

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

Four Reviews

by Gary Metras

The Nap by the Waterfall by Howard Nelson.

2009; 44pp; Pa; Timberline Press, 6281 Red Bud, Fulton, MO 65251. \$10.00.

Imagine yourself sitting at a table in a café or a kitchen with good friends, swapping succinct and meaningful stories and you will have the style and appeal of this new book of poems by Howard Nelson. The poems are narrative, easy going, and straight-forward, like good conversation.

Each poem evolves in such a way that you are lured by the narrated situation, whether the poem is seven lines ("Thanks") or five pages ("Tubing the Esopus") into reading all of the poem and are richly rewarded by an ending which sheds new light on the story and often elevates what began as a personal narrative into a universal truth. The speaker of "Hound in Pond" observes a dog sniffing along the opposite shore "checking the news among the mud and grass" to discover that it is "a cool dog in the pond of sensible desire" (11).

The poem from which the book's title derives, "Twenty-five Naps in the Adirondacks," is less narrative and more descriptive. Nelson uses accumulated details, "The nap by the pond in late summer. / You lie down in the tall grass and disappear into it" (40), to segue into "the great nap you have not yet taken" (41). So this personal poem, full of lush images, stuns the reader with that beautiful, apocalyptic ending. This is wonderful writing.

A note about the publisher: Clarence Wolfshohl, letterpress printer and editor of Timberline, is closing down his operation after more than thirty years of bringing forth some exciting poetry and dressing them in beautiful, handcrafted editions, but titles will still be available.

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The Southern Quarterly. 46:2, Winter 2009.

Douglas B. Chambers, Editor. 4 issues/year. The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Dr. #5078, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5078. \$25/yr, \$35 institutions.

If you teach *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, or anything else by Richard Wright, this issue belongs in your professional library. You will relish it, dip into it again and again, and maybe even hunt down some of the many bibliographic references, which accompany each essay. The issue celebrates the centennial of Wright's birth and is packed with articles, essays, and reviews of his work. Each is a treasure trove of information, quotes, and interpretative appreciations, in line with the editor's introductory statement that "this issue attempts to show the protean nature of Richard Wright's genius" and each of the contributors reveals some of that genius.

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W. Lawrence Hogue's essay uses "ideas from Subaltern Studies, Post-colonial theory, Psychoanalysis, and Existentialism to frame my discussion of *Native Son*" (10). As foreboding as that may sound, the essay is quite readable. Robert Butler examines *Black Boy* for Wright's conservative religious upbringing and how Marxism was substituted for it, until Wright "came to see party ideology as similar to Seventh Day Adventist dogma, as static systems which locked its members in 'militant ignorance'" (55). The sensitive essay "Richard Wright's Haiku" by Jianqing Zheng is both an overview and an analysis of 22 of his 4,000 haiku, where Wright "used his pen as a brush to paint his tender feelings of nature and human nature" (61). There is a fascinating study, including cover reproductions, of editions of *Black Boy* over the years which argues that "[t]aken together, the *Black Boy* covers represent an intriguing interrelated graphic narrative that is arguably more central to the reception of Wright than has been previously acknowledged" (71). Then there are eleven essays Wright wrote between 1935 and 1937 for the Illinois Writers' Project (part of the federal program) that show Wright's own scholarship in titles such as "Ethnographical Aspects of Chicago's Black Belt," "A Survey of Amusement Facilities of District # 35," and "Bibliography on the Negro in Chicago."

Wright is quoted in the introduction as saying "my country had shown me no examples of how to live a human life" (5). This issue of *The Southern Quarterly* both justifies that statement and attempts to rectify such treatment of this writer and by implication all racial minorities.

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Winter Crows.

By Barry Sternlieb

2009, 38pp; Pa; Codhill Press, P.O. Box 280, Bloomington, NY 12411-0280. \$16.00.

Barry Sternlieb has been quietly writing moving and superbly crafted poems for a number of years but publishing only sporadically in some of our best literary journals and in limited edition chapbooks.

No one has published a full length collection of his poems and that's a shame because the lovers of contemporary poetry are being deprived of an authentic poetic voice.

Perhaps Sternlieb's new title, *Winter Crows*, winner of the Codhill Chapbook Award, will bring him some of the attention his work deserves.

Of the 28 poems here, a dozen are inspired by medieval Chinese and Japanese culture. Poems such as "Tea Master," "Shi Huang Ti," and "Swordsmith" perfectly capture those Asian themes in such evocative images as "That aura caught / by your long brushed hair / is sky whispering" ("Concubine"), where the rhythm echoes the action in the poem with a master stroke of language.

