
Please Read Carefully

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The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry edited by Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod. Bloomsbury, London, 2023. 535 pp. £150.00
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The cover art – a painting by Laura Eve Borenstein – is a queer morass of browns and muddled magenta. A smudge of green draws one’s attention to the upper right quadrant, hemmed in by a border of brownish black: the whole canvas an earthy colour field evocative of an abstract topographic map overlaid by a rhizomatic graticule, its constituent lines thicker here, narrower there, adventitious shoots tendrilling from them like trails of spilled coffee. The painting could be an artifact from a parallel world in which Mark Rothko was an action painter trying his hand at psychogeographical cartography. It’s a mess, really, but an arresting one, the paint thick and textured, sculptured, chthonic. It’s called, ‘Paintings in Browns and Rusts and Reds’ (although its title, like so much in this strange collection of essay, interview, and colloquy, is the brainchild of Craig Svonkin: originally, the painting was untitled). The piece is photographed beautifully by Karla Castañeda, who skilfully captures the topographical nature of the work.

As a kind of metaphor – or sigil – ‘Paintings in Browns and Rusts and Reds’ correlates evocatively with the book it covers, an idiosyncratic literary/historical map describing the contours of American poetry. Saddled with the workaday title, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, the collection is as self-consciously peculiar as its cover art; here is a book one *can* judge by its cover, if not by its title. There’s nothing boring or workaday about this hefty

volume. Ably edited by Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod, it stands about twenty-six centimetres tall, eighteen centimetres wide, and nearly four centimetres thick. It's a big book filled with big ideas articulated by big players in a big field: Rae Armantrout, Stephanie Burt, Terence Diggory, Richard Flynn, Jeffrey Gray, Michael Heyman, Bethany Hicok, Michael Joseph, Cary Nelson, Lissa Paul, and Marjorie Perloff are some of the more familiar writers whose work appears in *The Bloomsbury*, an impressive array of critics, scholars, and poets whose scholarship and criticism over the decades has helped map the complex terrain of contemporary American poetry. And yet, the collection never loses the whiff of the counter-cultural. The map of American poetry offered by *The Bloomsbury* is a palimpsest of the traditional and the oddball, as if a map highlighting all the expected (and culturally sanctioned) tourist attractions were printed atop a map of offbeat freakshows and roadside oddities: The Museum of Jurassic Technology overlaid by the Griffith Observatory; the Watts Towers just visible below The Walt Disney Concert Hall. That is, it is a distinctly American book, an intersection of conservative and radical, somehow both deeply individualistic yet beguilingly faddish and hip.

The editors note that they 'wanted a handbook that was more rhizomatic than genealogical', for they were aiming at a 'rhizome, not a family tree of a *Handbook*', were shooting at a collection of commentaries more 'heterogeneous' and 'multiple' than 'unidirectional' (p. 2). Their aim was true. 'If the essays here explore what is valuable in contemporary American poetics', Svonkin and Axelrod explain,

they do so in a pluralistic, multicultural, multi-perspectival context. And while we are interested in a more pluralistic aesthetics, we do not want to privilege aesthetics over history and culture, for doing so ignores the mutual entanglement of all three. (p. 2)

Heady stuff, but the handbook remains surprisingly approachable, nonetheless, engaging poetry and poetics, yes, but also – in a move I’m sure will appeal to most readers of *The Robert Graves Review* – poems and poets.

The book is comfortably tripartite in structure: Part One (‘Roots and Branches of the Contemporary’) contains fifteen chapters, among them essays exploring feminist poetry, Asian American poetry, queer poetry, post-war prose poetry, the Beats (through Bob Kaufman!), the New York School, and, of course, the obligatory (though, in this case, both novel and engaging) treatment of the mid-century Anthology Wars (*New Poets of England and America* [1957] v. *The New American Poetry* [1960]), a discussion inflected by a host of lesser-known West Coast anthologies that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century, anthologies that actively ‘refused a subordinate position frequently imposed on the West Coast due to its relative lack of cultural capital’ (p. 153). Part Three (‘The Contemporary Moment’) wraps the book up with thirteen chapters treating a range of subjects including ecopoetics, multilingual poetry, Arab American poetry and poetics, the fourth wave in Native American poetics, twenty-first century Jewish American poetry, the poetry of disability, online poetry (taken on by Jeffrey Gray in his wonderfully titled essay, ‘Data Dump’), and a provocative exploration of ‘the proliferation of award-winning Black poets in the twenty-first century’ (‘The Rise of Award-Winning Black Poets,’ by Howard Rambsy II) (p. 391).

