

Bare Witness: Collected Works**Joseph Small**

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A paean to beauty, honor, and truth, Bare Witness is an expansive poetry collection that delights in experimentation.

A fifty-year career retrospective, Joseph Small's *Bare Witness* gathers beautiful images that attest to a lifelong desire to honor ultimate truths.

Divided into nine sections between which there is topical crossover and that adhere to no clear chronology, these passionate poems speak out against social and political ills, including racism, war, injustice, false leadership, and climate change inaction; their reflections on such subjects are potent and sobering. And the book's forceful messages exist in wrenching juxtaposition to its crystalline observations of the natural world, with images of rustling tree leaves, starlit skies, and birds in flight recurring throughout.

Also acute is the consistent sense that the poems' narrators aspire to greatness that they themselves feel too humble to attain, so that—while the speakers are adamant in declaring what they do not stand for—many poems take on an air of uncertainty, both poignant and discombobulating: “There is a poem at the bottom of my heart / I cannot express // Maybe something to do with age being a slippery slope ... Maybe it's some indecipherable Sanskrit writings.”

This uncertainty extends to the poems' formats, which are experimental and shifting. Some are center aligned, and some are left aligned; some progress in a stream-of-conscious style, and others take the form of lyrics. Some line breaks are natural, and others feel jagged. End punctuation is sometimes forgone and sometimes pronounced. The intentions behind these decisions are not always clear, though they result in variety and a sense of gestational stylistic distinction.

The strongest entries in the book zoom into single subjects, treating them with precision and care. In the powerful poem *Hatred*, one stanza notes that

*Hatred:
strolls down the
street unmolested,
conspires sitting
casually in over-
stuffed armchairs. Lives
in a gigantic antique
museum piece that
reminds us of our
greatness.*

Likewise, the poems gathered into the “Fanciful” section soar because of their willingness to forego self-consciousness and instead play with language and ideas. The first entry of the section, “August 14,” is a narrative piece in which the speaker is “Slapped in the face with [their] unexpected sainthood,” but who may escape recognition

because “the detective on my case, unfortunately, was a skeptic.” Such wry lines lead to delightful turns—as do entries that eschew formality and grammar to winking effect, as with the jaunty entry “Moral of the Piggy”:

*He don't care
All day long
Snort snort snort
That piggy piggy piggy*

Inventive metaphors and similes abound throughout these collected works (one narrator declares themselves “ephemeral as a grace-filled thought”), though not all withstand scrutiny or readily reveal their deeper truths (the same poet, for example, is “filtered through your purity / like an exclusive water of joy”). Scattered punctuation and agreement issues also undermine the book’s delivery.

Still, the abundance of lovely, memorable images makes the book’s extended trip through the poet’s files worth taking. The entries croon of moons “set in deep twilight blue,” of “naïve romance beneath an apple tree,” and of “lives leaning toward / Transcendence,” enchanting and intoxicating their audience. Though the latter yearning seems unending, the collection also begs “don’t rock and rip my perfect world”—an empathetic entreaty worth hearing.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (September 29, 2023)

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