

Book Reviews

A GLOSSARY OF CHICKENS: POEMS.

BY GARY J. WHITEHEAD.

PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013. VIII, 64 PAGES.

“I sometimes feel a bit like a stowaway on a ship, like I’ve sneaked onboard without having paid passage.” This is Gary J. Whitehead on being included in the Princeton Series of Contemporary Poets, which has published books by renowned poets Robert Pinsky and Ann Lauterbach. But Whitehead need not feel like he has “sneaked onboard”; it’s apparent from this collection that he’s earned his passage.

Take, for example, the accomplishment of “Trap Door,” which arose when Whitehead witnessed his mother grieving over the loss of her own mother. It is one of the longer poems in the collection (still only three pages—the poems are all relatively short), and sustains a simple but powerful metaphor throughout the entire poem: the trapdoor of a stage as the door through which we pass from life into death. The sustained metaphor also gives rise to this wonder of a final stanza:

and when the trigger trips
and the floor falls out from under,
with what wonder will I watch
the bright and patterned silk
pour like water with all that soft applause?

The softness of repeated w’s contrasts with the harsher repetition of “f” sounds in the previous line. There’s also a softness in the internal rhyme of “under” and “wonder” and the assonances of “trigger” and “trips,” and “watch” and “applause.” This softness mitigates the grief expressed earlier in the poem, the sadness of the “way the living abscond / into the past,” for example. The gentleness of these sounds, coupled with the mostly regular meter give the stanza a slow-motion feel. So, on the one hand, death here is gentle and not to be feared. On the other hand, we learn in the first stanza that this is a magician’s stage, and so there’s something ominous in the hypnotic quality of the last stanza. And, of course, the most terrifying part

is that, at the end, the stage magician comparison breaks down. Because death, of course, is not a trick, and not reversible.

So, with poems like these, Whitehead is every bit deserving of his place in this series. Unfortunately, he at times gets distracted by less interesting concerns. Specifically, some poems contain a preoccupation with language, a common affliction among poets. It's found at the end of the title poem. Here is the splendid beginning and the deflating ending:

There should be a word for the way
they look with just one eye, neck bent,
for beetle or worm or strewn grain.
“Gleaning,” maybe, between “gizzard”
and “grit.” And for the way they run
toward someone they trust, their skirts
hiked, their plump bodies wobbling:
“bobbling,” let's call it, inserted
after “blowout” and before “bloom.”

...

And one for the sweetness of hens
but not roosters. We think
that by naming we can understand,
as if the tongue were more than muscle. (23)

The poem would be much stronger if it ended at “roosters.” These concerns also appear at the beginning of the one about a “Tied Dog” who's

choked always
at the end of a line,
teeth just out of reach
of whatever's worth snapping at. (35)

Poets, too, who must use the faulty medium of language, are “just out of reach / of whatever's worth snapping at.” While these reflections are not unimportant, they're not of much interest to anyone other than poets or undergrads learning about structuralism for the first time, and if they remained implicit, the poems would be stronger.

But the book is not weighed down by this small shortcoming, and, when Whitehead gets down to other concerns, such as his speakers' relationship to the natural world, he's marvellous. As one would expect from the

title, there are a lot of animals here: chickens, of course, and also oysters, jellyfish, pigeons, dogs, vultures, beetles, butterflies, and fruit flies. Animals in this book serve as a stand-in for nature, and a close examination of the natural, visible world always offers up some sort of human truth, as in “In the Butterfly Conservatory,” in which the speaker observes that they are “[q]uite at home in the brightness / of their own being,” and, he says, “they seemed so unlike the wintered us.” Or in “Death Watches” when he observes of the death watch beetle that we are “somewhat like them.” Interestingly, the leap from the animal to the human world is explicit. For example, in “Luminescent Jellyfish,” he tells us that he “wonder[s] what those subaqueous flarings could teach [him] / that [he] didn’t already know.” It’s as though the speaker is trying to maintain his distance from the animal world even as he looks to it for meaning.

There is a distinct voice to the animal poems, but there are a variety of voices in the collection, including that of a post-flood Noah and that of “The Wimp.” Here, the speaker is the kind of guy who uses the word “wherewithal”—the sort of big word accessible to those with less big vocabularies—twice. He also makes rather bad similes like “there’s the future, like the lost pair of sneakers,” and makes dramatic statements like “I wouldn’t have minded expiring there / under the laden arms of a spruce,” and in the midst of the melodrama, manages to be funny, laughable, and profound all at once. The different voices represent distinct threads that run throughout this book: the animal poems, the biblical poems, and less easy to categorize poems like “The Wimp.” Creating distinct voices like this is an incredible accomplishment, one that’s made all the more so by the coherence of the collection as a whole.

