

A Book of Uncommon Prayer

edited by Matthew Vollmer (Outpost 19, 2015)

Reviewed by Savannah Johnston

In Matthew Vollmer's new anthology, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer*, each entry—each prayer—asks to be read in one sitting, on the bus, on the train, in line at the grocery, or while waiting at the dentist's. The anthology is deceptively slight, just too big to fit into a back pocket, but good-sized if you're a fan of bib overalls. In collecting the "uncommon" prayers of nearly seventy contributing writers, Vollmer has compiled an anthology remarkable for its depth, scope, and the way in which varied and diverse voices express what it is to pray.

Like the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* from which it takes its name, each prayer is presented without attribution, and most adhere to the ecumenical form, directly addressing those who might need it most. While the *Book of Common Prayer* holds such prayers as those "For Cities" and "For Rain," Vollmer's anthology holds those "For the Post-Interview Job Candidate," "For Men Named Nancy," and "A Bidding Prayer For Those Who Pray." The heart of *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* lies in its openness, as the vestiges of prayer as understood in the Anglican tradition remain, but reimagined as poems, screeds, meditations, and diatribes.

In the anthology's preface, Vollmer writes:

I wanted to see what happened when poets and writers of literary prose entered this particular form, how they'd push against the conventions to make something new, and—hopefully—expand the notion of prayer as a genre...After all, prayer—as a genre,

as a rhetorical mode—encompasses so much of what we writers struggle with everyday: the attempt at expression, the articulation of desires, the hope of resolution.

This is not a secular anthology, but it is not a religious one; instead, *A Book of Uncommon Prayer* reaches for the core of the human experience in all its fickleness. Vollmer's collected prayers speak to the fundamental and the minute, as well as to the absurd, the ecstatic, and the mundane.

Savannah Johnston is an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. She completed her undergraduate degree at Columbia University and is presently pursuing an MFA in fiction at New Mexico State University. Her work has appeared in *Portland Review* and *Moon City Review*.