

The Wonder Code: Discover the Way of Haiku and See the World with New Eyes, by Scott Mason (Chappaqua, N.Y.: Girasole Press, 2017). 370 pages; 18.5 cm; 5¼" x 7¼". Hardbound; semigloss white board covers; Smythe-sewn. ISBN 978-0-692930-35-9. Price: \$24.95 from www.thewondercode.com

Reviewed by Charles Trumbull

In mid-August Scott Mason contacted me to say the he was planning to ship about 200 copies of his new book, *The Wonder Code*, to Haiku North America for sale at the book fair. As gently as I could, I told him that I thought this was quite a lot of books and that I was advising people to bring not more than 20–30 copies. Mason finally sent about 100 copies, and to my bemusement, he sold almost all of them. What we have here is an instant haiku bestseller!

As well it should be. This is a fine book, very well written by a leading haiku practitioner and editor, and beautifully produced in a hardbound edition by Mason's own Girasole Press.

In fact, *The Wonder Code* is not one volume but three. Its core comprises five short essays about the basic principles of haiku plus an introduction and a detailed acknowledgments section. Each of the five chapters is then supplemented by a "gallery" of haiku selected from eighteen years of *The Heron's Nest*, the hybrid online/print journal where Mason has been an associate editor since 2010. This is followed by a "Solo Exhibition," a selection of Mason's own published haiku. Each of these volumes could successfully stand alone as a publication. I'm not sure, however, that they comfortably fit together between a single set of covers.

I was expecting another "haiku how-to," but *The Wonder Code* is not that. Rather it is an appreciation of haiku. Perhaps Mason most succinctly describes what he hopes from and for his readers at the very end of the fifth essay: "Come see and experience that world with haiku eyes. Behold marvels small as well as large. Partake in a feast for all the senses. Come scale the peaks and plumb the depth of our truest feeling. Meet and even befriend the unexpected. And connect with the ultimate essence of which we are part.... Life awaits ... may its wonder be with you."

The five central chapters focus on various aspects of haiku presented as paths—a code, if you will—to unlocking the abilities of haiku to create wonder. These principles of haiku are rudimentary to the genre and will be quite familiar to most haiku poets. Still, Mason has much to add. He is a fine writer who has thought these matters through carefully and presents his theses on composing and enjoying haiku in a novel and engaging way. His style is lucid and engaging, light yet serious and informative. His usual procedure is to leverage an incident in daily life to introduce a discussion of one aspect of haiku. This technique reminds me of the popular science books by writers such as Oliver Sacks. Mason’s first chapter, for example, is titled “Think Small.” The author points out an essential difference between Eastern and Western philosophies, that in the East people are trained to focus on and cohabit with the small things in Nature, while the Western approach seeks to transcend or dominate Nature. Haiku, Mason, says provides a way we Westerners can reclaim our relationship with the natural world.

“Come to Your Senses” focuses on what we call the haiku moment and urges us to make use of all our senses to call up impressions and attune us to the wonders of the physical world. “Feel the Moment” deconstructs the haiku moment and brings in aspects of that instant such as seasonality and the various colorations of Japanese aesthetics such as *wabi sabi*, *yūgen*, *mono no aware*, and *karumi*, all familiar to the serious student of haiku.

“Prepare for Surprise” is about “the aha! moment” in haiku—the surprise—which Mason characterizes as the operative quality of many fine haiku. As he does throughout *The Wonder Code*, Mason cites contemporary scholarship to bridge the study of haiku with psychology and literary theory. In this case, for example, he refers to “self-described professional ‘surprisologists’” Tania Luna and LeeAnn Renninger, whose main research motivation is “to raise awareness about and promote what they call ‘the positive consequences of surprise: delight, excitement, adventure, curiosity, wonder, and serendipity.’”

The final chapter, “Only Connect,” makes the point that everything in Nature—human beings included—is interconnected. Haiku is fine way to overcome the modern, Western-originated tendency toward experi-

encing things as independent rather than interconnected entities, social fragmentation, and isolation of the individual. Mason makes the interesting observation that “while the Internet has all the potential to foster a sense of global community, it can just as often serve as a portal to escapism, tribalism, or isolation from our immediate surroundings.” Haiku, of course, provides a remedy.

What I see as the second volume of *The Wonder Code* consists of galleries of haiku selected from *The Heron’s Nest* that track to each of Mason’s five essays. With forty to ninety-six haiku in each gallery, together these galleries represent a very substantial anthology of high quality haiku that could well be published separately. But then we already have such a book, *Nest Feathers: Selected Haiku from the First 15 Years of The Heron’s Nest* (2015), edited by John Stevenson. The selections are different of course, but the number of poems in the two books is comparable (270 in *Nest Feathers*, about 350 here) with an overlap of 57 haiku. Moreover, all issues of *The Heron’s Nest* are readily accessible to all on the website.

So I have to wonder what the five galleries of haiku add to *The Wonder Code*. Within his essays Mason already includes adequate illustrative examples. What are we to make of haiku such as these two presented one after the other in the “Think Small” gallery but seeming to make the same point:

first warm day
the pulse of the honeybee’s
abdomen

Yvonne Cabalona

creek rising —
a tree frog’s heart beats
against the window

Anna Tambour

or again, these moments of reflection on aging found on the same page in “Feel the Moment”:

never younger
than now
I zest a lemon

Marilyn Appl Walker

a purple tree
when did I stop
being young?

Katherine Cudney

These are indubitably wonderful haiku (there are no bad haiku in *The Heron's Nest* or *The Wonder Code*) but do we need multiple examples? It's almost as though Mason is assuring us that *The Heron's Nest* follows his haiku wonder code in its selection procedures, or he wants to drive home the veracity of his analysis by lavishing us with myriad examples.

Inclusion of the "Solo Exhibition" section in *The Wonder Code* is the biggest mystery, however. Comprising 103 haiku, all but 6 of which originally appeared in places other than *The Heron's Nest*, it could have been a chapbook or small book of Mason's work, and a welcome first collection at that. These are very fine haiku indeed—most of them winners of top prizes or featured in the best journals—and it is wonderful to have them gathered in one place. They are arranged into subsections that again parallel the five chapters of the book, suggesting that perhaps they were included in early drafts of the five galleries but were so numerous that they threatened to crowd out the haiku of others. A clue to Mason's rationale for including this section comes in the last paragraph of the book, where he acknowledges the contributions of his partner Carla Gambescia: "the aforementioned solo exhibition of my own haiku appears in this volume at her insistence." In any event, as it is, the section seems tacked on at the end of a book that began with a different purpose altogether.

I am puzzled by these things, yet I enthusiastically affirm that I am the very proud owner of *The Wonder Code*, a book that I think will be influential in the years to come. It is certain to be enjoyed by experienced haiku poets as well as those just coping with the essential aspects of the genre. I myself gained a great deal from the informative and accessible essays as well as from the author's presentation based on the book at Haiku North America.

The Soundless Dance: Haiku, by Gérard Krebs (Spalding, Lincs: Hub Editions, 2017). 66 pages; 20.5 cm; 5½" x 8". Glossy oversize tan card wrappers with four-color image; pasted flaps; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-957646-08-7. Price: UK£6.50 from the publisher.

Reviewed by Charles Trumbull