

Keeping the Swarm: New & Selected Essays

George Venn

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Poet, essayist, literary historian, and educator, George Venn is a recognized figure in Western US literature. His works have won numerous awards, and his third book, *Marking the Magic Circle*, published in 1988, was honored by the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission as “one of the 100 best Oregon books in two centuries.”

In his latest collection of essays, *Keeping the Swarm*, Venn again reflects his strong ties to and affection for the Pacific Northwest. Born in 1943, Venn here captures the region’s frontier sensibilities and the innocence of a boyhood growing up in rural Washington and Idaho. He and his brother were initially raised by their grandparents, Hazel and George Mayo, on a farm and apiary, and the two boys later lived with their mother and stepfather, a Presbyterian minister, while still spending summers with their grandparents.

Intensely personal and intimate, these essays reflect a thoughtful nostalgia and gentle sensibility for these early experiences. In the first essay, Venn describes the small workbench his grandfather built for the two boys: “Carved out of poverty and necessity and love and accident and craft and imagination, the old beekeeper had given the two brothers a once-in-a lifetime gift.” Elsewhere Venn describes the wonders of playing in their first big snowfall, watching his grandfather keep the bees, and observing the reactions of the native people, the Upper Skagit, while his stepfather played his accordion and led them in singing traditional Protestant hymns. Although most of these essays are set in the Northwest, a few recall Venn’s sojourns in Spain and China.

Keeping the Swarm offers numerous touches of powerful writing, including several of Venn’s poems, which are integrated into the stories he tells. Occasionally, though, his detailed descriptions of these domestic scenes become mundane, such as when he recalls the building of “Mr. Frosty with carrot slice eyes, a carrot nose, a brown grocery sack hat, sticks for arms, mittens for hands” and the gradual change as the snowmen “freeze and sag and melt and distort and disappear.” Nothing distinguishes this passage from the experience of any other child who has grown up in the North.

Still, with his candid and personal perspective, Venn offers many memorable moments. In the closing lines of the final essay, Venn writes, “Behind me, I felt the barn settle, articulate with weight. We had filled it again. Everything seemed to hold together now by what we didn’t say.” In the silence of his grandfather’s barn, Venn finds something profound.

KRISTEN RABE (Winter 2013)

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