

29

Mary Sojourner  
350 pages  
Paperback \$15.95  
Torrey House Press

"Either give me enough wine or leave me alone/ now that I know how it is/ to be with you in a constant conversation." — Rumi

Mary Sojourner's third novel, *29*, is one long ecstatic conversation between narrators Nell and Monkey, and everyone they know. The novel starts off with: "You should write a book about us. —Monkey," suggesting that Sojourner is co-creating along with the kaleidoscope of vivid characters that inhabit this wry, surreal, and tender novel.

Nell is a 55 year-old unemployed executive whose career is dead in ageist and post-recession America. As the amenities of her former life dissolve, she begins to tap in to her environment; she dreams about bees leaving their hives, becomes obsessed with a creature she sees at the aquarium called the "Leafy Sea Dragon," gives away her car and gets on a bus to 29 Palms (what better vehicle for a modern Odyssey?) Taken in by a rogue social services network called "Black Widow," Nell finds work at Monkey's shade tree mechanic shop and enters a world completely opposite of her former life. Sojourner deftly balances a cast of rotating characters that guide Nell's way, from the girl at the bus station who suggests she go to 29 Palms to Mariah, a local Chemehuevi woman and activist.

Like all the residents of 29, Monkey lives in a black market world for a reason. He has secrets and his past life as an EMT made it so he "didn't even see people any more. I didn't see animals, I saw grievous errors." He struggles with visions that are both prophetic and about collective memory:

"This is how it is, this is how it was. Once you were fragile. Once you did not know how to hunt or move on water. Once you put feathers in your hair. The Other's feathers were orange. Orange was the color of death. Beyond alien moons, a pebble rolled down a mountain..."

The surreal elements of *29*, "a novel of the impossible," are tempered by the very real edge of fear that Sojourner places her characters on. They function within a belief that something is very, very wrong, especially in their small desert town. A one point Shilo, one of the members of the Black Widow says, "We've got mysterious stuff on the Base and their creepy orange flares at night and who knows what floating in the air. We've got guys on the lam, greed and mutations of dope the rest of the world has yet to discover." Nell joins Mariah in a community struggle to fight for protection of the Southern Paiute Salt Song Trail. It is not only an ecological struggle, but a spiritual one to save a sacred trail "made of rock and water and song." What I love about Nell and Monkey is that, despite their controversial friendship, they are evolved characters seeking grace. They're the sort of folks you'd like to talk to for a good long while, even if you are wondering if they're brilliant or just crazy.

Which brings me back to the Leafy Sea Dragon:

"The creature glided up and away. The body was that of a foot-long sea horse. It did not seem to flex or propel, and still it moved and disappeared into a web of kelp. Nell tucked her legs under her and sat. A second creature appeared. Blush-pink striped with silver. She saw that



MARY SOJOURNER is the author of two novels, *Sisters of the Dream* and *Going Through Ghosts*; the short story collection, *Delicate*; an essay collection, *Bonelight: Ruin and Grace in the New Southwest*; and memoirs, *Solace: Rituals of Loss and Desire* and *She Bets Her Life*. She is an intermittent NPR commentator and the author of many essays, columns and op-eds for *High Country News*, *Writers on the Range* and other publications. A graduate of the University of Rochester, Sojourner teaches writing in private circles, one-on-one, at colleges and universities, writing conferences, and book festivals. She believes in both the limitations and possibilities of healing through writing—the most powerful tool she has found for doing what is necessary to mend. She lives in Flagstaff, Arizona. Learn more about Mary on her website: [breakthroughwriting.net](http://breakthroughwriting.net).

[Visit Mary's Website](http://breakthroughwriting.net)

what appeared to be kelp were green streamers of living flesh. Tiny translucent fins beat steadily."

The Leafy Sea Dragon haunts Nell throughout the rest of the novel and she is swept up in trances of her own, believing she is receiving messages from the sea creature. She spreads the news of the Leafy Sea Dragons and their existence with nearly every one she encounters. It's a rare and impossible creature in a broken world, much like hope, Sojourner suggests. Nell's transformation in the novel from hopeless to hopeful ripples out into her life as she reconciles her troubled past. 29 made me think of how found family always seems to represent lost family, as Nell's new life leads her back to her roots. Here she speaks to the Leafy Sea Dragon:

"Sometimes it seems that most of the people I've met have tiny invisible fins that had moved them through their lives toward me. This is not about g-o-d, my shining friends. This is not about the Big Puppeteer in the Sky. This, and this is the best part, is about something I can't and will never be able to figure out, a big nothing as vast, hard and generous as the Mojave desert, as mysterious as the return to home."

29 reminded me that literature is an ecstatic conversation between reader and author and I was fully immersed in Sojourner's vivid dialogue. The moment I finished 29 I found myself googling the Leafy Sea Dragon.

Review by Jamie Houghton



