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KUSHNER, DALE M. (2013). *The Conditions of Love*. New York, NY: Grand Central Publishing. 371 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4555-1975-0. Paperback, \$15.00. Reviewed by Ilene A Serlin.

The Journey of the Wild Child

The Conditions of Love, a debut novel by the poet Dale Kushner, has been described as a young girl's awakening, through love, to womanhood.

While this is certainly a major theme, my own preference is to see it in the lineage of the archetype of the Wild Child. Like the characters in *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (Estes, 1992), the protagonist in this Thoreau-like novel reminds us of the Wild Child who lives in many women's psyches.

Eunice's journey to womanhood embraces several stages: Her upbringing by an unconventional mother; her choice of a new surrogate mother and life in the wild; her forced experience living in the "real world;" and her eventual integration, through love, into a world of her choosing.

Through lush poetic prose, various themes emerge in the novel:

Identity. The power of names and naming is described as Eunice discovers her power to create her world. Her father, a charming seducer, abandoned the family when she was young: "And that's when I stopped calling my father Frankie and started calling him Dupere" (p. 24). She revisioned the romance of her parents' relationship: "I saw my parents in a field, tipsy with love, dancing to bluesy horns. Through the haze, a Ferris wheel was spinning toward them" (p. 25-26).

Her father shows up in her dreams as the Demon Lover who forever affects her view of men: "He was my secret. He came in the middle of the night. No one else could see him" (p. 52).

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She imagines him saying: “*They won’t believe you. They’re blind, Bunny, but you’re not blind... We’re not like them. We’re a couple of gypsies. No one cheers me up the way you do, Bunny*” (p. 52).

Her relationship with her mother was equally complex: a beautiful seductive woman who both nurtured and also abandoned her. This abandonment helped her separate and individuate as she created her own life: “What right did she have to decide my future? Why did her life have to be my life? I’m like her moon, I thought. I’ll always be in her orbit. I’ll never be able to escape and have a life of my own. My mother ruled my days and nights, but I couldn’t leave her, even though only a nitwit would stay” (p. 94).

Eunice coped with the difficulties of life with a single mother through use of the imagination: “I was modeling myself on Lauren Bacall in *Dark Passage*, practicing being the kind of woman a man could tell his secrets to without feeling betrayed” (p. 19). She used narrative to re-imagine her life and discover new possibilities (Serlin, 2007).

Fate and Freedom. The theme of fate and freedom runs through *The Conditions of Love* as characters both deal with their circumstance of birth and genetics, while discovering the freedom to create their own lives. Sam, her mother’s lover, tells her: “*There is no grand plan, sweetheart! There’s good luck and there’s bad luck—that’s it!*” (p. 96). Her mother’s version was: “The Man Upstairs plays with us, Eunice. Cat and mouse” (p. 121). When her mother abandons her to run off with a new lover, Eunice is consoled by Mr. Tabachnik: “Cisskele, from such terrible trials good comes” (p. 144).

Emotions. Kushner captures the complexity and ambivalence of a young girl’s feelings. When her first love, her pet turtle, dies she muses: “Mern cried when I told her, a fact that surprised me, but then sadness, I knew, was like any weather, coming and going at its own pleasing. I cried myself to sleep that night and then I stopped crying. I was finished crying, Eunice Turtle would not want me to mourn forever” (p. 119).

By introducing other colorful characters who mentored Eunice, Kushner also illustrates the young girl’s lessons on emotions. A neighbor, a Jewish delicatessen owner, helped Eunice cope with the loss of her mother’s lover Sam: “In war there are no winners,” Mr. Tabachnik sighed, “so, between men and women, why should it be different? Love and suffering are like this... Why should this be? Because a mischievous *pishadikeh* angel shoots an arrow, and the arrow doesn’t kill you, but oy, the pain! ...And that, my friend, is love!” (p. 110).

The World of Nature, Artist, and the Wild Child

From an early age, Eunice knew that she was different. She could see the hidden world behind the visible, and also knew that this was the role of the artist. “I barely understood. I just knew I could see two worlds, the visible and the invisible, and how they were connected” (p. 123). “Question: how does an

artist capture invisible things? Like the wind moving through the fields?" (p. 301).

Her mother, an unusual woman herself, told her: "*Normal! Who wants to be normal, kiddo?*" (p. 183). Her adopted mother, Rose, warned her that normal people would try to co-opt them: "They're going to try to tame us or shoot us" (p. 193).

Eunice's role was to bridge worlds. Rose told her: "What I'm trying to say is that the bridge is an in-between place and that's where you are now. You're bound to cross over the bridge and move on because life is change" (p. 170).

As she was taken into the "normal" world, Eunice felt her dislocation: "It was as if I'd been wrenched from one life and redeposited into a former one..." (p. 179).

The world of nature, on the other hand, introduced her to magic: "A few golden leaves spun in the air, defying gravity... It's like magic here.' *Is magical,*' Rose said, closing her eyes." Rose also taught her about how to "see" the invisible world of magic. Eunice reflected: "My true education began with learning about silence and Rose called 'soft eyes.' According to Rose, if a person relaxed her eyes, she could see the world as it really was—not only trees and shoe and automobiles, but the spirit of these things (p. 146)." Rose was her spiritual mentor: "She wanted for me what she desired for herself: to live on the wing, to cross invisible meridians, to travel guided by the cold fire of stars" (p. 224).

Love

One of the main themes in *The Conditions of Love* is the healing and redemptive power of love. Love transforms death: "In the dirt beneath us, maggots digested the ancient bones of elk. And all this violent seething, riotous simmering, this charging and recharging, this energy exchange, was love... Love was constantly working change with its terrible, precise force. Love leaped and roiled, rammed against itself, entered and exited, bloomed, died, and was reborn in things. In us!" (p. 176-177).

Rose taught Eunice: "Love is in no way orderly, even under the best circumstances" (p. 166). But it is love that brings us rebirth and eternity. Eunice understands herself as "...an artist who believes that love does not vanish across the border of death but is itself another word for eternity" (p. 367).

Finally, love echoes the reality that time is circular and death is not the end. After her lover, Fox, says to her: "*We can't know what we are creating, Sparrow, until long after we've created it*" (p. 356), Eunice reflects: "I think you may have been talking about reinvention and about hope. If I'm correct, months from now, your death will throw new marvels into high relief" (p. 356).

She understands that the surrender and commitment that love demands also gives: "If you believed I sacrificed myself for you, you must have also known I

depended on your love. I was fervently dependent, and I don't see how any love of worth can be otherwise. Dependence and independence rightly coexist! I come here and am *expanded* by your presence, not made less. What a relief to discover our habits of lifelong companionship can't be broken by death" (p. 356).

In conclusion, *The Conditions of Love* is the beautiful story of a young woman's awakening into womanhood through love. It describes her as a modern Wild Child who was raised by wise women, grew up in the forest, and learned to navigate between the worlds of nature and reality. For all of us women who are still in touch with our inner Wild Child, this book will resonate for months to come.

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The Author

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