

reviewed

Issa and Being Human by David G. Lanoue (2017, *Haiku-Guy.com*). 228 pages, 5½×8", perfectbound. ISBN 0991284054. \$9.99 from *amazon.com*

Reviewed by Joshua Gage

David G. Lanoue—poet, translator, scholar, former HSA president—is probably most known in the haiku community for his monumental Issa translation project. He has translated over 10,000 haiku from haiku master Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828), which are available on his website, *haikuguy.com*. Lanoue’s newest book, *Issa and Being Human*, focuses on Issa’s haiku portraits of his contemporaries in an attempt to understand the poet’s views of humanity.

Lanoue starts with two different translations of the same poem by Issa:

naka-naka ni hito to umarete aki no kure

quite remarkable
being born human ...
autumn dusk

just so-so
being born human ...
autumn dusk

Lanoue’s thesis is that the ambiguity of the phrase *naka-naka ni*, meaning both “remarkable” or “just so-so,” captures Issa’s views of humanity. Issa saw people as remarkable, deserving of praise or pity, as well as just “so-so,” worthy of satire and occasionally

scorn. Lanoue builds on this idea to explore what Issa thought about the concept of “being born human” using Issa’s haiku as the starting point for an analysis of the poet’s worldview and philosophy.

The book is organized into chapters that focus on social classes or castes of people in Issa’s world: children, farmers, priests, samurai, artisans and merchants, entertainers, prostitutes, beggars and outcasts, the old. In each chapter, Lanoue provides his translation of an Issa haiku, as well as an analysis of the poem and an explanation of how it reveals Issa’s views on humanity. As the author explores Issa’s worldview, he also delivers a fairly intimate portrait of Issa himself, with all his strengths and flaws. This allows the reader to better understand and empathize with the poet, even through hundreds of years of historical and cultural distance.

To aid the reader, Lanoue provides background information on Issa’s society and culture. This is a fairly academic text, with many notes and resources included. However, Lanoue makes it extremely accessible for the average reader to understand and digest. Whether he is describing the various levels of legal and illegal prostitution at the time, or 18th-century Japanese currency, or the psychological concept of a “default mode network” in children’s minds, Lanoue is able to fully explain the concept to the reader.

Issa and Being Human is a historically rich exploration of Issa, his poetry, and his world. The book offers a great collection of translated haiku, and Lanoue’s scholarship, helping the reader to understand Issa more fully, is invaluable. Anyone interested in haiku or haiku history should read this book.