There are poems with an international flavor: "Corcomroe Abbey (Ireland)," "Godot in Sarajevo" (which celebrates their revolution and honors the artistic efforts of Susan Sontag on their behalf), and "Yukon

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River Oracle," where nature is prescient: "...loon calls // take the shape / of whatever hides longing / in your heart." And poems from Maine to Taos to Alaska: "Sailing the inside passage, / watch life eat away at the infinite / until only it remains" ("Water Route"), along with revelation from his backyard, where deer come to feed: "...My breath, // given body, tells me I'm destined / for the greatness of fallen apples / going bad on the lawn..." ("The Final Taste").

Perhaps the short "Mayflies" best showcases Sternlieb's lyrical gifts and imaginative powers:

As an ancient breed
of darkness from the creek
suddenly swirled into long maple light,
they ignore the change
and mate on the wing
filling the sky like revelation
blind to us who seem
no more than soil or wood
or swallows that bolt their pale sealing
of bodies down until this valley
is a sun shower
of sacrifice and desire,
old names we rarely use,
but always answer to.

This wide-ranging collection by a sensitive, observant, and intelligent poet deserves a wide readership.

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The Vampires Saved Civilization: New & Selected Prose, 2000-2010

By Gerald Locklin

Paul Kareem Tayyar, ed.

2010; 185pp; Pa; World Parade Books, 5267 Warner Ave. #191, Huntington Beach, CA 92649. Npl.

Twenty-four short stories, seven essays, and one interview comprise this volume. The range of selection highly favors fiction, not the non-fiction most would consider as prose writing. From a poet with the longevity and reputation of Locklin, we would expect this book to include assessments on other poets or poetry schools, philosophical or idealistic rumination on the art of poetry, craft of writing articles, and perhaps some book reviews, and maybe a memoir or two about significant events in his life as a poet, or even professor. None of this is here.

Instead, we are offered short stories which seem to be thinly veiled accounts of himself as college professor, or emotionless narratives of failed marriages and love. What Locklin says in homage to Charles Bukowski's writing: "The narrative, comedic, and dramatic gifts with which the author was blessed..." (69), we desperately wish those same traits

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were evident in his own fiction. In "The Black Story" classically modernist irony seems to be the goal of the narrator as he questions 1960s white girls on campus sleeping with black men, then he leaves his wife for a black dancer; he laments, "Already my new life as a Bachelor was proving itself to be a hollow, dreary sham. My only literary equivalent was the literal, emotional, Existential Nausea experienced by the protagonist of Sartre's eponymous novel" (91). This level of writing characterizes the style and tone of this entire thirty-one page story, and much of the fiction selected. The story "Hunger" is a monologue reply to a woman the narrator dated and who "never [let] me get a word in edgewise..." (46), so he enacts his revenge by doing the same to her, but the toll is exacted from the reader; the story is less a monologue than an Egologue.

There are, however, some real bright spots: "Fish Story" is hilarious and entertaining in the way good fiction should be, and "The Tequila-Tequila story" has the sort of black humor Joyce or Brecht would have approved. "In Wonderland" is a good read with the reappearing protagonist, Jimmy Abbey, reaching fully human form, instead of the usual stereotypical character he is in other stories.

Of the prose, non-fiction pieces, "Notes on Bukowski and Hemingway" is the most interesting because they reveal the most about Locklin, himself: "[Bukowski] was one of the living writers from whom I most learned how to be the sort of writer I ended up being..." (171). But readers of Bukowski and Locklin already know this from the similarity of voices, tone, and topics in their writings. And most would probably assess the former as the better. The same quoted sentence concludes: "and even more about how to conduct an underground literary career." True, both writers are heralded in the small press and even revered as models, though Bukowski, unlike Locklin, did have a fling with commercial success in publishing, including a subsequent movie from his novel. Many writers have held up Hemingway as their own "literary god" (176) but very few have come close enough to that talent to even deign to share a drink with him. For Locklin, it seems that the idolization of Heminway is more professorial than writerly.

In the interview Locklin says, "I believe that all of our discourses are fictive... even the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in our own minds" (166) [ellipsis is Locklin's]. Such a proposition has gotten several memoirists in trouble for emendating their stories, and has resulted in some professors being censured or fired for similar alterations to their stories and studies. Elsewhere in the interview Locklin says, "a story must have 'the ring' of truth" (155). But there is a vast difference between creating characters and plots that are interesting, if not exciting, which have a life-like veritas, and fiction that reads like the ho-hum average Joe-College-Prof's daily trials and tribulations magnified by an uncritical lens. If the ring fits, wear it. If not, pawn it.