

**Jane and Werner Reichhold. *Symbiotic Poetry*.** Gualala, CA: AHA Books, 2014, 282 pp., perfect softbound, 7.5 x 9.25 inches. ISBN 978-1494422776. US\$14 from online booksellers.

by M.S. Clarke, Warrenpoint, Northern Ireland

The cover illustration of *Symbiotic Poetry* by artist and writer Werner Reichhold features a collage of words, drawings, and photographs that hints at the scope of this latest volume produced with his wife, Jane. Containing a body of work that includes prose and short plays penned by the Reichholds over several decades, this book is much more than a poetry collection.

In the three-page introduction, “Coming to Terms,” the authors address the familiar problem of how to define English-language poetry inspired by a whole range of traditional Japanese forms such as haiku, tanka, and renga. Issues including differences in sound between the English and Japanese languages; the fact that today’s poetry is informed by experiences far removed from the simple, rural life of the early *haijin*; and the use of experimental poetic techniques suggest that it was inevitable that such Western poetry would evolve into something very different from its traditional Eastern counterpart.

Bearing this in mind, the Reichholds present the case for adopting the term “symbiotic poetry” to categorize this type of work which has been inspired by different cultures and poetry forms—in other words, of mixed literary parentage. Both writers have sifted through their creative output of “borrowed genres” (to use Jane’s own words) to find examples of such work. This rich and unusual collection is the result.

So that the reader can distinguish between each of their contributions, Jane’s work is typeset in Book Antigua and Werner’s in Arial on the pages of the text. However, their individual styles are so distinct that they are easily recognisable.

For instance, if the following two tanka in Jane's series "A Thank You" from *In the Presence* are compared with Werner's untitled poem from *Bridge of Voices*, the difference in style is immediately evident.

waiting on you  
in a vase of admiration  
the rhododendron  
its perfection stops just short  
of breaking into song

and

alone and cloaked  
a walk in the woods  
I am recognized  
trees wave leafy boughs  
flowers nod and wave

linking man on the moon two stars  
snail of an ear the spoken word winding  
all holes linked Swiss cheese  
smoke of a joint the leaves of no virgin circling  
a letter unfolding two roses  
silver arrow the cry of geese  
whenever we meet the tide is changing color

The first two poems, which are quite traditional, very visual, and suggest a certain oneness with nature, reveal the poet's sentiments quite clearly. The third is like a spell or chant and begins almost as a list poem detailing a dream. Even when the author comments in the last line, we are not totally sure exactly what is being described, so the reader must work in order to arrive at a conclusion.

Many of the themes that run through the book are traditional: nature, love and relationships, birth and death, loneliness and growing old. There are some really beautiful poems, in particular, the "Water-Renga" from *Narrow Road to Renga* written by both Jane and Werner. This sequence features mermaids,

sea fog, and tide pools. Again their individual contributions reflect their different poetic styles and it is interesting to observe how they combine—“symbiotically”—to create something new and surprising:

darting into spindrift  
silver between his talons (Jane)

gold medal winner  
dives into advertising  
sun oil (Werner)

And a touching tanka from *Bowls I Buy* describes Jane as sculptress not only of her clay creations, but also of the child she carries:

hands folded  
she models for the artist  
in clay  
her smile shapes within  
a son who looks like him

In the following haiku from *Ten Years Haikujane*, several of the senses come into play in just seven words to create an extremely visual and auditory haiku:

wild lilac  
a bush speaks  
with bees

and from the same collection of Jane’s, the cyclical nature of life is highlighted in this haiku with the images of birth and death in the first two lines. In line three, “nest-shaped” suggests the season of spring, and therefore birth . . . and so life continues:

eggshell  
a bird’s skull  
nest-shaped

This love haiku by Werner from *Layers of Content* effectively employs a shift of focus from the close-up, tiny speck of light in a lover's eyes to the faraway mass of stars in the universe. I found it to be a beautiful poem:

on a voyage  
the light in your eyes  
star to star

The use of the collective noun "herd" for snowflakes is also striking in Werner's lines from "Into My Heart," a collaborative poem taken from the collection *Film of Words*:

turning loose  
a herd of snowflakes  
the lover's lips unseen

However, these form just a small part of "Into My Heart," demonstrating how its individual components can be enjoyed as well-constructed, stand-alone poems as well as integral parts of the complete piece. When read as a whole, it moves along at a rapid pace and feels very spontaneous.

It is perhaps the spontaneity employed in parts of the collection that sometimes results in a slightly disjointed effect. This technique combined with the occasional lack of logical (or perhaps traditional) construction brought to mind some of the work of the Absurdist playwrights and New Wave film makers in Europe when reflecting the absurd nature of the human condition—the conflict between our constant search to find meaning in life and our inability to do so. They also favoured the technique of self-reference which appears in Werner's short play, *Alfredo and Traviata*, at the beginning of *Symbiotic Poetry*. Here, there is reference to the craft of writing when Alfredo reports that "the guys mentioned earlier (Freud, Foucault, and Derrida) stated, 'A special kind of madness is one of the conditions, requirements, qualifications in finding a concept for writing poetry.'" Indeed, the characters' sometimes

meandering conversations reminded me a little of the work of the Irish writer, Samuel Beckett.

The book ends with a journal entry from *Invitation* entitled “Wednesday January 14, 1998.” The detailed preparations depicted for what was obviously a very important event led me to believe that Jane was describing her wedding day. It is, in fact, a meticulous account of their participation in the New Year’s Poetry Reading at the Imperial Court of Japan. The Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko had invited the Reichholds to that year’s prestigious event, Utakai Hajimi, and I really enjoyed reading this firsthand report of the occasion. This in turn allowed me to reread Werner’s piece, “Entering the Poetry” with a much better understanding. Here is an extract:

Poems leave their notation  
in the singers’ mouth, in the direction toward their Majesties  
and back from wooden walls, the acoustic is timing its echoes.  
Voices go for a swim in space,

and a tanka from Jane’s account:

feeling the poetry  
deepening in the voices  
men chanting  
The Pine Tree Room reaches out  
to the god in every one

Jane and Werner Reichhold’s distinctive styles and their influence on each other when working collaboratively could be considered an excellent example of symbiosis at work. No doubt they absorb some of each other’s poetic rhythm; in fact, the following haiku is typeset in Arial, therefore it must be Werner’s—but it also sounds a lot like Jane’s!

from a bay  
escorting salt  
the spin of birds

In any case, it left me slightly breathless with a hint of sea spray or spindrift in the air. I have no doubt that *Symbiotic Poetry* is one of those books that I shall be dipping into again and again.



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