to Melody's journey, and also to the lives of those her life touches.

Along the way – present but hidden, as prison is in our world – the reader hears from Alex, imprisoned at Old Max. In various stories scattered throughout the book, we see Alex on his prison job digging a ditch, Alex contemplating escape, Alex enumerating *how you lose*. We watch Alex decide to *get out* through education, and witness as Alex recognizes, "It took me ten years to realize I had shot that man and his daughter, that it wasn't drugs or my dad or the city streets; it was me. I shot them because I couldn't get what I wanted, and now every day I wish to God I hadn't." Alex's prison pilgrimage from the boy who killed Melody's father, to the man who meets with Mel at the book's end, is one crucial strand of *How You Lose*.

Amberchele's *novel in stories* creates both narrative and meaning. The author honors Melody who, when sitting in the prison visiting room, "reminds herself that she is not here for revenge..., but to finish what she has begun herself – to untie this knot in her head..." He honors Alex whose light, as he walks from the visiting room, appears to Mel as "a shimmer of blue, clear and close to the body, but wispy, flickering, as though starved for fuel, as pale blue flame in the wind." Amberchele honors Hank, Toni, Jarrold, and all the other characters whose stories are shared.

The author, in prison himself, has published these stories in a number of journals. "Melody" and "Mel" both appear in Bell Gale Chevigny's *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (Arcade Publishing, Inc., 1999).

In honoring Melody, Alex, Hank, Toni and Jarrold, Amberchele honors human beings and our desires and loses, dreams and disappointments, connections and failures to connect. *How*

You Lose is a beautiful book, one that reveals – both in form and in content – how we each move along the path of our life, how life touches life, and how there’s a web we’re all part of.

Published in *Fortune News*, Spring 1999

Prison Writing in 20th Century America, by H. Bruce Franklin, forward by Tom Wicker
Penguin Books, 1999

H. Bruce Franklin, author of *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* and subject of a 1993 interview in these pages, has put together an important new collection. *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* contains extended excerpts of work by those incarcerated in plantation prisons in the earliest part of this century to pieces by Dannie Martin, Mumia Abu Jamal and Jimmy Santiago Baca today. Franklin not only shares passages from the memoirs, stories, essays and poems of incarcerated men and women, but also places these in a clear historical context.

The reality prisoners face often demands their full attention. As Piri Thomas puts it in his memoir *Seven Long Times*, “Political awareness was not too big a thing with me at that time. Survival was.” Franklin, though, has the necessary distance and vision to weave each prison writers’ experience into a larger fabric. He writes that modern American prison writings constitute a coherent body of literature with a unique historical significance and cultural influence.” Through his choice of material and in his introductions to the book as a whole and to the work of each writer, Franklin proves both the significance and the influence.

Franklin discusses the late eighteenth-century birth of the modern American prison as an isolated and secret world different from the previous system of punishment which had been administered as public spectacle. He shows how the South, one hundred years after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment; the Black Codes that followed; and the fee system that tied police, sheriffs and judges’ pay to the number of people picked up, charged and found guilty, created “criminals” of former slaves. In the North, too, prisons provide a source of cheap labor. Franklin then brings the reader to “the twilight of the twentieth century (where) the United States has transformed the prison into a central institution of society, unprecedented in scale and influence.”

Organized in sections beginning with “From Plantation to Penitentiary” to “The American Gulag Today,” *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* travels through “The Early Modern American Prison (with writings by Jack London, Agnes Smedley, Chester Himes and six others), “The Movement and The Prison” (Malcolm X, George Jackson, Assata Shakur and four more), and “The Literary Renaissance”(composed of work by sixteen prison-writers including

Etheridge Knight, Patricia McConnel and Jerome Washington). Franklin tells the reader, “The works have been chosen for what they reveal about prison and about human beings in the most difficult circumstances.”

The revelations Franklin has chosen are made in artistic, rather than polemical, fashion. As Jack Henry Abbot notes in the book created from Abbot’s letters to Norman Mailer entitled *In the Belly of the Beast*, he’s presenting the “sensation of what it is to be seriously a long term prisoner in American prison.”

Patricia McConnel (in her novel *Sing Soft, Sing Loud*) describes a common response to these sensations: “Partly, jailface just happens when you been under everybody’s heel too long, but after a while you learn to do it on purpose so you never let on that you’re scared or feeling pain or worry or sickness. What you do is, you freeze your face so nothin’ moves. Your eyebrows don’t scrunch together in a frown, your mouth don’t twitch or smile or sneer. Freeze ain’t exactly the right word ‘cause it makes it sound like the face goes hard, when actually it goes limp and you don’t let it tighten up over nothin; at all, ever.”

