

Book Review

Title: *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening*

Author: Stephen Kuusisto

Publisher: W. W. Norton, 2006

Cloth, ISBN: 0-393-05892-1, 244 pages

Cost: \$23.95 USD

Reviewer: Steven E. Brown

I have not yet read Kuusisto's earlier memoir, *Planet of the Blind*, so I picked up *Eavesdropping* only knowing that many of my colleagues have raved about the author's way with words. I agree. I found *Eavesdropping* delightful. Kuusisto writes prose like the poet he is. In two sections and twenty-nine essays he explains what it is like to spend moments and days in auditory "sight-seeing."

My self-perception is as a visual and tactile learner so I wondered how I would relate to a book called *Eavesdropping*? As it happens I read most of the book during a 2006 day Hawai'i experienced an earthquake and O'ahu lost all its electricity for many hours. At one point during that unusually quiet day I purposefully listened and realized I heard wind blowing through trees; pedestrians walking and talking; cars going by; neighbors' voices; and other sounds to which I generally do not attend. I also realized I did not hear the hum of a clock, refrigerator, TV, VCR, DVD player. I did not go on the computer all day, so I did not hear any of its sounds. We had no way to cook, so I missed all those sounds. But I did hear the following languages spoken: English, German, and Spanish. That is not unusual where I live. What is unusual is we all sat outside in the dimming light and conversed (including listening) for hours, while we awaited the return of electricity and our routine lives.

I found the descriptions of how Kuusisto listens to be fascinating. He describes his early delight, as a lonely boy, finding Caruso records in an attic. Caruso and his music continue to be a theme woven throughout the book. He also depicts what it is like to stand in a forest and listen to the sounds surround him. Kuusisto is adept at taking what many of us consider everyday sounds and exploring them in depth. The wind at a New York intersection is one such adventure. "I was working my way south on Fifth and eavesdropping as I walked... Then I was standing in the strange white noise of the west- going-to-east Hudson River wind" (p. 82). The narrative about this corner continues for the next two pages.

Much of *Eavesdropping* revolves around travel. Kuusisto describes travels as close by as the gift of a transistor radio and as faraway from his Ohio home as Iceland, among many other journeys. *Eavesdropping* is in many senses a travelogue—from learning as a young boy to travel outside of his apparently unhappy home; to physical travel as a blind man in venues as diverse as a concert hall in Reykjavik to a baseball game in Boston (and others in various cities); to a diner in Texas. Along the way, Kuusisto regales us with what he hears, imagines, and supposes.

Eavesdropping contains the kinds of stories that everyone wants to hear: informed, stylish, entertaining, and educational. The book belongs in libraries and at the very least in graduate programs about disability and literature.