There is genuine poetic engagement in these poems, and there’s evidence of it beyond the allusions to Donne (“three-chambered heart”) and Whitman (“Not just the body, then, electric”). Whitehead presents us with a world that stands up to close examination, a world in which the study of pieces of nature such as “Luminescent Jellyfish,” Whitehead’s take on Whitman’s study of the male body, uncovers the strange and wonderful truth that “the flush of the known universe is in him.”

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SONGS THAT REMIND US OF FACTORIES.

BY DANNY JACOBS.

NIGHTWOOD EDITIONS. 2013. 80 PAGES.\$18.95.

Danny Jacobs' debut poetry collection, *Songs That Remind Us of Factories*, is smart and well crafted. Whether it's a meditation on the mundane chores of yard-keeping and work at a call centre, a portrait of a series of personified household pests, or a strikingly beautiful depiction of a "Pacific Energy Super 27," Jacobs joins poets such as Karen Solie in extracting an aesthetic experience from the colloquial, the overlooked, or the industrial. Yet Jacobs' poems distinguish themselves by the presence of a strong and distinctive poetic voice that demonstrates a command of form and an ear finely tuned to the cadences of language. This is the work of a poet who has mastered the tools of his trade and has begun to experiment with convention in a singular and exciting way.

The most striking aspect of *Songs That Remind Us of Factories* is Jacobs' ability to transform the ordinary into the marvellous and restore delight to the minutiae of the everyday; potatoes become "grubby monks / cosmic eggs for dirt universes" (20), the common housefly a "buzz-drunk zealot" (38), and the next-door neighbours' dog a "mastodon / wrapped in permafrost" whose howl "wakes Wepwawet / Fenrir" (60). Indeed, in poems such as "Weeding" or "Lawn Boy," Jacobs rejects the "esteemed perennials" for "lowbrow / garden thugs" (16) and the "Yard Men, ride-ons, brawny / showstoppers" for "the goofy dude, scrawny / dud, caught with dated paint job" (14). His heroes are the unsung and the underrated, but they achieve a degree of splendour when framed by Jacobs' attentive eye.

I also admire Jacobs' ability to draw from his Maritime rootedness without romanticizing local experience. Indeed, in the poem "Old Boat," the speaker decries the "solipsistic sonnets on lobster traps / and gannets" of "showy poets obdurate in slogging out Maritime doggerel / for self-dashed chapbooks," and demands that his reader "tow me to the brink and sink me for a guiltless / death at sea lest I am blind-sided and caught sepia on some GG / nominee" (51). Yet while the poet rejects the "ode[s]," "stanzas," and "sonnet[s]" that define the "straight-faced romp in cliché" of "chumps that pen one-offs about bottomed-out trawlers," the poem overturns its resistance to clichéd forms with a final internally rhymed couplet, creating a tension between form and content that demonstrates Jacobs' sophisticated poetic self-

consciousness. Similarly, in poems such as “Excavator Dreams,” “Ox,” and “A Fifth Factory,” Jacobs invokes the sonnet to address subjects—factories, farm animals, “bilge and spillage” (22)—that are conventionally considered ill-suited to the elegance of the form. The result is powerful juxtaposition that resolves itself beautifully in the euphony of the rhyming couplet.

But the real joy of these poems is the slack-key music of Jacobs’ language. In poems such as “Weeding” and “Pacific Energy Super 27,” the rhythms and reverbs of speech jounce each line forward over rocky terrains of harsh consonants or smoother pastures of assonant vowels and demand to be read aloud so the tongue can savour the shape of each syllable. Words such as “hydraulic,” “neocortex,” “xerox,” “quark” and “Gore-Tex” become fascinating new instruments in Jacobs’ bizarre one-man band, while familiar onomatopoeias such as “buzz,” “om,” “hiss” and “squawk” integrate themselves seamlessly into Jacobs’ self-described “bionic lexicon” (22). And unsurprisingly, the aural qualities of language inform Jacobs’ overall aesthetic vision. As the poems “Cacophony” and “Betty Goodwin Sound Installation” suggest, Jacobs understands poetry to be “speech / gone wonky, phonetic trill / washed to phoneme / all plosive and frictive” (46), and as a result, the “songs that remind us of factories” are the “creak and whirr / likely heard when a synesthete sees a Kandinsky” (54).

Overall, this is a lively collection of poems that continue to ring in your ears long after the pages have been closed. Euphonic, whimsical and truly delightful, *Songs That Remind Us of Factories* is a testament to Jacobs’ talent and a promise of his future success.

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*SANCTIONED IGNORANCE: THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND
THE TEACHING OF LITERATURES OF CANADA.*

BY PAUL MARTIN.

EDMONTON: UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA PRESS, 2013. XXXII, 312 PAGES.

\$49.95.

