



Blood and Guts in High School: A Novel

Kathy Acker

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Kathy Acker was a high-wire writer. She took risks. She experimented for the sake of it. She made mistakes. She fell. She never wanted a modest success, and so her books, all of them, swing from passages of topflight bravura, where you think, "How did she do that?" to a sawdust-in-your-mouth kind of feeling that you just want to spit out. She is an exhilarating, exasperating writer who wants you in the ring with her, through the highs and the lows. There was always something touching and trusting about Acker's belief that her audience would not want a smooth finished product of the kind they could buy at any dime store, but would prefer to be in on the process -- flying when she did, falling when she did, nothing leveled out or homogenized.

She was ahead of her time. There is no doubt about that. Acker really was interactive art. It's why she fronted bands -- most famously The Mekons on the CD of Pussy, King of the Pirates -- if you haven't heard it, buy it now. It's why her readings were more like stage shows than those creepy literary events where some dude mumbles in a monotone for half an hour. To see Kathy in her leopard-skin leotard, slash of red lipstick, gym-honed muscles, maybe a dildo, usually a backing track, seduce a packed crowd with that gorgeous voice and knowing childlike look was to discover how exciting art could be. Not rarefied, not back-dated, not dull, just something you suddenly wanted -- the way you suddenly want to be kissed by someone you hadn't even looked at before.

Okay, so Acker was art as performance and language as desire, but was she an important writer? Yes. Important work always has risk in it. That doesn't mean that all risky work is important, but it does mean that safety gets us nowhere. In science this is self-evident. In the arts, and particularly literature, we still moan and groan at experiment. Just gimme a good story, we say, with a beginning, middle, and end. Well, Acker won't do that for you, but she will help you get high.

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