

Slack Action

Jeffery Donaldson

The Porcupine's Quill (September 2013)

Softcover \$16.95 (96pp)

978-0-88984-367-7

Donaldson's words flow like they could only ever belong together, thoughtful and witty, entertaining and moving.

Poetry is often characterized as thoughtful or humorous or entertaining, but it's much less common for it to be marked by all of these descriptions at once. Jeffery Donaldson's collection *Slack Action* manages all of these—and more.

The title, *Slack Action*, refers to the railroading term for the degree of play between the couplings of moving cars. It's an appropriate title and gives the sense of Donaldson as a master engineer, keeping everything connected tightly enough to make a cohesive whole, but loosely enough to allow a sense of playfulness in his poems.

Slack Action is Donaldson's fifth collection of poetry. One of his previous volumes, *Palilalia*, was a finalist for the Canadian Authors Association Award for Poetry. His expertise is always evident, but it is perhaps most notable when his sense of humor combines with imaginative metaphors and a near-perfect ability to summon words that are uncommon yet familiar, that roll delicately in the mouth and arrive gracefully at the ears. From "Marbles":

*"I was the king of a dominion's bright subjects:
globed iridescences in glass, buffed lustres,
and stirrings inside crystal shape in shape,

ribbon and shawl, nebulae and nimbus,
silk scarves and swirls of DNA flung skyward
in their gelled ethers, clear-eyed experiments..."*

The book is divided into three sections: "Slack Action," "Toy Poems," and "House of Cards." Each section contains poems related to its title, most directly "Toy Poems," which offers selections like "Jack-in-the-Box," "Yo-yo," "Rocking Horse," and "Ball," among others. In Donaldson's hands, every poem does seem to be his toy, manipulated for his own entertainment, and there is a palpable sense of the poet's enjoyment of the process of writing poetry throughout the book.

Even when Donaldson's poems seem, at first glance, to be nearly random collections of syllables within a given structure, such as the fourteen lines of "A Touretter's Twelve-Tone Sonnet," there is a method to the madness, and the words flow like they could only ever belong together:

*"The glib angle's soffit gables true.
Chaff saddleback, the aster's alms.
The woodlot's whistle and jib."*

Slack Action's sole flaw is a minor one: the table of contents is slightly off, with each poem's page number off target by two pages. It's a small but noticeable error, and one that should have been caught before publication. However, once readers find themselves in the grasp of Donaldson's intoxicating poetry, it's likely they'll steam through the book,

unhindered by page numbering or anything else.

PETER DABBENE (February 20, 2014)

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