

Cultural Daily

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John Yamrus and Nuestros Amigos Peludos (our furred friends): an Appreciation by Mark Statman

Mark Statman · Wednesday, December 2nd, 2020

About ten or so years ago I was teaching an introduction to writing poetry course. One of the requirements was that students had to present the work of a living poet not on the syllabus who had published at least two books or the equivalent and that this poet should be someone they really thought the rest of the students studying in the class needed to read.

One of the students asked me if she could present John Yamrus. I was familiar with his work, not very, but enough to know that this was a good choice. I knew he'd written over 20 books, so he certainly met that requirement. She said she was having a little trouble finding out much about him and I suggested she contact him. I remembered vaguely that John was considered somewhat Bukowski-like so I thought maybe she should do this a little carefully. We did an online search, found his email. She showed me the note she would write him, it seemed pretty straightforward, no one could possibly be offended by it, and I suggested she send it.

Well, there must have been some kind of confusion. Because John's email answer to her kind of pushed her away, suggested she just read his work, that he was a busy guy. Not good, right? A young college student just wanting to do her work? I decided to get involved. I wrote him. I explained the situation. Certainly he misunderstood?

Well, John wrote back immediately. And he was so apologetic. He felt awful about the whole thing. He really had misunderstood. He loved hearing from young poets! He loved people who loved his work! No worries, no worries, I assured him. Just help her out. He did. She gave a wonderful presentation and I think a lot of the students came away intrigued by the poetry.

So that's how I met John Yamrus. From that email exchange, John and I started to write to each other. A lot. We discovered that we had more than enough in common. Not just poetry, but all literature, and all kinds. We started tipping each other off on books we thought the other would like. Sending books as gifts. We also sent each other our poems and became close readers of the other's work.

John and I discovered other things in common. Great political and social justice sympathies. An affection for the bad (good) jokes I think both of us heard all the time growing up. We have a mutual devotion to baseball, especially baseball on the radio. The history of baseball, the names of the game. We wrote, still write, each other a couple of times a week. Though he is in Pennsylvania and I was in Brooklyn (and now southern Mexico), we took, and take, the time to talk a couple of

times a year. This is a good deep friendship. A funny thing? We've never actually met in person. Life has its own ways of moving.

But, and this is important, there is something greater, greater than poetry, greater than politics and jokes, greater even than baseball, that brings these two guys from different backgrounds and different lives together. Dogs. John and I love dogs. It was one of the first things we started to talk about after he figured out I wasn't some academic (he is not a fan of academics), that maybe I was an okay guy. Dogs. John fell in love, via photos and my stories, with our beloved and (now) missed black Labrador Cannonball, and the same with Cannonball's great-great-nephew, the ever exuberant Apollo. When Cannonball died in the late winter of early 2017, the first person to write me was John: *All dogs are good. Some dogs are better. Then there was Cannonball*. When John's dog Abby passed, we spoke at length and he swore he wouldn't get another dog again. Wait, I thought, wait. Not long later, Stella arrived. And so. That's how it is when you love dogs. They get under your skin. They don't want you to mourn. They want you to keep on. And how better to keep on than to bring in another one of our *amigos peludos* (furred friends) to keep the faith?

Which brings me to *Five Dogs*. When John showed it to me in manuscript I thought it striking and original and different, a blend of memoir and poetry that had John's dogs at the center but it was more than about dogs, it was about life, and being alive, and about love and devotion and something strange that happens when you think you're doing one thing and in fact, it is being done for you. Our dogs. Who are better than baseball because they don't care if the team blows the game in the 9th. They don't care if the poem you're working on is making you feel like an idiot. They don't care if there's been a moron in the White House or if the climate is a mess. They just do that thing. They sit on your feet. They breathe in your face. They get excited just because you happen to have walked in the door. No matter that you've been shopping and you're in a bad mood or a good mood or whatever mood. It's a *celebration! You're home*. The fun has already started.

I wrote John how much I liked the book and he wrote me and asked me for a blurb. I was honored. I've written about John's work before, and he graciously gave me the opportunity to write the introduction to his splendid book *Alchemy*. but this book just felt different to me, more personal, even than John's most personal poems and his memoirs.

Should I run you through the text? We start with "The Zoomies." You either know this or you don't. But here John is almost perfect.

they could be lying there, half asleep, in the sun or in the shade...and then all
of a sudden, the head perks up, the eyes get wide and it's off
to the races, around and around the yard...into and out of trees...behind
and through shrubs and bushes and around benches and tables and chairs.

you gotta see it to believe it. (P.7)

Or you just have to have a dog...

Then John tells us about the dogs. Mika. Phoebe and Ito (you can't say one without the other—John has written a wonderful book about the two dogs being friends). Abby. Stella (that current canine member of the Yamrus household). There are photos. And stories. There's no point in telling the stories. It would be counter-productive. And insulting. If you know John's work, stripped bare of ornamentation and as clear as a cold morning fishing, then you know that for me to try to break this down is silly. John has done the best job here.

Several weeks ago, when *Cultural Weekly* asked me to review ***Five Dogs*** I asked how I could; I'd blurbbed the book! But then I suggested an appreciation, just some words on how good the book is and why I like it. I think there might have been some eyebrows raised but what had they to lose?

So here is this: an appreciation. This is a very good book. I'm a fan of John Yamrus. And with the best of all reasons. The man can write. Here's my blurb, I mean every word.

*Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you are doing, stop. Read **Five Dogs**. our souls are made from, and of, this love.*

Enhorabuena, John. You nailed it.



Five Dogs is available on [Amazon](#).

John Yamrus's website is: www.johnyamrus.com

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