

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Review: Hell and High Water by Wolfgang Carstens

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, June 13th, 2018

Hell and High Water  
By Wolfgang Carstens  
Six Ft. Swells Press  
November 2017  
\$12.95  
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*i wore  
a Trojan  
“Fire and Ice”  
condom.*

*it  
was like  
fucking  
my prom date—*

*and  
my wife*

*at  
the same  
time.*

“i don’t write love poems” is the title of one of the poems in Wolfgang Carstens’s new sophisticated poetry collection *Hell and High Water*. But that’s a lie—in fact, he does write love poems and other kinds of poems such as erotic poems—to and about his wife. Some of them are found in this book.

Wolfgang Carstens’s *Hell and High Water* is about marriage and family life, its joys and frustrations. The mostly short-short poems in this collection are raw, funny, and reader-friendly. The speaker’s strong voice masterfully deconstructs the nuances of family life for us in enjoyable bites.

Carstens lives in Canada with his wife of twenty-five years, five children, one grandchild, and dog. He's a prolific poet. There's a long list of his previously published poetry collections and chapbooks. He's also the tireless editor and publisher of Epic Rites Press, which publishes broadsides, posters, and tee-shirts in addition to poetry books. Epic Rites Press and Carstens are responsible for "discovering" and encouraging a whole slew of nonmainstream writers.

### **What life is like after twenty-five years of marriage**

The speaker's ostensible role in the marriage is that of long-suffering, henpecked husband. Apparently, his wife "is always mad at him about something" ("Slave Lake, 2014"). Poor thing—when his wife catches him watching internet porn, she throws his laptop into the toilet, telling him that from now on, he'll have to use his imagination ("caught watching internet porn"). When his daughter asks why the speaker loves to fish, he answers:

*"do you  
see  
your mother  
here?"*

*("Daddy")*

Then there's also the poem where the speaker goes outside to smoke in "minus forty" conditions, commenting:

*he  
had been  
married  
so long*

*the cold  
no longer  
bothered  
him.*

*("although")*

In the poem "i don't write love poems," the speaker associates marriage with the Angler fish where the female fish "absorbs her man" as they mate. The speaker also informs us that he has been "happily married" for twenty-five years "to an apex predator" ("Charles Bukowski").

Yet the poet gives a lot of the best lines in the book to the wife. For example, when they're in the car and spot a sign with a typo that reads, "Speed Hump," she quips,

*"finally  
  
a sport  
you  
can win."*

*("instead of 'Speed Bump'")*

The speaker seems to relish the sassiness of his wife. He jokes that in the afterlife, Satan will

*look up one day to see  
my wife  
...arrive  
at [his] doorstep*

*to kick [him]*

*out*

*(“there’s an old joke”).*

The speaker is funniest when he aims his sharply barbed wit at himself. His humor involving his wife features himself as clueless stooge, not her. I laughed when I read about the speaker’s experiments with the “Sex-Toy-of-the-Month Club” (is this even a real thing?). He also cracked me up when I read how he dreams his wife wakes him up and “want[s] to fuck.” He ends up watching the sit-com *Married with Children*, muttering, “[F]uck you, Peg,” instead (“i had a dream”).

The speaker doesn’t dwell forever on the limitations and irritations of a long marriage. He never quite lets family life drag him down. He tells us, in a quite believable voice, that he owns a marriage “survival kit” consisting of Tequila, beer, and a half-smoked joint (“if not a mess”).

### **A man crazy about his wife**

As it turns out, at least part of the time, the speaker appreciates his wife—in fact, he’s crazy about her, both emotionally and physically. For example, one night he wakes up in a sweat and ends up putting his head on her lap. He says, “you saved me / last night / my love...”

There is something primal and Biblical about the speaker’s earthy passion for his wife. He elaborates in the erotic poem “Tracy Lee [his wife’s name]”:

*all i want  
is you  
naked*

*on your hands  
and knees...*

And, sometimes, the speaker is so in love with his wife that “[his] knees shake” when he approaches her for a kiss goodnight (“strange”).

It’s not a marriage made in heaven, “but // it’s close” (“she”).

### **The secret strength of Carstens’s poems**

Carstens cleverly incorporates the specific and the universal, giving the reader plenty to relate to and plenty to think about. For example, I asked myself, isn’t the “speaker” in his poems actually a side of all of us? And is the “speaker” always really Carstens?—or is he just playing a character and pulling our leg? At the end of the day, though, these poems enable the reader to feel the wild

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reality that is one man's soul and life, and that's the secret strength of this poetry collection.

Reading *Hell and High Water* by Wolfgang Carstens, I was more than entertained. I found these poems to be often hilarious and touching. I heartily recommend these relatable poems to married and unmarried readers alike. Laugh while you learn.

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