ForeWord Reviews

POETRY

The Essential Robert Gibbs: Selected by Brian Bartlett
Robert Gibbs
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In the modern world of cell phones, texting, and Twitter, “Getting in touch with nature” has become a cliche, something that sounds like the latest status update from one of several hundred Facebook friends. *The Essential Robert Gibbs*, the latest collection in The Porcupine’s Quill *Essentials* series focusing on Canadian poets, helps to restore an emphasis on the natural world by seizing on the little details we often miss day to day.

Influenced by the landscapes that surrounded him during his long teaching career at the University of New Brunswick, Gibbs wrote many wonderful poems, the best of which have been collected here. *The Essential Robert Gibbs* offers works from the beginning of Gibbs’s writing career, through the productive 1970s, and on to its latter stages, with the final poems collected here dating to 2003.

Gibbs’s poetic innovations can be subtle but effective, such as the substitution of spacing for punctuation, as in this fragment “From Verse Journal,” in which the narrator rises early and reflects on his lover’s sleeping form: “That grace that sleep / so well opposed to my waking / I withdraw from / stealthily and whisper / Wait wait a little / till I break this perfect egg”

Other times, Gibbs puns and plays delightfully with his words, like a child creating novel combinations of food on a dinner plate. In the excerpt “From A Dog in a Dream,” Gibbs describes a poet dying on a river: “Words no longer words / divided him asunder / and left him to stink / like a split fish on a drying rack / a kipper / an unread herring”

Gibbs is known as a Maritime poet—that is, a poet from one of the three Canadian Atlantic coast provinces, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Gibbs’s own New Brunswick. Sometimes the “maritime” influence is clear, but the bulk of Gibbs’s poetry is viewed through the lens of the land, even when the main focus of a poem is less tangible. Interactions with other people, musings on various themes—all are filtered through this physical world mindset, as when Gibbs describes eating blueberries and ruminates on cranberry juice on his way to bigger and weightier subjects. The reader’s response to the ongoing descriptions of wild mushrooms, birdcalls, and flowers will likely be the factor that makes *The Essential Robert Gibbs* merely a

pleasant read, or … well, essential.

Despite his nimble wordplay, Gibbs's poetry does not aim to dazzle; it does not generally shout for attention but rather waits for the reader to adjust to its own pace and rhythm. It is a polite but potent sort of poetry—perhaps what an American reader might expect from a Canadian poet. For a patient reader of well-crafted poetry, *The Essential Robert Gibbs* opens up a rich world, right before our eyes and well worth exploring.

Peter Dabbene