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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

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\$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

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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