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The Graywolf Silver Anthology

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This work is a celebration of twenty-five distinguished years of publishing, intended as a “sampling” of Graywolf authors over the decades. Where one might expect the fashionable ennui and overwrought self-absorption beloved of the literary criticism establishment, one discovers short stories, poems and essays that seem to share readability, accessibility and durability. Though the anthology contains its share of the lamentable political correctness that corrodes much American writing late in the twentieth century, many of the better pieces included—especially the poems—are luminous and memorable. Refreshingly, most of the authors represented are not looking for blame, nor falling into the trap of “academic” revisionism.

In “Burning Down the House,” Charles Baxter aims his barbs directly at the malignant social influence of dishonest politicos and liars like Richard Nixon, revealing how the late President (and those like him) created a climate “In which social narratives are designed to be deliberately incoherent and misleading. Such narratives,” he continues, “humiliate the act of storytelling.” Baxter’s dissection of the culture of “victims and victimization” and of literary characters who are never able to act without blaming others is well thought out and engagingly presented.

While Baxter’s work deals with the outward spread of bad social narratives, Dana Giola’s essay “Can Poetry Matter?” deals with the opposite extreme: the implosion of good academic writings. This is a timely expose of the growing subculture of inward-focused academic poetry and literature, where all the specialized professors and their graduate students know each other to the point that—as Griola puts it— “poetry’s institutional success … (has) unwittingly contributed to its disappearance from public view.” Fortunately, one can find evidence to the contrary in the anthology itself; among them “Willingly” by Tess Gallagher. Printed from her book Amplitude, it springs alive from the pages. A man, painting a house, perhaps a lover, has transformed a moment forever: “His careful strokes whiten the web/the swirl of woodgrain blotted/ out like a breath stopped/at the heart.”

One cannot forget to mention as well the powerful short story “Sheepskin” by Croatian-born Josip Novakovich, with its echoes of ethnic cleansing and religious intolerance. Or the selection from “Sweet and Sour Milk” by Somali-born Nuruddin Farah. These compelling voices are a welcome surprise. Despite their dark tone of loss and lunacy, they are reaffirmations of humor and life amid horror and waste.

Most of these works in this very welcome book are emphatically not centered in the stuffy world of self-satisfied literary professionals, which makes this anthology appealing not only to literary types, but to the reading public in general.

KENNETH WYLIE (May / June 1999)

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