

## The Essential John Reibetanz

**John Reibetanz**

**Jeffery Donaldson, Editor**

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*Angled approaches, revealing inner character one carefully chosen word at a time, are a Reibetanz specialty.*

In the Porcupine Quill's wonderful collection *The Essential John Reibetanz*, exquisite poems focus on subjects both commonplace and unique.

John Reibetanz, an English professor at the University of Toronto, has published ten volumes of poetry; several of his poems have been featured in prestigious publications like *Poetry* and *The Paris Review*. A trim thirty are included here, and they comprise an impressive sampler and retrospective of Reibetanz's poetic career.

Dynamic from the start, the first poem, "Lewis Bolt, Farmer," portrays a man who's proud of the work he's achieved, though it hints at his nagging dissatisfaction and wanderlust. These angled approaches, revealing inner character one carefully chosen word at a time, are a Reibetanz specialty. The poem reads seamlessly, with rhymes and near-rhymes that amuse and delight along the way:

*Old binder strong wound around nails rusted  
Brittle; incredible the space wasted  
By that and the other rubbish I cleared.*

Reibetanz shows ambition in longer poems like "A Chest of Angels" and "Fresco Magic," but most enjoyable are the works in which he takes a seemingly minor observed subject or detail and builds a world (and a poem) around it. In "The Hammer," passing a homeless man prompts thoughts about the man's mother; in "Lincoln Logs," a child's toy provides a powerful symbol of a boy's ability to survive; "She Goes Like" studies a Hungarian girl who works to assimilate into North American culture, yet feels a connection to her roots through her parents. Reibetanz even waxes poetic about the creators of the Curious George children's books, a subject that might first seem whimsical, in "Curious George Takes Flight, 12 June 1940." This poem reveals that the character's red balloon is "really his heart," and Nazi Germany's "yellow star of reproach" (creators H. A. and Margret Rey were Jewish) is transformed "into wearable sun / the yellow hat of rescue."

Whether they are drawn from his own personal history, someone else's, or are imagined entirely, key visual and emotional elements make every poem relatable in some way. Reibetanz remembers that wordplay and technique are elements, but not the *only* elements, of a good poem. Even shorter, simpler poems like "Christmas Pageant" and "June Light" bear his well-practiced slant rhymes, with a stanza from the latter reading "freight accumulates, / letting the vessel / slip its moorings, gain." Yet the two poems never lose their focus on the strong imagery of snow on branches and the sun on the ocean, respectively.

Reibetanz's pure poetic dexterity is electrifying, and spans such a wide range of human experience that *The Essential John Reibetanz* will satisfy any poetry lover, and perhaps even draw a few newcomers to the medium.

PETER DABBENE (August 17, 2018)

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