

The TV Sutras by Dodie Bellamy **Ugly Duckling Presse, 2014**

reviewed by Anna Langston

For six months in 2009, Dodie Bellamy practiced yoga to a DVD called *Peaceful Weight Loss Through Yoga* followed by twenty minutes of meditation before finishing with sitting in front of her television and receiving transmissions of spiritual inspiration from whatever was on TV. The transmissions were lessons, or sutras, and, accompanied by shadowy descriptions of what was happening on the screen, make up the first half of her book *The TV Sutras*. According to Bellamy, she made no attempt to be clever or artful (though that effect is achieved) during their creation, and instead recorded whatever divine inspiration struck her first—even, she says, if it made her cringe. Though some of the sutras may be worthy of that reaction (“Be your own hero—turn within—from within the depths of silence you can uncover your true voice”), others contain nuggets of wisdom and advice, sometimes invoking one’s creative practice, that are worth consideration, perhaps on a bad day.

In the second half of the book, Bellamy recounts the story of the ten years of her life that she spent in a cult, which remains unnamed. Billed as an “essay” by Brooklyn-based publisher Ugly Duckling Presse, the piece is an often sexy, tensely vulnerable hybrid of memoir, fiction, and maybe even religious text.

From the start, Bellamy takes a scathing attitude toward the cult. She cites the frequency with which young people, especially women, were taken advantage of and lost touch with reality after the slow brainwashing of cultist teachings. “For ten years this was my life, for ten years I was gone,” she says of her time as a member. Yet the life she describes is also rich and full. The

organization provided her with a community, spiritual classes, and authoritative elders (however predatory and misguided) as she moved through the changing and dispelling relationships of her early adulthood. The cultists who weave through this nonlinear story are at times frustratingly naive, and at other moments effervescent and addictive. Their commonality lies in their willingness to believe what they're asked to, no matter how absurd. There has been an unbroken line of Masters since the dawn of life; beautiful women can be Jovial saints; cigarettes burn holes in your Astral body; homosexuality is a spiritual learning experience. Like her friends and lovers, Bellamy's character believes with the wide-open acceptance and excitement of a child. In a community where meaning is found in believing just for the sake of it, and connection is forged through believing in something together, Bellamy felt bathed in love and privy to the secrets of the universe. If we begin the book by scoffing, we may find ourselves at times tempted to join in the fun.

Bellamy's prose—simple, conversational, and gossipy—allows the reader to forget her brilliance and think of her art as natural, like a funny woman telling her friends a juicy story. It's in the tradition of writers like Eve Babitz, whose memoir similarly captures and critiques the depth of a woman's experience under the guise of a plausible beach read. Apart from anxieties over immature relationships and lusty encounters with guru lovers, Bellamy offers an antidote to dominant religious narratives. Maybe all belief is absurd, she suggests. While Bellamy's style feels sometimes tongue-in-cheek and always self-aware, her insistence on the sutras' authenticity invites us to believe in her story in full and, if we decide to do so, to question everything we've deemed worthy of belief. "Are [these sutras] as valid, for instance, as the Ten Commandments?" Bellamy wonders. "Who owns meaning? [...] Only scraggly loin-clothed prophets starving in caves? [...] Can meaning arise in a depressed middle-aged writer sitting on her

living room floor, wearing knit pajama bottoms patterned with hot pink peonies?,” she writes. Why not? If inspired texts reflect the cultural motifs of their time, the teachings of the cults of the 1970s are perhaps no more ostentatious than the Bible and, likewise, her own sutras. “Isn’t the promise—or at least the hope—of the *TV Sutras* that meaning is a sort of commons, available to everyone?,” Bellamy asks. Her reader may want to answer *yes*.