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Ocean by Sue Goyette and Timely Irreverence by Jay MillAr

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Poetry as Nature-Life Interface

***Ocean* by SUE GOYETTE**

Gaspereau, 2013 \$19.95

***Timely Irreverence* by JAY MILLAR**

Nightwood Editions, 2013 \$18.95

Reviewed by **CHAD WEIDNER**

An essential question that good poetry forces us to ask is whether our ordinary lives can generate interesting material for art. Two recent collections of poetry explore the numerous ways poetry can serve as an interface for humans and art. Overall, both Sue Goyette's *Ocean* and Jay MillAr's *Timely Irreverence* are highly recommended for those who enjoy the quiet places poetry can take us, and the ways in which literature helps us express the depth and fullness of human lives.

Ocean is Sue Goyette's fourth collection of poetry, and is published by Gaspereau Press. The distinctive cover is appealing, and while secondary to the content of the collection, reminds us of the tactile feel of good poetry. Moreover, the cover anticipates the care with which the words inside are carefully crafted. While *Ocean* is divided into 56 separate lyrics, a thread of nature-experience ties all the poems together, neatly and tightly. Not surprising in a volume entitled *Ocean*, the collection is founded on deep ecological issues such as the timeless human relationship to the sea. But at the same time, *Ocean* exposes subtle changes in human culture, and the ways in which we conceive of our position in the universe. But *Ocean* is not simply another writer's anthropomorphized view of nature.

The collection certainly paints an anthropomorphized sense of the human

relationship to the sea. Indeed, it may be impossible for humans to ever fully separate ourselves from our surroundings. More than that, *Ocean* deals with fundamental questions such as the ways in which poetry can function as a conduit between humans and the natural world. Poems here are indelibly marked by the distinctive geographical and cultural proximity of Nova Scotia to the sea, and to the wind beaten spaces where water comes together with the earth. Goyette calmly acknowledges the significance of this everyday fact as it shapes and impacts the lives of those who live there. The sea thus functions as a deep and rich poetic cultural interface for everyday endeavors, including the predictable rise and fall of the sea. The figures that appear in the collection, traders and fishermen, might occasionally seem predictable, but they nevertheless remain powerful images of the human relationship to the water. We are also allowed private glimpses into the reciprocal relationship of these coastal people to the sea. The collection as a whole is a snug and valuable read for those interested in the places where poetry, human experience, and nature converge.

While Goyette's *Ocean* delves into the complex relationship between people and nature, Jay MillAr's *Timely Irreverence* instead addresses the ways in which everyday human events generate the stuff of poetry. Jay MillAr is a highly successful author of several chapbooks and volumes of poetry, and this collection is composed with both dexterity and confidence. When picking up the book, I wondered how Canadian art might be distinctive from that found in other Anglo cultures, and the conclusion I came to was that Canadian culture remains situated in the middle place between culture and nature, and that many

Canadian writers effectively navigate between the two in the pursuit of elusive poetry. In essence, MillAr's book forces us to question the significance of the daily happenings in our lives, or at least allow ourselves to contemplate how routine events fill our lives with so much meaning. *Timely Irreverence* is broken down into three separate sections, but I do have some questions about the organization of the collection. I am not totally convinced that the attempt to impart internal coherence by inserting three separate sections is totally successful. Why three sections and not five? But this really is a minor gripe, since all of the poems in the collection are tied together by collective, playful, mordant snapshots of contemporary Canadian life.

While many high-profile poets develop an unhealthy appreciation of self, MillAr's poetry remains modest, inquisitive, and surprisingly self-reflexive. This is clear from one of the very first poems of the collection, "On Certain Incredible Nights," where MillAr writes: "I'm content to be unseen with you. / On hold in the anger of the fog / or the silence. You must hear the rest / When the blood functions perilously. / Who but you could hear such tiny points / Along these assumed terrorized shores?" This fragment reflects the larger collection well in its attention to silence, as well as the appreciation and even reverence of the evasive quality of well-written poetry. "Who but you could hear such tiny points / Along these assumed terrorized shores" shows the power of poetry to highlight the details that make our lives worthwhile as well as the assumptions we make about the perceived permanence of things. In the end, *Timely Irreverence* pushes us to accept the simplicity and transience of our existence.

Both Sue Goyette's *Ocean* and Jay MillAr's *Timely Irreverence* provide

welcome glimpses into contemporary Canadian existence through the inventive interface of nature and life poetry. If poetry really has the capacity to help save us, then these two books of poetry suggest that by remaining modest and attentive, we can find balance in our increasingly fragmented world.

CHAD WEIDNER teaches English and film at University College Roosevelt, which is a faculty of Utrecht University, in the Netherlands. He has recently given a keynote lecture in ecocriticism at a symposium in China, and works as a reviewer in several capacities. He co-edited an issue of *Comparative American Studies* (Sept 2013), and is presently editing a book on radical experimental writing and ecocriticism. He is also co-convenor of a seminar to be held on ecocriticism and the avant-garde in Brussels in December 2014.