



Indecency

Justin Phillip Reed

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Indecency is boldly and carefully executed and perfectly ragged. In these poems, Justin Phillip Reed experiments with language to explore inequity and injustice and to critique and lament the culture of white supremacy and the dominant social order. Political and personal, tender, daring, and insightful?the author unpacks his intimacies, weaponizing poetry to take on masculinity, sexuality, exploitation, and the prison industrial complex and unmask all the failures of the structures into which society sorts us.

Indecency Details

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Claire says

One of the best things I can say about this is that it did not hurt my eyes to look at, unlike many of the Greek and Russian poems I've spent hours and hours translating for Tuesday or Thursday, on many of the same topics.

Quote from the poetry: "sacrificial fires nightly appealing

where is that word?"

Maybe that is because I am in a different frame of mind now instead of it being on an entirely different subject matter.

It is also a different author, Justin Phillip Reed, a new author.

He mentions finches, and I DID translate about passer, the finch, so I do actually like this work! Even though in general I dislike poetry, there are reasons this author overcame that.

So, there are good aspects to appreciate about this piece of literature besides what I alluded to above. There is written "I've never really had breath from a really hot black guy"... That's a somewhat but not-so-subtle way to record what I think the author means.

There is a page pondering if repetition is boring. For the record, I think it only helps solidify the memory.

What I most liked and agreed with was this author's sentiment "Literature is not the same as publishing."

So, if you don't mind the occasional curse word in your poetry, this is an OK new work to peruse. It offers a few interesting things to ponder in a somewhat salacious way, but I didn't think it was anything worse than what I was studying with Professor Rosso on Tuesdays, unless you have a major squick to casual mentions of, like, S&M.

Julie Ehlers says

*I've told this story. I barely graduated.
I stunted my own growth. I don't know how
to go home. What you don't know is
I needed someone like you but braver. Now
I just have issues with needing anyone at all.*

Somehow both sophisticated and brutal, *Indecency*, the 2018 National Book Award winner for poetry, is full of vivid imagery and beautiful language that I was constantly marveling at, but honestly a lot of what Reed was doing was over my head. This book absolutely deserves five stars, and it also deserves the kind of attention I don't feel I can give it right now. And so, *Indecency* will join Louise Glück's *Faithful and Virtuous Night* in my list of collections I need to reread someday.

Adam Lowy says

"The deep art of these days./The city rears up:/white,white, lovely./Inside, every room/mutates like a basic truth."

"The men are machines. The white/engine assembled a sincere/ crack in the silence./This churning sucks up the day./The violent muck is quite other."

Images, perceptions of the body, in sex and violence. How to protect (from potential victimizers, police etc.) and then gain possession of bodily self.

Wonderful poet!

Tim Jones-Yelvington says

f***ing amazing

Thomas says

Wanted to love this one but couldn't understand a good amount of it. Justin Phillip Reed tackles pressing topics – masculinity, sexuality, white supremacy, etc. – with raw emotion and leaves few clean conclusions. His words pack a lot of power and show his pain and the depth of his feeling. The queerness and blackness of this collection, and the way Reed navigates these social identities with so much heart and vulnerability, makes *Indecency* a necessary addition to the existing canon of poetry. Unfortunately, as someone not that well-versed in poetry I found myself confused by several of these poems, such that I could grasp a few lines, an emotion, or an overall subject but couldn't comprehend the poem as a whole. Unsure if this stems from my lack of poetry reading comprehension or the obscurity of Reed's language. Still, would recommend this to people who like poetry and who find themselves drawn to work that questions the white, heteronormative social order through a personal perspective.

Chuck says

I decided to check out all of this year's National Book Award poetry short-listers and this is one of the collections on that list. Deep, dark purple poetry from a black gay perspective that is so constantly inventive it is barely contained (or sometimes not contained at all) by Reed's endless experimentation with form. Beautifully literate and abrasively in-your-face rough but very real wake up calls. A gut punch of perspective on the world we live in from one who is doubly marginalized. Just when I'd want to give up on a poem, a diamond made of one or two lines would emerge. Can't wait to see how Reed evolves.

