



The Detective Girl

Bill Tibbitts

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One of the greatest criticisms of poetry is that it's inaccessible and hard to understand. Bill Tibbitts' collection, *The Detective Girl*, is the cure-all antidote for metrophobic folks. This collection is one part poetry, one part young adult novel, and one part comic book. The action is constant, and protagonist June and her nemesis, the Heiress, are memorable. Who knew poetry could be both insightful and laugh-out-loud funny? This is poetry for both new readers and connoisseurs.

The book's structure is creative. This collection of ninety-seven sonnets tells the story of June Pao and the Heiress—the villain of these poems—as they train at this school for young women. The sections are fast-paced and, like comic book panels, they propel the reader forward. The poems operate both individually and as a whole.

The Detective Girl Academy is a school run by “an order / of nuns with concerns about crime and equal / character development of girls.” Here, the girls are taught “the fine arts of urban espionage,” like wire tapping and martial arts. Tibbitts' poems are successful because they are as much about girl power and independence as they are about this humorous school and its students. The world portrayed in these poems is one where it's common to find “fighting females in every action film” and where former heroes like Dick Tracy and Sherlock Holmes are replaced with the grace of females.

Some of the rhymes here are a bit forced, which means that some lines are stronger than others. Tibbitts addresses this in the second poem of the collection, writing that, “Detective Girl works best in meter.” However, this self-awareness only goes so far. The signature music of the sonnet is off-tune because some rhymes are too loud and stretched. This also means that the poet restates the obvious just to make the rhyme scheme work. For example, he writes: “I am writing these poems because in a / world of specialists with one advantage / June Pao stands out as a total package.” Like a redundant caption beneath an obvious photograph, such lines add little to the collection.

The book is as much a modern fairy tale as it is a collection of poems. Though the Heiress may taunt and bully June out of jealousy, June sees the good in her and does not respond. Her sweet disposition, kindness, and hard work are an inspiration. The reader will come away with an understanding of the book's message: “If you have jokes to tell then tell them now / and always be strong and kind, like June Pao.” Girl power was never so quick-witted, tongue-in-cheek, or effective. Readers of all ages will close the book wishing he or she had a chance to join the Detective Girl Academy.

LISA BOWER (May 18, 2010)

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