In addition to these more conventional essays, some taking a more expansive, top-down perspective (Cary Nelson’s ‘American Poetry and War,’ for instance) and others adopting a more narrowly-focused, bottom-up point of view (Stephanie Burt’s ‘Lowell’s Turtles’), we find in Part Two an entire section devoted to ‘Interviews with Poets’. Part One and Part Three both begin with an interview, anticipating and echoing Part Two. The handbook’s first piece: ‘A Conversation with

Marjorie Perloff,' is an engaging roundtable featuring Perloff ('one of the most distinguished and prolific scholars of modern and contemporary American poetry in the world' [p. 7]), Susan McCabe, Brain Reed, and co-editor Axelrod. In Part Three's interview, Svonkin joins Axelrod in an absolute stunner of a conversation with Stephanie Burt ('a distinguished scholar and an influential critic of contemporary poetry as well as being a notable poet herself' [p. 299]). The three poetry lovers wend around and drill deeply into a rattle bag of topics and concerns. It's a truly joyful performance.

The poets in Part Two are largely interviewed by the editors, but a few other voices find their way into the mix. Andrew Lyndon Knighton interviews poet, essayist, and playwright Claudia Rankine (whose work is also treated in Axelrod's essay, 'The Black Art of Confession', in which he argues that Rankine's work 'brilliantly reshapes the post-confessional poem as a fundamentally African American, communitarian text' [p. 172]). Traise Yamamoto, author of *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (1999), joins Svonkin and Axelrod in interviewing poet, essayist, and activist Mitsuye Yamada. I am the last of the non-editorial interviewers, posing questions to innovative poet and intermedial artist Geof Huth, whose iconoclastic, often genre-bending work includes 'handwritten or typed pieces, sewn collages, sculptures, paintings, and poems written into sand, snow, accumulated pollen, and the condensation on bathroom mirrors' (p. 255). Huth's interview, uniquely, is illustrated by reproductions of four of his provocative visual poems: 'jHegaf:' 'Stoen 87: u u,' 'Anatomy. Myology. Plate XV', and 'The Weight of Thinking'.

The rest of the interviews, ten in all, are handled by the editors, Svonkin and Axelrod, sometimes working together, sometimes solo. The interview section comprises an aesthetically diverse crew: Marilyn Nelson, acclaimed poet,

memoirist, and writer for children and young adults, sits comfortably alongside Pulitzer-Prize-winning co-founder of Language poetry, Rae Armantrout. Lorna Dee Cervantes, Marilyn Chin, Juan Delgado, Crisosto Apache, and Joshua Jennifer Espinoza round out the eighty-four-page section. Understand, handbooks of this kind rarely – if ever – give the poets themselves the microphone. I wish more would follow *The Bloomsbury*'s example. The questions poised are provocative and the answers illuminating (and sometimes suggestively elusive).

The interviews are lively, reminding readers that poetry can be a joy to make, read, and talk about, and this lively joyfulness suffuses the collection, a leitmotif heard throughout its pages. In Marilyn Chin's interview, for example, Chin asks Svonkin, 'Do you notice that most poets take themselves too seriously?' She adds, 'A good poem and a good joke need perfect timing' (p. 247). Her gentle needling resonates with an exchange found in the Marjorie Perloff roundtable. Brian Reed quotes from Perloff's piece, 'Take Five', a list of five bits of advice for poets (published in 2013 in *Poetry* magazine, 'Take Five' riffs on Ezra Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', which appeared in *Poetry* a century earlier). Reed quotes from 'take' number two:

Don't take yourself so seriously. In the age of social networks, of endless information and misinformation, 'sensitivity' and the 'true voice of feeling' have become the most available of commodities. Remember that, as Wallace Stevens put it, 'Life is a bitter aspic. We are not | at the center of a diamond.' (p. 8)

This quotation inspires Perloff to reflect on emotion in poetry – even in poetry that may seem, on its face, coldly intellectual and remote. However, she suggests that humour – at the nexus of surprise and joy – is an emotion too often overlooked or

dismissed by both poets and critics in favour of the high-minded and serious. Thus, Perloff's advice (for poets, scholars, and critics): 'don't take yourself so seriously, have a sense of humor' (p. 8).

Humour, of course, is also a key feature in children's poetry (although not a necessary one), and *The Bloomsbury*, in its drive for the 'heterogeneous' and 'multiple', does not ignore poetry for young folks, as all too many literary handbooks do. In a collaborative piece called 'Contemporary Children's Poetry: A Colloquy' (in Part Three), *The Bloomsbury* brings together eight major scholars and critics (and several writers) of children's poetry, each responding to various prompts put to them by Svonkin (a critic of children's poetry himself). Humour and play are evoked more than a few times in this colloquy, notably by poet JonArno Lawson (whom readers of *The Robert Graves Review* might remember from the summer, 2020 issue of *Gravesiana*, *The Review's* antecedent, in which four of his poems were published). Lawson (who, alongside Marilyn Nelson, remains one of the most aesthetically accomplished and exciting American children's poets writing today) discusses the joy that comes from playing with 'errors' or 'slip-ups (Freudian and otherwise)', lamenting that 'we tend not to pay attention to them. They're often wasted by those who discover them, because they're treated as errors, corrected, and/or dismissed'. The humorous oddities of language, he continues, 'spring naturally out of life', and the trick is to recognize them, to use them, to resist the impulse to revise the strangeness and novelty out of them while leaving oneself open to 'encounter[s] [with] something entirely new, or something old through new eyes' (p. 349).

