

WRITING APPRECIATIONS OF BOOKS AND CHAPBOOKS BY V-V AUTHORS

by Tom Montag

I have suggested to Jim Lewis and the contributing editors that members of the *Verse-Virtual* community might find it useful and interesting at times to expand from commenting on poems in the monthly issues of the magazine and instead prepare a full "appreciation" of another community member's book or chapbook. The appreciations would be sent to me at appreciations4vv@gmail.com. I will format them for consistency and distribute them the same way I now distribute the monthly comments, that is, (1) post them to the main V-V Facebook and (2) send them out to the email list of our members.

You wouldn't (or shouldn't) write a "review" of a friend's or a student's or a mentor's book because a review is an "outsider's" look at the work, and is supposed to be more objective than a friend's assessment. We in the V-V community are not outsiders to each other. So how are reviews and appreciations alike, and how are they different?

~ ***They are alike in that*** both provide information about access to the book (publisher/address, year of publication, price). Typically reviews are about recent books, while appreciations don't have to be.

~ ***Both reviews and appreciations engage*** the poems and their themes and the structure of the book and examine the poems in the context of the poet's other work, perhaps, and perhaps in the context of the work of other poets.

~ ***In the appreciation, the writer must be*** entirely upfront about any relationship he or she may have with the poet being appreciated; the reader needs to know where the writer stands in relation to the poet. It's not bad to be a friend of the poet you're appreciating, but it's bad to hide that fact.

~ ***The writer of the appreciation is freer*** to discuss personal responses to poems under discussion than would be suitable in a "review." Indeed, the appreciation can be all around more personal than a review would be.

~ ***Because the appreciation is inviting*** the reader into a poet's work, the focus is on showing the best work, rather than evaluating and judging the work. Snark which might be suitable for a review has no place in an appreciation. A hatchet-job is never suitable.

~ ***In the end, the appreciation intends*** to hold the poet's work open for consideration, while the review's intention is to judge the work. The appreciation is more an insider's viewpoint; the review is an outsider's.

I am including below an appreciation I wrote many years ago (of V-V community member Karla Huston's *Catch and Release*) to illustrate how one might proceed. Now, we don't want writers to try and scam a free book off poets in the community under the guise of writing these appreciations; rather, we hope you will consider addressing books or chapbooks you come across as normal purchases or for which you have traded a book of your own, as many of us do.

Your appreciation doesn't have to be as extensive as the example I'm offering, but you do want to provide a satisfying sense of the work under consideration, its structure, its themes.

If you have further questions before proceeding, contact me at appreciations4vv@gmail.com and I will try to answer them. I see such appreciations as I'm proposing as another way to foster the sense of community at *Verse-Virtual*, and I hope you do as well.

Example of an Appreciation (from 2005):

KARLA HUSTON'S *CATCH AND RELEASE*: AN APPRECIATION by Tom Montag

[*Catch and Release* by Karla Huston. ISBN 0-9718909-8-6. Marsh River Editions, M233 Marsh Road, Marshfield, WI 54449. \$10.00.]

These poems of Karla Huston's, in *Catch and Release*, have a touch that belongs to memoir. Perhaps poetry and memoir are the twin-sister arts. This is a poet's life, shaped. One kind of telling can be shaped to a prose account, the other to the beat and break of the line. The life that is recalled in a poem is not less true than that which would come to us in memoir; it is simply that the poem insists on being immediate and urgent, banging and humping as poems do. Sometimes memoir loses this sense of urgency, though the best does not. The difference between the prose telling, and the poem? As May Sarton has noted in her *Journal of a Solitude*, "Perhaps it is that prose is earned and poetry given."

I speak of these poems as a friend of Karla's, one who has long appreciated her talent and would like to see her work more widely known.

So I ask: what has Karla Huston been given in *Catch and Release*?

In "Night Swim," there is the sweetness of the memory. It was "after supper in hot August." The poet and her brother stepped carefully into the water. Mother "tucked pin curls into her tight bathing cap." And dad? "My dad would barrel-ass down the bank,/slice the water, show up on the other side//of the safety ropes, smiling." As she was falling asleep later, the lake came back to her, the water hugging her skin, her father's face grinning mischief, and "those waves rocking me to sleep."

In "Tumbling," there is an uncertainty. The poet's mother is "conniving about macaroni" over the back fence while her brother has thrown himself down the basement stairs; he challenges his sister to do it too. She does. Oh, her mother is angry. "My lip quivered in shame,

the taste/of blood a little sour in my mouth." In the end, she is "unsure why some things/hurt so bad they almost feel good." In such uncertainty is the beginning of wisdom, yes?

The poet is ten years old in "Matinee," watching April Love and falling for Pat Boone. She cannot believe the heartbreak: "I knew I could do it better, cherish him,/save his pretty and impossible heart." She struggles with "this longing/larger than anything I'd known."

"Coming Home" is about another kind of longing.

*When I was a kid, I'd go so fast
I felt like I was being chased
running home from Patty's house....*

Now when she sees a tortoise in a pet shop "trapped in a plastic aquarium," she wonders if someone is calling *him* home. "The need that calls him/is insistent and familiar," the poet thinks, "his feet/trembling with every forward step."

The poet was the only girl allowed to play work-up in "Rounders," a kind of sand-lot baseball you play when you don't have enough for two teams. She was the permanent catcher, at least until she asked to bat:

*... For a joke, he pitched
an empty bean can that split
my scalp....*

Later this kid, the oldest in the neighborhood,

*... caught up
with me in the alley
across the street and asked to touch
the cut. I didn't cry
until he tried to kiss me.*

The poet finds a dead bird in "Dead Cardinal." She examines the bird and feels a need

*... to say something
about this moment, something about choices,

and the dark roads we travel. I want to say
how close we all are to the edge....*

But she cannot, at this moment, be profound. She talks instead about the ants crawling in and out of the dead cardinal's mouth. She notices that

*Even in death,
industry and patience have their reward.*

The title poem, "Catch and Release," is a tour de force about two boys who drowned and were lost in Lake Winnebago "one November storm ago." The dead boys will

*... be glad to be found -
if the dead are glad of anything -*

*after all those months of freefall,
the second rising that always comes in spring.*

There are twenty-seven poems in *Catch and Release*; lines and stanzas continue to resonate after you put the book down. How, for instance, does one teach this girl to write of war?

She must hunt for the wounded,

*seek the man with no eyes, the woman
with a hole in her heart,
the boy too dumb to speak.*

In one poem, the poet wonders, "How can I write about the moon/tonight...."

And, again, in another poem, she might be "a nice girl, not the kind to frolic//in hotels with men," but for the moment her glass "is half full, the animal of her loosed and for a moment, free."

The final line of the final poem reads: "in praise of great and dangerous things;" this speaks as much about the purpose of the poems Huston's book, I think, as about the raised arms of the "Saguaro."

Could these poems be imagined life? Yes. Yes, of course. If this is not the life the poet had, it is the life the poet could have had; it is the life the poet has in her heart. A life where the small things we've noticed have meaning beyond the frail particulars. Such tellings are no less true for being imagined, but admittedly one cannot say that to a roomful of students still learning to tell the literal truth. Huston has stepped beyond the need to tell the literal truth, into the realm of the larger truths she carries out of memory.