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Journey into Life: A Review of *Shrapnel*

Marie Manilla. *Shrapnel*. River City Publishing, 2012.

Marie Manilla's *Shrapnel* is a testimony to the power of relationships. The reader journeys with protagonist Bing through sequential chapters of his life, and is able to grow with him as he evolves into a better human being. Through Bing's experiences, we begin to feel what he feels: love and longing for love, prejudice toward "outsiders," loneliness and fear about aging, encouragement, courage, actions, and finally faith. The novel captures our human obsession with becoming "the best we can be" before meeting our inevitable end. What better way to teach a lesson about the eternal battle between good and evil, and old and new, than by experiencing it through the mind of a hero. Manilla's book is saturated with complicated stereotypes: generational, geographical, and social. Manilla blends together opposing ideas to prove that, just as Bing learns to navigate the uncertainties and changes of contemporary life, so too can society.

Bing's life mirrors the three stages of Joseph Campbell's theory of a hero's journey: Departure, Initiation, and Return. The loss of his wife, Barbara, and his declining health propel Bing to leave his comfortable life in Texas, where he is a true American patriot still holding onto old American ways, prejudices, and oppressive traditions. Bing envies a teenage boy at his yard sale because the boy wants not only "the gas can and weed whacker thrown in for free" with his purchase, but also because he is able to lift the heavy items into the truck bed with "one smooth arc." As Bing travels toward West Virginia, where he thinks everyone will be a "pig-toting, barefoot, gap-toothed, inbred holler-dweller," he stops to eat and rest along the way. When he enters a Dairy Queen in Mississippi and finds Lavonda at the counter, with her airbrushed inch-long nails, and a kitchen full of black cooks, he thinks, "Eating in a room full of Mexicans is one thing, but this, well, holy shit." Bing's fear of the unknown cripples his opportunity to start over.

Bing is also afraid of getting old, physically and mentally. "In the deepest crevice of his brain is a disturbing fear that he no longer has the mental capacity to start over." One of the most moving scenes in the novel is Bing's surrender of ego in a cave, a pit-stop on his way to West Virginia, where he is trapped. Bing lays in the dark on cold dirt, weeping for his deceased wife Barbara and wishing he were dead. We feel his genuine heartache, loneliness, regrets, and his fear of the

unknown life he is traveling toward. For the first time in his life, Bing is vulnerable, and with this vulnerability we are finally able to relate to him. The reader is granted a glimmer of hope, and we cheer for the protagonist to get up and face his fears and succeed in his hero's journey.

The Return stage begins when Bing moves into the home of Susie, his daughter. He is propelled into this stage of his journey by his “meeting with the goddess,” Ellen, a woman who cooks like Barbara, welds like a man, and beats him at chess. Because of her, Bing is able to open up to his family. More importantly, at the end of his journey, and with the supernatural aid of his dead son, Roger, Bing is finally able to comfort the one person he could never understand, his daughter Susie.

At the novel's beginning, it is easy to dislike Bing, but as he pushes through his fears and discomfort in his struggle to find peace with his family and create a new life, it is impossible not to sympathize with him. Manilla is a mastermind in the way she parallels Bing's personal journey with major conflicts in the world, social and political. Her beautiful language and vivid descriptions invite the reader to become part of the story. We know the characters because we are them. Manilla uses Bing's weaknesses to represent the imperfections of humans in general. Bing is able to let go of his past, open his mind to new ideas, and create more meaningful relationships with the people he loves. *Shrapnel* is both brutal and refreshingly honest, a true representation of a hero's journey. If Bing can accomplish the journey, why not a nation?

Marie Manilla's short story, “Hand. Me. Down.” appeared in *Kestrel* 22 (spring 2009). —Eds.