

*On Becoming a Poet*, ed. Susan Terris (Marsh Hawk Press)

Although this book is subtitled 'Essential Information About the Writing Craft', it's actually more a collection of 25 autobiographical musings from a collection of American poets. That's actually quite a relief: I wasn't looking forward to a how-to-write manual, nor anything that suggested poets were born or relied on muses and inspiration for their work.

What we do have is a mostly enjoyable anthology of people looking back at what informed and encouraged them to start and keep writing. Sheila E. Murphy focuses on the music of language, linking it to the ever-present music in her childhood home. Geoffrey O'Brien wittily deconstructs a nursery rhyme, Philip F. Clark discusses how to 'sustain wonder', Burt Kimmelman links it all back to Black Mountain poetics, and Lynne Thompson writes about how her 'journey to becoming a writer was inspired by my father', a nice contrast to Denise Low's discussion of 'The Womanly Lineage of Writerly Mentors', which celebrates her feminist teacher Mrs. Sullivan.

David Lehman is a little bit more schoolmasterly, with some sections of his work instructing the reader what to do, but it's mostly sensible if slightly obvious stuff, such as 'Write any time, any place. Take a little notebook with you. Jot down possible titles, overheard phrases, unexpected similes.' More useful is his recognition that poetry is no different to and is informed by other genres:

Write prose. All the writing you do helps all the other writing you do. Learn the prose virtues of economy, directness, and clarity. Good journalism or nonfiction writing or speech writing or technical writing can help your poetry. Writing to an editor's specifications, on deadline, with a tight word-count, is a sort of discipline not unlike writing poems [...]

He's also astute enough to point out that 'poetry is not the whole of one's life, it is a part of it'.

Personally, my two favourite parts of the book are both interviews. Arthur Sze discusses 'Revealing and Revelling in Complexity' and declares that he loves 'the intensity and power of language, and imagination that all come together in poetry.' He also discusses clarity and the use of specialist language, multiculturalism, science and poetry, and writing with 'openness and risk'. Jane Hirshfield has to answer some dodgy lines of questioning about inspiration, influences and – worst of all – 'poetic voice', but mostly keeps coming back to what she calls 'deepened language' and wanting her 'poems to be stranger'. I'm less convinced by her aspiration to use poetry to make 'a more full human person', although I note her hesitant 'perhaps' earlier in the sentence.

This feels like a rather old-fashioned anthology, from the rather clunky cover design and disingenuous blurb and Introduction, to the insistence on traditional publishing and the volume's overall confessional, or autobiographical, approach to things. There is little mention of performance, visual poetics, digital publishing or experimental processes and poetics. Mostly it is as though the late 20th Century has not happened to the poets here, although I know for a fact it has! It would be good to see another volume that focussed on younger writers, what they make with language, and why they do so.

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