

The Berkshire Eagle
Poetry as therapy
Reviewed by Alicia Bunt, Berkshire Eagle Staff
Sunday, April 01

Karen Chase's recent nonfiction book, "Land of Stone," sounds almost romantic at first.

Chase, an accomplished poet, joins the staff of Rosedale Hospital, a large psychiatric facility outside of New York City for the severely incapacitated. As "poet-in-residence," she teaches her craft to the ward's patients. There she begins to work with Ben, a strikingly handsome young man who has inexplicably stopped speaking.

"In another time, Ben might have been considered a saint ... his piercing black eyes, his statuesqueness, his few words, each offered as if it is monumental his authentic manner reflects a purity of belief," a Rosedale doctor tells Chase.

But "Land of Stone" is not about the relationship between Chase and her silent student. It is about the love triangle of Chase, Ben and the written word which is much more seductive than any cliché teacher-student story could ever be.

"Language, I believe, comes about in reaction to contact and with a sense of urgency, regardless of any particular setting or family or culture," Chase says.

The poet and patient form an unusual connection, rarely exchanging words, but nonetheless meeting every week to write collaborative poems.

Chase along with all of Ben's doctors and his parents does not know why Ben suddenly chose to leave the world of speech. But unlike doctors, Chase does not pressure Ben to return. Instead, she merely passes a lined pad to him, and after he writes his line of verse, she writes hers.

"We wrote nearly two hundred poems in collaboration, and every week for nearly two years, I wrote a line, he wrote a line," Chase says. She never asks him why he writes what he writes. They don't discuss stanzas or rhymes. And by the end of the book, her admiration for his development as a poet is evident.

"Land of Stone" is unique in that so much of the author's life is revealed in so few of the author's experiences. And yet she manages to divulge so much about her patient, her emotions and the environment in which she works. The reader is told almost nothing of what goes on during those lapses when Chase is not with Ben, but it doesn't seem to matter. Chase is completely self-aware, exposing much of herself with almost no reservations. When she realizes how closely she relates her childhood bout of polio with Ben's verbal paralysis, she immediately and unashamedly relates the story of her former affliction.

Somehow, though all Chase describes are those weekly meetings, it's evident that a breakthrough is taking place. Chase and Ben's poems are evolving and so are they. Ben is healing, and he's helping Chase to do the same. Her memory is precise, impeccable. Her writing is simplistic and her grasp of the mechanics is enviable. In the final chapter, Chase suddenly switches to the present tense. It becomes apparent that everything that was before is done and the end is very close. The quick shift is almost nerve-wracking, and the change is clearly deliberate. Chase's emotions in the last chapter are volatile and nervous.

But Chase, who worked with who-knows how many patients besides Ben, has helped at least one. At their last meeting, once-silent Ben speaks in parting.

"We used words well. I kind of anticipated at the beginning that words would be the important part."