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***The Tides of Time: A Nova Scotia Book of Seasons* by SUZANNE STEWART**

Pottersfield Press, 2018 \$21.95

Reviewed by **SHANE NEILSON**

In a sense, every book I read is a self-help project; and, lord knows, I do need a lot of help! Some books, though, more overtly encourage the reader to identify with and compare themselves to the subjectivity on offer between the covers even though they are not explicit manuals or programs for improvement. Suzanne Stewart's *The Tides of Time* is such a book: part memoir, part academic reflection, and part spiritual reclamation program, Stewart's text is the kind of memoir that results when a writer hits upon a set of constraints—say, follow a particular kind of diet, or resolve to live by spending only three dollars a day—and then writes out the resultant story. Perhaps best classified as a kind of life writing of intense and idiosyncratic local engagement in order to better situate the self, the book is aimed at anyone who might want to unplug and access a way of being that is ancient. I suspect that I am not the only one who needs a lot of help in this respect.

The constraint (mainly structural) is this: Stewart uses *The Book of Hours*, Christianity's once-ubiquitous devotional text from the Middle Ages, as a model for her own investigation of rural Nova Scotia. Her argument—not a novel one—is that humans for millennia were connected to land and thereby to time, to seasonal change; that *The Book of Hours* is attentive to the same things makes it an ideal model for her own reclamation project. A professor of Romantic Literature at Dalhousie University, Stewart became increasingly disaffected by modernity's array of conveniences. Concerned by the way she could live and work without much regard for weather or time, Stewart created a life-writing project in which she would consciously experience time and local conditions, seeking out experience using the lived experience and testimony of seasonal workers to inform her meditations on time, ecology, and Romantic literature (especially poetry).

Stewart's style is elegant and many of her sentences would fit in any book of lyric prose by a master. For example, "On a clear, bright day, like today, the light cuts crisply around the edges of Cape Breton's majestic Highlands, shadowy wedge-shaped hills that heave themselves out of the water like a whale, wrinkled and humped and bumped with enormous mammalian length." In that small, sinuous space, Stewart sketches time, place, and living things. That she's a good prose craftsperson is not just key in an elementary sense, for Stewart couldn't succeed in her project if it didn't substantiate itself as beautiful at the level of the line. (E.g., How could the project be interesting if it didn't read *as* interesting?) Her literary allusions and explanations are often well-deployed—Keats, Wordsworth (brother & sister), Tennyson, and many others are used to undergird Stewart's contemporary reflections, but the further one gets into the book, one becomes aware of a kind of content-generator template for the author. When the prose flounders, it's often because Stewart's living human subjects are overpaired with counterparts from Romantic literature:

I see the meeting of Jack MacLeod and John Keats: a similar sweetness in their lives—in autumn. Keats went to Italy to die; Jack has given life to his inhospitable land in an Italian way. For both, autumn is *dolce*. Keats was too delicate to farm, so he wrote, but he walked on the land, enjoying its open-air beauty when he composed his ode “To Autumn.” Jack is too restless and robust to be a sedentary poet, but he writes in his notebooks, recording the details of his days, watching the world with the same sensitive, aesthetic eyes. (49)

Only a Romanticist would write a paragraph like this, in which an orchard keeper and Keats are contrasted to thicken the narrative. The strategy often works, but when it doesn’t, the strain is obvious. Moreover, we are treated to too many anecdotes about teaching, making this memoir intensely personal (a good thing) but also somehow limiting—a professor’s reclamation of the self.

Conceived differently, perhaps an issue with the prose comes from an uncalibrated focus and varying time signature. If Stewart can make a link to a Romantic figure, she will; if she can bring in her teaching praxis, she will; this makes for two go-to habits that eventually read as tics. She frequently moves back and forth in time. For example, an experience in her childhood is brought to bear on what she’s currently experiencing, or her own understanding of a season is somehow brought out of a scene and into the modern placeless milieu. One gets the sense that the author is programmatically moving back and forth, to and fro, in an effort to build narrative cross-links, but the moves become predictable. One of the most blatant of these various comparison engines is as follows:

Chandra’s life is laboured; mine is aesthetic. I arrived this morning steeped in the beauty of early autumn’s delicacy: its softly tumbling leaves, nurturing rain, amber-tinted light, smoky mist, and still-muted colours. Chandra’s autumn is marked by rugged work: with ropes, nets, buckets, and traps. She pursues a colossal fish, which my perceptive land-bound sensibilities will never experience or comprehend.

We differ, too, in terms of time. I am searching for temporal fluidity: the year-round rhythm of one season after another in perfectly proportioned harmony. Chandra’s work is episodic, defined by stops and starts: periods of weeks when labour is intense, or when nothing happens at all.

My language is metaphoric, lovingly nuanced, but hers is literal, anchored in practicality. (30)

X. Then Y. But X; then Y, etc. On the brighter side, I suspect the aforementioned flaws are a byproduct of the author’s truly impressive strength, which is to convey her own momentary delights on the page. Stewart *really* seems to slow time down, and one of the main pleasures of reading *The Tides of Time* is to see just how much she can hold the reader’s attention by demonstrating her own appreciation of slow time. And through this crafted holding, the intended spiritual benefits of the book come to bear. Reconnection with the land and with time through a deliberate and prolonged intimacy eventually made me ask: why aren’t I paying this kind of attention when I live and write? The self-help element comes to the fore in this way,

and all the ephemeral annoyances and unimportant transiency that I overweight in the present moment goad me to try to adapt Stewart's project to my own situation.

Which is, I think, a very high recommendation.

SHANE NEILSON is not welcome in polite company.