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## REVIEWS

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*Haibun: a Writer's Guide*, by Roberta Beary, Lew Watts, and Rich Youmans (United Kingdom: Ad Hoc Fiction, 2023). 120 pages; 6x9. Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-915247-40-7. Price: \$16.99 from online booksellers.

*by Judson Evans*

As a college instructor of haiku forms at Berklee College of Music, I view this book as an excellent resource not only for my own college classes, but also for readers and writers at any level of engagement with the haibun or other Japanese short form poetry. The text emphasizes the importance of reading effective haibun as a precursor to writing, and offers useful guidelines, prompts, and resources. It also provides a wide-ranging anthology of fine contemporary haibun for study. The authors contextualize haibun within other Japanese short forms and usefully compare the prose/haiku relationship in haibun to the link and shift of elements in renku. In the Forward, they state: “we will define what makes a good haibun and what makes haibun different from other forms of poetry.” Both goals are achieved with clarity. The authors, widely published haibun writers and effective editors, show their savoring of language, sound, and imagination in the examples they choose to discuss and admire. They clearly love and trust the form’s possibilities.

As an editor of haibun, myself, I also appreciate the pragmatic approach to problems and pitfalls in writing this challenging form. The author’s definition of a successful haibun is holistic:

“Successful haibun share one key attribute: the haiku add to and deepen the meaning of the prose. A haibun may have exquisite prose and an out-

standing haiku, but without that partnership between the two, both are simply strangers standing next to each other. To succeed, each needs to bring out something more than either could alone:  $a + b = c$ , with  $c$  being the 'aha' that derives from the combination, like a spark from two live wires."

The authors view the haibun as a "high-energy construct" (Ezra Pound's term) where each part must serve the whole and where the 'white space'—the gaps or leaps—must be understood energetically as "sparks" engaging emotion and insight. The theory of the 'Four Sparks' developed here is both a pragmatic 'checklist' and a sophisticated hermeneutic model of the way both reading and writing circle back on themselves. It also reveals how the haiku/ prose relationship in haibun vitally links to the fragment/ phrase relationship in haiku. The 'Four Sparks' concept keeps the writer's focus on pace, surprise, and illumination, and is an antidote to mere reportage in the prose.

Secondly, the authors understand quality of haiku as central to effective haibun. They offer a brief but essential tutorial on haiku incorporating influential and forward-looking approaches including reference to Richard Gilbert's invaluable *Disjunctive Dragonfly*. Yet, their understanding of the function of haiku within the context of haibun prose is flexible and nuanced. They offer a list of multiple ways the haiku might interact with the prose—to introduce or set the scene; to clarify or conclude the prose; to amplify or deepen the prose; to leap and open new narratives—and demonstrate these alternatives in useful examples. They understand that haiku within haibun, besides its self-sufficient 'thusness,' does other 'work': its microcosm reflects the macrocosm of the haibun. As the authors state: "because haiku offer self-contained moments—because they are poems themselves—their impact is much greater than standard lines of prose".

The authors also avoid some of the mystification that sometimes accrues around ideas of haiku forms that privilege Zen-like insight above the hard work of craft. They emphasize the 'work' that must be done in choosing appropriate titles, sentence lengths, and levels of diction to create a charged atmosphere for the appropriate haiku. They recognize the

‘art’ in storytelling—“a haibun typically starts in the middle of the story. No lengthy prelude ...”; the play of imagination—“something doesn’t need to be factual to be true ...; and the savvy ordering of elements—“just because it happened doesn’t necessarily make it interesting.”

Anyone who has grappled with the dynamics of haibun writing will appreciate the exchange between the three authors on the question of whether the haibun writer begins with the haiku or the prose, or whether the haiku in haibun must be capable of standing alone or can afford a greater obliqueness based on its more deeply contextual function. Here the give and take of collaboration is most useful and rich. Their diversity of approaches to invention and revision are equally illuminating and enabling.

Yet, for all the rigor and clarity of step-by-step analysis, this is also an exploration and interrogation of the form that demonstrates how effective haibun can be in “surfacing” complex, unconscious, sometimes traumatic personal material. The models offered dive into difficult topics—the raw emotions of a birth mother encountering her adopted child in Crystal Ignatowski’s “Open Adoption”; Ray Rasmussen’s “Elsewhere” on the loss of a teenage child to drug addiction; or Lew Watts’ own excavation of memory of his mother’s suicide in “Deposition.” The toughness of subject matter tests the strength of haibun to contain and transform it.

Finally, the authors recognize the ways haibun has continued to expand both within what they call the “vibrant bubble” of the haiku world, and in the new environment of mainstream contemporary poetry. They offer just enough overview of haibun’s evolution from Bashō to the early practitioners in English, while also referencing important earlier anthologies, such as Bruce Ross’ *Journeys to the Interior* and Angelee Deodar’s *Journeys 2017*. They also range widely through various experiments from “braided haibun,” “concrete haibun,” to haibun as “hermit crab essay.” Most importantly, they leave the reader with the sense of haibun as a vibrant organic presence: “if the prose is a river, imagine the haiku as islands that allow the reader to pause, to dwell, to contemplate, to reflect and see anew ...”