Shaun says

The very best poetry is being written by young men and women of color and this book proves it once again. A few years ago, Claudia Rankine wrote an awesome collection of poetry and essays called "Citizen" about the "black experience" in America. It blew me away! It was so incredibly well written. I actually made it a point to go see the installment called "Hood" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art solely because of Claudia Rankine's incredible work in "Citizen." The same can be said of Justin Phillip Reed's work in his first collection of poetry and "wordsmithing" entitled "Indecency". This shite is that good!

At times, every poet's work is a bit obtuse and far out there; too far out there. Justin Philip Reed's work is like that at times, but once you know a bit about the back story or to whom or about whom the poem is written, you see how so freaking talented the poet is with forming and shaping his or her words. That J.P. Reed suffers PTSD because he is guilty of being "black in modern America" that has declared a secret war on the rights of young men and women of color is simply without peradventure. His work screams about the murder of his young black soul merely by being alive and living on the mean streets of St. Louis. I have been there and I have seen the oppression J.P. Reed writes about with the "whites" of my very own eyes. Prejudice, race baiting and hatred run rampant in the people and neighborhoods in those parts of St. Louis J.P. Reed writes about in this collection of his first 38 poems. Each one is more strident and shocking than the next. It was and is impossible to pick the very best, they are each that good.

American men and women of letters, especially those of color, are the proverbial "parakeets in the soul-killing mine" of our great nation. America, we have much to discuss, much to address and much to atone for. Justin Phillip Reed's work here captures so eloquently the street argot, anguish and urgency of America's black men; especially gay black men of which Reed, as in the Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young song says we should do, let's his "freak flag fly."

Ironically, the state of American poetry is still exceptionally high, indeed as long as we fail to address the evils we have wrought on our brothers and sisters of color. There is so much art, big, juicy bits of it, out there for all to see and experience. It is a sad, but nevertheless fortunate place to be if you are as talented as Justin Phillip Reed and Claudia Rankine. I hope they both live long, productive lives. They both bring so much to the table and make living in modern 21st Century America so painfully exquisite. Long may ye reign!

Amy says

Douglas Kearney's blurb on the back cover says better than I can why this volume is so powerful:

"Don't avert: Justin Phillip Reed demands we witness that who's missing was taken, who fell was dropped, and who died was murdered. Witness, too, that who done it will claim everything but responsibility. That obscenity drives the poet to fracture language into the exquisite shrapnel of lyric paroxysms, leaves 'body/...deboned of its irony.' That indecency triggered these devastating poems. Fuck what they claim; here's what Reed has seen."

Favorite poems:

- Gateway
- A Statement from No One, Incorporated
- Retrograde

- I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel
- Orientation
- To Every Faggot Who Pulverized Me for Being a Faggot
- The Fratricide
- They Speak of the Body and One Sits Up Straight
- Paroxysm

I read this volume with a dictionary, and it sent me to the internet to search for the BuzzFeed article about Michael L. Johnson, the wrestler (a story I recall, but it didn't register for me much beyond a headline at the time). Reed is inventive with form and phrasing and the space of the page. I was drawn to the rawness of the language that pulls no punches, which is why my favorite poems are my favorites, esp To Every Faggot. The last 6 lines are killer, in which the speaker Adams himself like a god:

From its stubborn clay I've shaped
a creature, hollowed into its guts
a pair of lungs, attached appendages
that make it capable of walking
out of every room it enters at will
and willed it to love. What have you done.

Lastly, the repetition in such poems as Orientation and The Fratricide is very effective and reminds me of Glenn Ligon's visual artwork. The repetition distorts and takes on new meaning with each iteration.

Ben Truong says

Indecency is an anthology of poems written by Justin Phillip Reed. This anthology tackles many timely themes, such as: masculinity, sexuality, white supremacy, exploitation, and the prison industrial complex.

Indecency is a collection of poems that are focused on the inequities and injustices of current life. These poems are deep, candid, intricate, intimate, confrontational, thought provoking, and were a joy to read. Reed critiques, criticizes, and in some points laments about the inequities and injustices that are still prevalent today.

