

**Connections: Cosmic and Otherwise, Volume II: Tell Me a Story****Ian Stott****Ian Smissen, Photographer**

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*Friendly and wise, the poems collected in Connections muse through heady contemporary topics.*

Pairing text with photographs, Ian Stott's poetry collection *Connections* distills wisdom from lived experiences.

Written in a friendly, nonjudgmental tone, these hundred-plus poems make direct addresses to their audience on recurring themes, including the value of taking responsibility for one's part in a relationship, not seeking to control others, maintaining optimism, and ideas for making life more manageable. Metaphors and similes abound, sometimes providing structure, as in "Fish on a Line," which is about the sense of a life being managed by a "calm and content" entity who is holding control. In other poems, awkward metaphors and similes pile up to distracting effect, as in "No Regrets," where the past is cast in concrete, goals are set "for when the bell tolls," a bumpy ride ensues, and a "patrol" and a curtain call are added on.

Contemporary subjects are also addressed, as with the question of whether violence is innate to humans: "Is it a fundamental of survival, / Biologically driven, to slay our rival?" The subject of interpersonal relationships is also considered: the best people can do in their relationships, according to one entry, is to "show loving concern" for others. Often, such advice is diluted by the nearby appearance of more pedestrian exhortations, such as, "Just do your best." Indeed, superfluous phrases often obscure the poems' topics, taking up line space without need—or, sometimes, shoehorning in the rhymes that the book preferences.

Most entries fit on a single page. There's tension between their uniformity and variety in terms of structure: a variety of stanza forms are used, and the lines are of varying length. At the same time, all of the lines are end-stopped, and lines appear in rhyming pairs. This leads to predictability, though also a few successes. "The Witches' Party," for instance, is a rollicking piece that uses magic and humor to describe a supernatural frolic. More often, though, the entries' rhymes and meters are undercut by forced-sounding language or are derailed by ill-fitting reversals of the usual orders of words (instead of "unclear answers," for example, there are "answers unclear"). This causes particular issues in poems of a more serious nature (which most of the entries are), where the reversals are repetitive and fussy.

The advice-filled poems collected in *Connections* have the flavor of a self-help text, moving through heady contemporary issues in an upbeat way.

MICHELE SHARPE (March 12, 2024)

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