Joy and playfulness abound throughout *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*. It's marked by a hip kind of New York Schoolish teasing subversion, making for a delightful read (it modulates into more overtly serious

topics too, of course, and even play is taken seriously – or maybe ‘rigorously’ would be the more appropriate word). But as I suggested earlier, it doesn’t forget *poems* in its attention to literary history, poetics, and poets. One of the best parts of the book (also in the children’s poetry colloquy), is by our fellow Gravesian Michael Joseph, the editor of *The Robert Graves Review* and a poet himself. His piece concludes the colloquy, and while it is an extended response to Svonkin’s question, *What advice might you offer scholars wanting to join the discussion of North American children's poetry?* (p. 351), it functions equally well as advice for any scholar choosing ‘to join the discussion’ surrounding poetry of any kind. It also captures the canny wit and subversive charm of *The Bloomsbury* itself.

Joseph’s answer is simple and direct: ‘I think reading poems carefully would not be time badly spent’ (p. 354), but he doesn’t stop there, choosing to map (a fortuitous expression given the cartographic metaphor I’ve been circling throughout this review) the reading process ‘to the scientific method of inquiry’,

a method described by science writer Samantha Jones in the April 10, 2021, issue of *Quillette* as a system ‘guided by intellectual humility, skepticism, careful observation, questioning, hypothesis formulation, prediction, and experimentation’. (p. 354)

I hesitate to suggest that Joseph’s contribution to this colloquy is worth the price of admission – 150 pounds sterling is nothing to sneeze at – but I will say that since my first encounter with the piece, Joseph’s five-page discourse on engaging poetry has been required reading in every one of my university courses in which poetry plays a part. Nevertheless, I haven’t the space to unpack the entire piece, so I’ll simply point to a few highlights. The most beautiful (and useful)

section chooses as its subject the much-maligned poem, 'Trees,' by Joyce Kilmer. Joseph writes,

So, let me begin the inevitable parade of corny examples: let's say the poem we are reading happens to be Joyce Kilmer's 'Trees,' a poem my colleague Rachel Hadas has been immortalized by the Wikipedia for having once called 'rather slight'.

The choice is, of course, strategic. 'Trees' first appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1913 (the same year as Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,' *supra*), and while it is beloved (or at least known) by more readers than just about any poem not concerning roads (taken or otherwise) or catted hats, it often functions as a punchline by those of us who supposedly know better (folks like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, for example, and, famously, Conrad Aiken, Kilmer's grouchy contemporary – although their reputations aren't exactly at their zenith these days). And yet Michael Joseph's charming attention to the textures of language seduces us, as does his willingness to follow his own advice: 'to doubt one's impressions, to test their logic and consistency as one proceeds' (p. 355), to 'be skeptical', to 'doubt your interpretation – but also doubt your doubts: what is to say that your oddball, counterintuitive reading is wrong?' And soon we find ourselves as beguiled by Kilmer's 'Trees' as we are by Joseph's virtuoso performance.

Now, Joseph doesn't offer us a definitive reading of 'Trees' (he reminds, 'William Blake wrote, 'Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps', and asks, 'Was [Blake] preaching moderation or was he extolling the inexhaustibility of feeling in the inexhaustible medium of poetry?' So don't expect Joseph to venture a definitive, exhaustive reading of any poem [p. 356]); instead, he models the playful spirit necessary to make poems and make poems mean (he writes, 'poetry's

playground is criticism, is close reading' [p. 357]). It really is a *tour de force* performance, one designed 'to demonstrate, with intellectual humility and inappropriate humor, [that] close reading can and should encourage creative nonsense, or creative hermeneutics, or poetic nonsense' (p. 358).

And in that respect, Michael Joseph's piece really is a lovely synecdoche for *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, for Michael's words, like *The Bloomsbury*, engenders in its readers an excitement about poetry and poems, encourages in us a desire both to return to the poems that led us here in the first place and to discover new poems, as yet unread (and perhaps as yet unwritten); but more than that, it reminds us all that in order to 'broaden, deepen, and diversify the discourse' surrounding contemporary American poetry – for children or adults – 'one has to read [some poems] first.' And lucky for us, we have Craig Svonkin and Steven Gould Axelrod's *Bloomsbury Handbook of Contemporary American Poetry*, a charming, idiosyncratic, and weirdly seductive map to a whole lot of poems. However, as you begin tracking them down, be sure to remember Michael Joseph's admonition: if you're going to take the time to read, 'please read carefully' (p. 359).

