Clarion Review

Poetry

Africa
Brent Cassan
CreateSpace
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Four Stars (out of Five)

For readers who have not experienced Africa outside of the occasional National Geographic television special, Brent Cassan's book of poetry will be educational. The poems, which are based on Cassan's years of travel on the continent, provide a wide range of situations, landscapes, and portraits. Divided into two sections, "South of North" and "North of South," in reference to poems set below and above the equator, respectively, the book's organization allows the reader to detect sometimes subtle (and not so subtle) differences between one country or culture and another. A good balance of subjects can be found, as well: there are poems here about refugees, civil war, and the human element; wild animals and the majesty of nature; and the author's own personal reflections.

Africa is Cassan's eighth book of poetry, and there are several standout poems in it. In "Pyramid," for example, he stacks sixteen words into a triangular construction, combining evocative poetry with inventive design to describe the African setting: "To / indulge / in a solid fix / of rock, thick browns / towering over me—nightlong, / it pleases." In "Brute Force," Cassan needs a mere fourteen words to elicit a vivid image of nature's power: "Wasting / little time, / a sun-sprung and rain-blistered / root and vine, / cracking / wall."

The author's short poems are the book's biggest strength. Though the free verse format used throughout the book would seem to lend itself to such a vast, expansive subject as Africa, some of the longer poems read more like prose than poetry. The book does include a few prose poems, which work well, but too often the line arrangements of the free verse poems seem arbitrary. This, however, is not poetry that requires technical precision to offer a rewarding read. And despite a plethora of African place-names, the poems are not impenetrable, either—the voice of the common traveler is present throughout, weaved among foreign-tongued Sayyids and modern-day Memsahibs, gazing with wonder across the Kalahari Desert and Zambesi River

alike.

Anyone interested in Africa (the continent) should enjoy *Africa* (the book). Brent Cassan's poetry admirably captures a wide swath of the deserts, savannahs, and jungles of the second-largest continent, as well as the many creatures who make their homes there.

Peter Dabbene