

[from *Whispers of Mermaids and Wonderful Things: Children's Poetry and Verse from Atlantic Canada*, ed. Sheree Fitch and Anne Hunt. Halifax: Nimbus Press, 2017.]

Foreword

A toddler curls up in the warm place under a parent's arm, both focused on the open book in front of them. The parent's voice translates the silent mysterious symbols on the page into real language, language they attend to, understand, and respond to, together.

We all know this is an important scene, one of the miracles of human society. We don't, though, reflect very often or very deeply on why this is so. We say learning to read is important, and we often stop right there, letting the idea rest on the convenient assumption that it's about exchanging information, about learning the "skills" that will let a child grow into an adult who can "succeed in school" and "earn a living." In truth, though, that sort of mechanical process is by far the least important thing happening in front of that open book. What makes us fully human is our ability to imagine the mental states and processes of the people around us. Psychologists call this, awkwardly, "theory of mind," which makes it seem pretty distant from our everyday experience. But in fact, it's exactly this empathy that lets us know what Mom means when she says, "Well, that hair is a bird's nest, isn't it?" It isn't, of course, only that she doesn't mean there's a bird somewhere nearby; it also means that we all share an image of what the nest a bird makes looks like, and know together that birds are nice, that nests are comfy, and at the same time that a bird's nest on your head isn't quite appropriate, and that you and Mom are sharing all that.

This leads to – no, is central to – the ability to understand the figures of speech that make language more than a telegraph system: metaphors, sarcasm, irony. The ability to understand the language that goes beyond literal information is central to our participation in the society around us. If that sounds exaggerated, consider what would be lost to our society if, after a delicious meal, someone next to you said, "Well, that was really horrible." Imagine you missed the irony and thought there was a disagreement about the meal, rather than sharing the presumption that it was so good any negative comment would be immediately recognized, by both speaker and listeners, as absurd.

We almost never notice the extent to which our language is drenched in, is composed of, figures of speech which depend on our already sharing values, assumptions, connections, with each other. And, most centrally, recognizing the sharing; knowing, without anyone saying it, that the speaker is expecting you to recognize her language as intending something, as being the utterance of someone whose mind is deeply like your own. Who knows that you know that she knows. And where does the ability to use language that way come from? Consider that toddler, the parent, the book. Consider how the toddler, in order to understand what is happening at all, has to come to feel the relations between the voice of the mother, the voice of the author, and the marks on the page. As the mother and toddler share the surprise of the turned page, the bounce of the new and unexpected word or idea, the three become one experience, and the child's understanding of other human beings' experiences can be shared through that page.

And so, what about a book of poems? A book of poems coming from our shared social context, written without the academic assumption that to be "good," poetry needs to be nearly incomprehensible without the help of a scholar or critic or teacher? A book using language that can build on the assumption that we already share experience of a world, of how that world is connected together, and

how people act in it, to extend and deepen our ability to use language to participate in that world together? So when Mom reads to you, or when you read yourself, something like Bill Bauer's amazing "Tantrum Poem III," you know, and learn, that everyone can share the complex amusement at the small child's refusing to eat something everyone else agrees is just fine, and imagining the absurd consequences.

Contemplate how wonderfully complicated that experience is. It's the voice of someone else, a stranger, someone named Bill Bauer, pretending to be a child, and it's Dad's voice – or perhaps now your own – taking the same language on, knowing that it's play, that there is no child with a wad of meat stuffed in a cheek, knowing that it's funny, and at the same time understanding just what it would be like to be that child, imagining how, thirty-five years from now with the meat still there, "everyone / Will say and won't I be glad when they do / What cruel parents he must have had / To drive him to do such a thing as that." The richness of that social experience– of that understanding, tolerant amusement– is deeply humanizing.

But what about a book of poems "from Atlantic Canada"? To engage with the voices far from us, the voices of the world, we begin with the voices near to us, the voices of Mom and Dad, the voices of family, the voices of neighbours. And the voices of our shared cultures and surroundings. The recognition of our own experiences can be shared, can be made into metaphors, can become opportunities to share our life with others. Find a poem at random and you come upon Elizabeth Brewster's springtime girl who "abandoned / rubber boots too early," who is picking her way "delicately / over the small islands of mud and ice."

Open the book. Pick a poem at random. You won't go wrong.

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December 2016