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Independent Voices, New Perspectives

‘As Real As Rain’ by John Yamrus /Janne Karlsson

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Monday, February 12th, 2018

AS REAL AS RAIN
by John Yamrus /Janne Karlsson
Published by Epic Rites Press

In his new collection *As Real As Rain,* internationally acclaimed poet John Yamrus partners with Swedish illustrator Janne Karlssonin a grand experiment. This book is the poetry equivalent of a graphic novel where all the Yamrus poems are accompanied by one or more black-and-white drawings by Karlsson. The poems and illustrations are hilarious and haunting, so we often linger over a page before moving on.

When asked if he’s an outlaw poet, influenced by Bukowski and Kerouac, Yamrus says, “I’m not a joiner.” Like Bob Dylan, who famously follows his own path, Yamrus resists being labeled. He is a master of short form poetry, making it look easy. He writes about dogs or brushing teeth or emails or other facets of daily life everyone relates to. “My audience,” he says, “isn’t sitting at table 4 at the reading in the coffee house; it’s in the back, cooking the food or waiting to clear the table.”

With almost 30 books to his credit and nearly 2,000 poems published since the ‘70s, we’d expect Yamrus to relax, travel the world, write his memoirs. Many successful poets find a niche—or bunker—and stay there for the rest of their careers. Instead, like Dylan, Yamrus loves to challenge himself by trying new things.

As Real As Rain started out at a successful poetry reading Yamrus did a few years ago sponsored by Epic Rites Press, his publisher. That reading really cooked; people are still talking about it to this day. The poems in *As Real As Rain* are the same poems arranged by Yamrus in the same order as his poems at that reading. The result is a book that’s a conversation with the audience, a reader-friendly flow of ideas and imagery.

Janne Karlsson, illustrator for *As Real As Rain,* has a world-wide following like Yamrus, although it’s more of a cult following at this point. With his clever, insidious drawings, Karlsson isthe reincarnation of R. Crumb from the ‘60s. Hisoddhuman parodies radiate post-modern dis-ease, theirvolleyballfaces expressing the absurdity of the human condition just as Yamrus’s poetry does.

Yamrus and Karlsson complement each other superbly, for example, when it comes to dog poems. The dogs in Karlsson’s drawings in *As Real As Rain* are doggone rascals. They match the lovable, but flawed canines Yamrus writes about, like the ones in the poem “my dogs” who bark at everything, including “the vacuum cleaner / the dust mop / and the broom.” Yamrus gives these

barkers the half-ironic epithet “good dogs.” The funny, sometimes sad poems and drawings about these and other dogs are among the high points of the book.

Yamrus isn’t everybody’s poetic cup of tea. His work has been called, in essence, poetry “lite,” not “real” poetry. Never mind that Yamrus has mastered traditional poetic techniques like imagery and enjambment and that he connects with a lot of readers.
Yamrus is a genius at imagery. Nobody can create a picture for the reader with a few well-chosen words better than Yamrus, as in this excerpt:
everything
was gray and brown,

like
the old movies,
and my uncle
had this
2nd floor
walk-up,

with
a single bulb
hanging from a wire
at the top of the stairs.

In addition, these lines are highly enjambed, not ending on a grammatical stop or pause. Similar to Imagist poet William Carlos Williams of “The Red Wheelbarrow” fame, Yamrus is an enjambment maestro. A John Yamrus poem is skinny—each line has only a few words or one word—and features powerful line breaks that keep urging the reader on to the next line on a wild ride to the poem’s end.

Readers have always found Yamrus’s poetry accessible. The short lines, everyday vocabulary, and speaker’s raw, directvoice are part of the pleasures of reading a Yamrus poem such as this:

“write a poem about THAT,”

she
said,

sitting
on the edge
of the
bed,

smiling.

Although this poem is short, Yamrus manages to make the personal universal. The poem engages the reader despite the “ordinary” language. Or is it because of it?

John Yamrus is a unique poet who’s popular for the right reasons. Those who complain that his poetry is too simplistic are like those who complain about Bob Dylan’s singing voice.The answer is that it may not work for everybody, but it works for him.

Yamrus is now approaching age 70, but he's a poet with staying power. He is always reading a classic novel, a history/biography book, and a "schlock" novel. He has read several pages of Proust every day pretty much all his life. In addition, to support his fellow poets and see what the competition is doing, for years he has bought and read a poetry book every week. He says, "You wouldn't expect Kmart not to be interested in what Walmart is doing."He knows how to prime his poetry muse, not that he'll admit to having one.

Yamrus once wrote a fan letter to author Robert Graves, who at that time was elderly and living in Majorca, Spain. To Yamrus's surprise, he received a lively, two-page handwritten letter back from the writer, who said he was still able to make a fist and defend himself if need be. That's the type of feisty old man Yamrus wants to be.
Yamrus is not an academic poet who wrote his way up through the ranks; he's the ultimate outsider poet. Perhaps he's also the outlaw's outlaw poet, which might make him the real thing. *As Real As Rain* by John Yamrus and Janne Karlsson is handsome enough to decorate a coffee table, but watch out—a reader who picks up this book intending to glance at the pictures and skim a poem or two may end up getting hooked. Good poetry has a way of doing that.

Illustration: John Yamrus, Watercolor by Henry Denander

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