In a climate of reduced funding for the arts, diminishing job security and declining enrollments, Paul Martin’s *Sanctioned Ignorance* demands that

teachers of Canadian literatures take up more space on the institutional landscape, and that we be more mindful of how and what spaces we occupy. Borrowing the term “sanctioned ignorance” from Gayatri Spivak’s *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, he suggests that Canadian universities and, in particular, Canadian English departments, too often refuse to acknowledge the structures that reinforce the centrality of an essentially British canon and thus compromise efforts to teach Canadian literature in a representative manner. Martin asks those who teach Canadian literature to consider the history of the profession in order to more proactively shape its future.

Martin conducted a large series of interviews and surveys of syllabi from institutions across the country to evaluate how Canadian literatures have been taught and how they are positioned within English departments. His study tends to favour large-research institutions and some smaller provincial institutions, while often failing to consider mid-sized universities in university-dense regions like southwestern Ontario and Nova Scotia, which could potentially skew his data. That said, his findings are presented in a narrative-based argument, which is supplemented by extensive and fascinating appendices that compile the number of courses taught in Canadian literature and in the department as a whole, the Canadian literature requirements for majors, the types of classes offered, and rank the books that were most frequently selected for Canadian literature courses in both 1997 and 2007.

Martin frames his research with two chapters on the history of the teaching of Canadian literatures and the impact of the university in defining, sanctioning and producing new works of Canadian literature. Perhaps most interesting is his interpretation of crucial differences between the establishment of English departments in Canada and the United States. His theoretical chapter explaining the centrality of the university in the production, consecration and reproduction of Canadian literatures and the entrenchment of the canon is a thorough and thought-provoking Bourdieusian analysis of Canadian literature as a limited field of production.

His findings in his comparative analysis are admonishing, but not astonishing—Canadian literature never represents more than 15% of the courses taught in English departments, and these figures tend to remain relatively unchanged or somewhat diminished over the last decade. As the interest in contemporary writing increases, early Canadian writing is edged out of syllabi. Furthermore, Canadian literature classes outside of Quebec universities rarely contain the works of French-language authors in transla-

tion, and there is only one department in the country that offers a major in comparative Canadian literatures. If Martin has successfully captured the spirit of the discipline, then this zeitgeist does not bode well for the future.

Perhaps Martin's biggest concern is with the bifurcation of Canadian literature based on language. Accepting the inherent 'two solitudes' logic that equates French language writing with French departments as *la littérature québécoise* and English language writing in English departments as Canadian literature—and not English Canadian literature—misrepresents the essential bicultural national character of our writing, and deprives our students of the opportunity to engage with a major body of critical aesthetic work. This argument is not new to most Canadian literature scholars, but its treatment here is starkly supported by empirical data. Where department regulations allow, teaching a work in translation does seem like a viable (though extremely tokenistic) way to address this coverage in survey courses of Canadian literature. What seems more troubling, and less easy to resolve, is Martin's interpretation of the diminishing place allocated to Canadian literature more broadly in English departments. As he makes clear, Canadianists often are stuck working within existing departmental structures that limit the type and style of courses taught in Canadian literatures, and as a result, place greater numbers of work, including entire genres and linguistic writing, under erasure.

There are several gaps in Martin's research that create an incomplete picture of how and why Canadian literatures are taught at universities across Canada. First, he does not directly address the place of Canadian Studies programs in the teaching of Canadian literatures, despite the fact that these programs teach the nation's relationship to literature in interdisciplinary and cross-cultural contexts, and perhaps create more opportunities for innovative pedagogy. Second, Martin's research does not attend to the dearth of graduate studies in Canadian literatures, and the role that such studies play in bolstering and re-framing Canadian literatures. Innovations in research can and do play important roles in the classroom, particularly when graduate students are offered introductory and survey courses as a complement to their work. Finally, and perhaps this dates his research somewhat because his most recent study takes place in 2007, the year before the economic downturn, his research fails to fully address the role contingency plays in limiting the potential for Canadian teachers to gain a stronger hold within English departments. The precariousness of adjunct and limited term positions makes it

impossible to reform or overhaul curriculum, and often further restricts and alienates Canadianist instructors within departments. It limits innovation and research, and reproduces the worst parts of the institution's increasingly corporate model. This ignorance is part and parcel of the university's structure—but is out of the hands of the individual teachers.

Ultimately, Martin's argument is admirable and important. His work encourages pedagogical self-reflection that is a necessary part of our roles as instructors within the fields of Canadian literature, and outside of it. In *Sanctioned Ignorance's* most hopeful moments, Martin asks us to think about how sharing knowledge and research into teaching practice across institutions can help undercut the isolation and cultural hegemony that often marks the Canadianist's experiences in British and American-centred or exclusively French-centred literature departments. I applaud and second his call to work together as a community of scholars and teachers to overcome the isolation and erasure of Canadian literatures within the university.

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