Like most anthologies, there are weaker contributions and this anthology is no exception. However, even those weaker poems – comparatively speaking, were constructed rather well and there were a handful of poems that I had to read several time and ponder about it throughout the day for me to understand them (I think).

All in all, *Indecency* is a wonderful collection of poems, which deals with the inequities of current society rather well.

Lisa says

So very very good.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

From the NBA longlist for poetry - this is a stunning collection dealing with issues of race and sexual orientation and the intersection of the two. These poems are complex and often manage to be both cerebral and visceral. The author is inspired by the killings of unarmed black men and a local case of a black wrestler accused of killing others by deliberately infecting other men with HIV. Societal perceptions of race and sexuality are explored. The author also plays with form - both the physical layout and technical structure.

Kayleb Candrilli says

Incredible debut. Will follow all Reed writes for years to come.

M says

to stitch the story is cauterizing work

(I love what Reed does with form, with disruption and space and expectation)

Lizy says

I did not like this book.

I did not get this book.

I don't think this book was meant for me--and that's ok.

I think there's people it is meant for, and that they'll love it.

But to understand this book, you need to be woke on a level that I'm not. You need to be well-versed in social justice, you need to have a certain background to comprehend it or, like me, you'll be lost.

I am not the intended audience.

So in my eyes, this book came off as pretentious. It was inaccessible. It was unnecessarily graphic. 50% or more of the book made vague references that I didn't know and couldn't relate to. It was alienating. I was lost.

And to me, it didn't make sense. It made analogies that I don't understand the logic behind. It jumps from point A to point F when it makes arguments, and if you haven't already gotten from A to F on any situation before, it all will go right over your head and look slightly crazy.

That was my experience with this poetry collection.

So, yeah, no, I didn't like it.

But I can see how other people will.

Julie says

I'm back to work so this won't be as long or thorough as the other ones, I think, but that's also because this collection was incredible and at the same time difficult to access. On one level, I mean this in a basic sense -- I frequently had to check a dictionary, Google a linguistics reference -- but also in some other sense that I'm having trouble articulating. Maybe I'll chew through it as I type this review.

The voice felt harsh, cold, closed, solitary, but surging with emotion -- anger (often at people's capacities to move on so easily from others', specifically black/queer, trauma), fear, loneliness, others. A really compelling and kind of scarily bitter/intelligent voice. Reminded me of the narrator from Teju Cole's *Open City*. Not that there aren't moments of warmth, solidarity, like "Carolina Prayer": "Let us smell rain. Let the breeze through an oak hymn / the promise that keeps us waking." Though that comes with its own darkness, right before: "Let the cop car / swerve its nose into the night and not see none of them" -- the hint of violence, a curse, in "swerve."

Reed uses the second person in this really interesting way, one that identifies the reader with his voice, but also implicates/accuses us: "You pile the less / pleasant bits of news / easily through all the sleep / and line the story of years" from "About A White City," the incredible "Retrograde" -- where the "you" feels angry at their neighbors for having loud sex, and at their own "vacuous erection / now making controversy of your spinal-wire tangle." I've been thinking a lot about anger this year, and it's also been all over the news -- mostly in the context of women's anger, people asking is it justified, is it useful. I read a little bit of Martha Nussbaum's *Anger and Forgiveness*, which argues that anger is useful only if it quickly transitions into something less harmful and more future-oriented. This position has been criticized for undervaluing anger and its role in resistance, particularly Black resistance. Next to the philosophical/political question of whether anger is justified/useful, I feel like what Reed's "you" shows is that anger is real, visceral. It can be cold, destructive; regardless, it is real. Bringing the reader into the "you" forces us to not ignore it, how we cause/feel it.

I don't know if that really makes sense. But that's my attempt to parse through things. A few other stray notes: the titles are incredible, every title I feel is not a direct reference to something in the poem, but something that adds more to it. The linguistics references -- and what he does visually with syntax, using slashes and brackets and bolds -- are so, so cool. I want to read a more knowledgeable person's review of this collection. And I want to return to it later, to really fully digest.
