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Foreword Review POETRY

The Waiting Room Reader: Stories to Keep You Company

Joan Cusack Handler, Editor
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Waiting rooms everywhere tend to have certain things in common: insipid music, unimaginative decorating, and a dearth of quality reading material to occupy the bored, anxious, or ill people who pass their time in such places. It's not a bad idea to provide patients and others who are marooned in florescent-lit rooms with something meaningful to read, so why not escape those mauve-papered walls by way of a poem? With the support of The Arnold P. Gold Foundation for Humanism in Medicine, the editors of CavanKerry Press have assembled a thin anthology of poetry about everyday experiences, family, food, love, and the earth.

The book's selections are organized thematically and are tailored for a general audience rather than regular poetry readers; the folks who pick it up should not have the expectations of more seasoned literature lovers. But overall this is a pleasant enough sampling of earnest and heart-felt poetry grounded in the quotidian, uttered in love or after loss, or written out of the pleasures of being a parent or sister. The fact that the contributors are not well known nor especially innovative in terms of form or content does not diminish the book's worthiness once it finds the hands of those weary of yet another copy of *People* magazine.

Among the stronger contributors is the late Jack Wiler, a poet who endured a long illness before his recent death, and therefore may resonate with readers in a particularly visceral way. His poems carry the energy of someone who knows their time is limited, and speak to the notion that living well during what remains of a life is precious: "We go over and over the same ground. / I worry about the plants, / the warmer than usual spring, / the frost and the fall and the winter / and we start again. / We go for walks on the first nice day. / You say, how lovely. / My heart is racing."

The best poems in this collection report on something essential and often ephemeral, and are spoken out of the soulfulness that resides even in the most ordinary human lives. They bring attention to the smallest details—the particular way hands wrap a corned beef sandwich, or how aging brings an acuteness of attention, as when Mark Nepo writes: "I eat and undie/ and water my doubts/with silence/ and birds come."

HOLLY WREN SPAULDING (March 8, 2011)

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