ForeWord Reviews

The Poetry of Life and The Life of Poetry
David Mason
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"Why is most contemporary poetry so dull? It is a measure of the author's generosity that when this challenge is issued—midway into a collection of essays and reviews of modern poetry—it seems less like a firebomb lobbed at the ivory towers of rival poet-professors? schools of "difficult" poets, and more like a general reader's bemused aside, one banished from academic communities for not speaking their coded argot of literary criticism. True, Mason does not suffer lazy poets gladly, but he stubbornly holds to a self-evident truth: poetry must ultimately be made of words that matter, that are memorable. In Wallace Stevens's phrase, "it must give pleasure."

The essays themselves, from Dublin's exile race of poets (Seamus Heaney only the latest Nobel winner) to America's under-appreciated West Coast poets such as John Haines and Thomas McGrath, flow into the other, gracefully succinct. Mason takes a decidedly Western view of our traditions, at his forebears? carrying their poetic culture (often in memory, their Tennyson and Longfellow) over the Rockies, while noting how the modern age's appetite for novelty is quick to compress and market a more sensational version of the last century, a strange Yankee pan-sexual hybrid named "Whitman Dickinson." In The Iliad he fears its muffled echo of war to mean that "strife is in our natures." He finds "good political poetry " is good poetry that includes politics.? His opinions feel spacious, not confined to the dogma of balkanized English Departments whom he sees as the tenured preaching to the publish-or-perish untenured.

Himself an award-winning poet and English professor at The Colorado College and frequent contributor to literary journals, he realizes that criticism itself is creative, a formal structure, logical yet personal, and that what is not personal ultimately has no meaning. Mason offers valuable counsel in the continued poetry wars. There are only a handful of poet-professors whose essays achieve both the tenacity of scholarship and the tact of a true amateur, a lover of words. This is one.

Leeta Taylor