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## Welcome to the Anthropocene by Alice Major

gillian harding-russell  
*University of Saskatchewan*

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## A Murmuration and a Mattering

*Welcome to the Anthropocene* by **ALICE MAJOR**

University of Alberta Press, 2018 \$19.95

Reviewed by **GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL**

In the poetry collection *Welcome to the Anthropocene*, Alice Major writes an ambitious work that addresses many of the issues besetting our times: most notably those concerning the environment, the limits of science, human myopia, and our failure to work together as a species toward our solutions. As well as nature and science, Major touches on such social issues as our view of the disabled in misconstrued terms of productivity, an empathetic perspective on homosexuality in a predominantly heterosexual society, and a case for euthanasia ironically presented in terms of a mathematical equation. Intelligent and witty, erudite and often ironic, the poems in *Welcome to the Anthropocene* are finely honed and elegantly organized into sections that address topics introduced in the long first poem, and that are headed by quotations drawn from the initial piece.

In the title section “Welcome to the Anthropocene,” Major begins the collection with something resembling a cosmic bang. In this long introductory poem, with an epigraph drawn from Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Man,” she emulates her predecessor with his discourse on science and nature, and even makes use of the heroic couplet to clinch a point while she infuses metaphor with incisive wit. Whereas Pope, from his eighteenth-century perspective, sought to rationalize God’s

ways to man (in answer to Milton’s desire to “justify God’s ways to man” in *Paradise Lost*), Major introduces a more balanced and compassionate approach:

We might not unite  
behind Pope’s verse Whatever is, is  
right.

Still whatever is, matters in a  
wholeness where  
everything is common and  
everything is rare. (27)

In the course of this introductory poem, Major challenges our inflated view of ourselves as the master species while also demonstrating the mischief of which we are capable:

Poor beasts. We have been rattling  
The Great Chain  
of Being. Feckless godlings, we’re  
inflamed  
by our capacities, creating mice  
in our own image, trying to entice  
genes to jump with tickled  
transposons  
and scraps of virus. (8)

With tongue-in-cheek, the poet concludes, “we have good reasons” “for meddling: improved tomatoes, / new vaccines or fuel for our autos” (8), and thus reveals our short-sighted goals. Unfortunately, our inventiveness has led to mass extinctions, with “our broad foot eradicat[ing] / the little islands of ecology” (13):

the disappearing rare, the melody  
of the threatened: red-eyed vireos  
piping plovers, grasshopper

sparrows[.] (13)

As Major characterizes humans, they can be

reckless geeks  
who don't know when [they've]  
pressed 'delete'  
once too often. (14)

And yet, for all the damage we humans do, our importance in the universe has been overplayed since, even if we blew up the "test tube" of our experiment on earth, "it wouldn't matter, not a monkey's nut" (22). With hilarity carried by the couplets as well as by the outrageous metaphysical imagery, images from modern technology and science, Major carries her points, concluding, "The cosmic roil makes bangs far bigger than / any feeble planetary species can" (22).

With the grace and power of a beautiful image, Major goes on to remark that we should learn from a "murmuration / of starlings, shape-shifting veil of wings" (23) how to communicate among ourselves as humans. Rather than by the leader, the flock is guided by the birds at the fringes that warn of encroaching danger.

While the introductory poem is key to the collection, the poems are polished and pertinent throughout. I am particularly struck by the image of an aging mother who waits for her daughter at the airport as the earth lies in wait for regeneration in "Demeter waits at the arrivals gate" (38). Again, "Discounted annuals" is a clever piece written in the familiar jaunty couplet format that adeptly brings together mercantile and social frames of reference to

lay bare our implicit prejudice against the disabled:

Yes, Larry is a little different from  
the rest  
of us. And thus  
his brain gets tagged with a discount  
sticker  
by the world  
that doesn't notice much beyond  
the check out counter. (79)

There is sympathy for the marginalized in "The realms of Asphodel," in which the lesbian perspective is entered in a predominantly heterosexual world (81). Clever as it is insightful, and as formally impeccable, is the poem about euthanasia, "Zero divided by zero," which uses an incantatory verse at the ends of stanzas to bring us back to beginnings and the suggestion of a non-answer.

One of my favourite poems is "Old Anna," inspired by a historic cleaning woman in a Dusseldorf Children's Clinic who would be given the worst-case sick infants, managing to bring them back to health by holding them close to her. The doctor's scorn is evident in the verse, "What quaint ideas she talks," but the speaker's view comes through in the lines

but he'd go on looking in his  
microscope  
and sending learned letters to his  
foreigners

while the "babies go on drooping on their cut stalks." (85)

In the penultimate poem, "Confabulation," Major returns to Pope

with an epigraph drawn from his “Essay on Criticism” that may be taken as a plea for open-mindedness on the part of the reader and literary critic, that literature should be read, as Pope famously puts it “*With the same Spirit that its Author writ*” (109). However, Major’s recognition that subjectivity may outdistance objectivity in our siftings of fact that form the basis for opinion proves her point on many levels. Our faith in science may be misplaced, since it is in the nature of our brains (not at all like machines, after all) that they are bridged with gaps and spaces to allow for the unexpected in our adaptation to an environment.

With its zeal and intellectual thrust, *Welcome to the Anthropocene* is a work of some power and also a gem. With its clever organisation around the introductory first poem, the collection may be said to resemble the “murmuration of starlings” wherein outliers shape the progress of the flock as a whole: here I refer to the shifting borrowings from the leader poem as epigraphs starting each section. Although the poems in this collection do not work in a currently popular, more elliptical style, in which the reader is drawn to interact with the poem in its interpretation, the collection is an intelligent work that presents and argues and wins us over in stunning metaphors and catchy measures reinforced by couplets (not after all unlike rap music).

**GILLIAN HARDING-RUSSELL** is a Regina poet, writer, and reviewer. Her new poetry collection, *In Another Air* (Radiant Press), will be released later this year.