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The Wolf is Back by Robert Priest

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We Share the Air

***The Wolf is Back* by ROBERT PRIEST**

Wolsak & Wynn, 2017 \$10.00

Reviewed by **KELLY SHEPHERD**

If the eminent Canadian poet and translator Robert Bringhurst were to write a book of rhythmic, rhyming children's songs, the result might be something like *The Wolf is Back*. The wide-ranging intellectual curiosity of these poems encompasses topics as diverse as ancient literature and architecture, wildness and ecology, and contemporary social justice movements. There are lyrics celebrating languages, the art and history of writing, and the groundbreaking but little-known literary innovations of women writing in both ancient Mesopotamia and classical Japan.

The poem "Dogkind" is about the deep-time relationship of human beings and dogs, in which for millennia hominid and canid species cooperated, and ultimately co-evolved, as we helped to keep one another alive. "Dogs Get the Point" describes one interesting aspect of this co-evolution, namely the advantageous ability of some dogs to understand when a person points with his or her finger. The book's title comes from a pair of poems ("Where are the Wolves" and "Return of the Wolves") about the wolf population from Jasper National Park that was reintroduced in the 1990s into Yellowstone National Park (which had no wolves, since they were exterminated in the 1920s):

The elk and the deer
Who have no fear
They graze in the valley all day

They strip the ground bare
With no wolves there
No wolves to scare them away
(15)

The return of the wolves to Yellowstone resulted in a trophic cascade that has successfully reinvigorated entire riparian ecosystems, from willow trees to rodents. Other poems in this collection explore the water cycle ("Cloud Canopy") and the vibrant multitudes of communicative organisms that make their homes in soil ("The Canopy Below").

A common thread that runs through these poems is a sense of ecological and social interconnectedness. Several explore the power that individuals, no matter their age, have to make a difference in their worlds. "People Like You and Me," for example, points out important innovations and inventions throughout history, from the bone flute to air travel, that were made by seemingly everyday people.

"The Children's March," the book's longest suite of poems, introduces the youthful Civil Rights activists who were trained in non-violent resistance in order to be arrested and to fill the local jails to overflowing to raise awareness in 1963 about the need for desegregation in the American South. This campaign, carried out by children, helped to usher in more equitable laws in the American South. Like many in this collection, these poems are explained in more detail in the "Notes" section, which includes contextual information and suggested readings for those who would like to know more.

Poems for and about present-day Canadian Indigenous peoples also occupy a central place in *The Wolf is Back*. "Indian

Affairs” documents the government greed and callousness that forced school children in the Attawapiskat First Nation, in northern Ontario, to sit in a school building with leaking diesel pipes below its floors for over twenty years, despite the health problems being caused by the fumes.

“The Journey of the Nishiyuu” is about seventeen-year-old David Kawapit who, inspired by Idle No More, led a march in 2013 from the northern Quebec Cree community of Whapmagoostui to Ottawa to protest the Canadian government’s treatment of Indigenous peoples and their lands. The marchers were completely ignored by then-Prime Minister Stephen Harper, however, who left town when they arrived in Ottawa for a photo op at the Toronto Zoo. This incident is also recorded here, in the poem “Did Stephen Get a Scare?”

But in the same way that we should not read a Shakespeare play as if it were a novel (and yes, there are a couple of poems about William Shakespeare here, too) it would be a mistake to treat this as if it were “just” a book of poetry. It is also a collection of images: Joan Krygsman’s intriguing black and white illustrations are a sort of constellation-pointillism; everything looks like it has been made out of shadows and stars.

The playful and sometimes nonsensical lyrics scattered throughout this book will undoubtedly be a big hit with the read-aloud crowd. “If you could be a bee | What kind of bee would you be?” asks the speaker in the pun-laden “What Kind of Bee” (28). “Schedule Sonnet for Doing and Being” weaves the verbs “to do” and “to be” into a repetitive scat-singing sound poem. “Parliament of Picture-Book Birds” is a humorous and rhythmic onomatopoeia of birdsong. There is even sheet music

included with two pieces (“We Share the Air” and “I Wish You Well”) so they can be sung with guitar or piano accompaniment.

As well as being appealing for their auditory qualities, these poems are formally adventurous: *The Wolf is Back* consists of mostly rhymes and meters—the better to sing them with, of course—but there is also a haiku (“Haiku for Mirasaki Shikubu”) and a list of brief, proverb-like “Micropoems to Go” with lines like “Poetry doesn’t care how you write it” and “It is better to have loved and loved and loved” and “Resistance is fertile” (79). This list is reminiscent of *Poetry As Insurgent Art* by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who is surely one of Priest’s literary forebears.

With lyrics that are sometimes serious, sometimes whimsical, but consistently positive, *The Wolf is Back* will appeal to curious and fun-loving readers and listeners of all ages.

Robert Priest is a prolific and award-winning Toronto poet, musician, and writer of children’s books, whose work has been featured on *Sesame Street*.

KELLY SHEPHERD’s second book, *Insomnia Bird: Edmonton Poems*, is being published by Thistledown Press in 2018.