Franklin reports that prison writing was given a voice through *American Mercury*, under the editorship of H.L. Mencken in the mid-20’s to the mid-30s. Prison thinkers and writers in the 1960’s, Malcolm X and George Jackson among them, influenced political movements within and beyond the bars of Norfolk Prison Colony, Soledad and San Quentin. In today’s world of “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” and media bans, men and women in prison are supposed to be silently buried away. But human beings need to speak, and human beings in prison have much to say. *Prison Writing in 20th Century America* allows us all, inside and outside the country’s jail houses, to listen.

Published in *Arts & Entertainment*, July 1990

The Elk Poems

by Kate Dougherty

(Pigmy Forest Press, 1989)

Kate Dougherty’s poems name names: Alvine, Mrs. Berry, The Johnson’s, Almora, Byrd Baker. These poems name Elk, a specific moment in time. There is “...a February rain/...on Roth’s meadow,” and Sunday afternoon storytelling, and “...Estelle and I...cleaning/The Greenwood Room at the Harbor House,” and Environmental Impact Meetings and the fire that “...cracks in the black stove.” There is not only Delphine upside down, but her “...fuschia pink running shoes/on the third highest step of the slide.”

These poems name life as it moves through particular people in this particular place: life in the children “On the edge of the sandbox in September,” in the daughter who

*...placed her tooth in my hand
and we looked down.
Young kernel
of ivory, hollow with blood
her own...;*

life in the old dog who has begun to “wander/onto Greenwood Road, stand and wait,” in Margaret at 81 present in the author’s mind as she stands among weeds that “...rattle like a dry cough/in a six month drought;” life in the death of the “Lumber man, fisherman, man/of his father’s land...”, in the “...Ashes/someone said. A family burial/in the valley/and a party for Elk.”

In these poems Elk, too – the town itself – has life, is a breathing being: “The town sang the song he loved to sing,” “The town left in a twisting line/like a snake full on a thing too large...”

These poems are mirrors that catch portraits:

*She would sit down on her front porch
for a little time, once a day.
She would sit on the bench
facing the ocean, when the sun
was most brilliant. Her eyes
were going, near to blind at the end...
("Alvine")*

*Byrd Baker always points
out the window when he talks
to the government panels
even if there are nothing but walls.
They can't figure him out. Is he
an artist, a fisherman, a troublemaker
or some distant relative of a whale;
he's that large. Too hard to figure,
so they smile and sit back
when Byrd Baker gets up to talk,
when Byrd Baker gets up
they put their pencils down.
("Environmental Impact Meeting")*

These poems are scores that note the song in daily speech –

*did I know about birds like my son?
She knew he was gone, had I heard from him
and look, the smallest egg
mottled gray-green, now what do you suppose
it could be?
("Vespers")*

as well as the poem the poet sings:

*it's that fine drizzle
that reminds me of a mare's low whicker
her muzzle nuzzling your palm*

*looking for sugar.
("Unnaming")*

In "Unnaming," the long poem that ends the book, Kate not only reflects as in "to give back an image of, to mirror", but reflects as in "to think seriously about, to contemplate, to ponder upon." Here she notes how in reading the history of Greenwood and Cuffey's Cove (the forerunners of Elk), her "eye/snagged on Clift's Ridge/...named by Orso Clift and known as Clift's Ridge;" but the town calls it "Cliff Ridge".

*All ridges here lead to the sea,
and roll in their own headlands
but this one was named for it.
This one was what it was, a cliff...*

And so Kate reflects, ponders upon, how something can be "Free/in name but not in commerce;" she ponders upon the importance of naming and the evil of claiming, the evil of

*calling something yours
when it goes on without you
while you rot in it
rot so far the letters
of your name get slurred
with daily town use.*

She points a finger at arrogance and greed:

*Whoever Steller was
I hope he is satisfied,
Steller's Jay,
the selfish bastard...*

but she does so at the same time understanding that we are all interconnected, that simple "blame" is too easy a response. Kate describes the man who sold the land he inherited from his father, the man who some days rides through town

*in a svelte black sports car, others
in a fully outrigged emergency equipped
rifle displayed three antenna four wheel drive;
a Cadillac if he's got the Stetson...*

and she also describes

*...the logging trucks
in the dark, as I am waking,...
My neighbors are fed doing this work.
When I buy redwood, any wood,
this is where it comes from.
If not here, then somewhere.*

For herself, Kate writes

*Well I won't. I just won't.
...in my mind,*

*when I speak or write,
look out my window or walk the cove
it stays Cliff Ridge.*

As though I gave it back to itself.

In “Unnaming” and in all *The Elk Poems*, Kate does give “It back to itself.” In these poems she never lays claim to Elk – not to the town, the land or the people. Instead she is, very skillfully, with much love and wisdom

*walking to the creek’s mouth, simply naming
things there, and watching
how things change.*

(Arts and Entertainment Magazine, Vol. XV, No. 7, July 1990)