

Afternoon Tomatoes: Accessible Poetry

T.J. Richards

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T. J. Richards's *Afternoon Tomatoes* is a nostalgic, enjoyable, and earthy poetry collection. Organized alphabetically, poems shed a light on one man's life, encompassing both joys and sorrows in a manner that is inviting.

The book opens with a quote from Alexander Hamilton that is key to the reading experience: the book will exhibit things as they are rather than as they ought to be. This is a life log told in verse, a journal that documents experiences and feelings just as they happened.

Alphabetical organization eschews chronological or thematic groupings. Poems skip from a couple's romantic afternoon to a trip to Alaska, then back to a cold day in the Adirondacks. This order, although appealing in its whimsy, is undermined when the first few poems prove to be the weakest in the compilation, due to their overabundance of adverbs and other redundant qualities, as with "she shyly smiled agreeably at me."

These poems are easy to understand; they do not hide their meanings behind complex structures or winding lexicons. They are open and straightforward, and as the collection progresses, they work into a kaleidoscope of rhymes, tempos, and rhythms.

The book swings between longer and shorter poems in a manner that is charming and cheerful. Themes vary, and include love, death, and family. Emotions are unfiltered, and thoughts are processed on the page.

Particularly striking is "The Visit," about time spent with a man suffering from dementia in a hospital. The visitor tries to comfort the patient's wife, and images of their shared grief are deeply moving in their compassion and sorrow:

*It's hard to chat with
friends asleep
or staring
straight ahead.*

Short words and simple language bring focus to the naked emotion of the situation.

In other poems, word choices are heavier, forcing too much emphasis in stanzas that are already filled with suggestion, and diminishing the poems' sense of fun, as with the title poem, which overdoes its innuendo.

"Sestina 101" and "Words" also stand out within the collection for the way that they use their poetry as both an art form and a vehicle of expression. They are precise and thoughtful, with provocative turns:

*Inked beneath my pen is
memory fixed,*

*but never fading like
sitting portraits of
bearded men—
Daguerreotypes
from centuries past.*

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CAROLINA CIUCCI (March 26, 2018)

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