

Slam Dunk

Philip Norton & Todd Swift (eds), *Short Fuse: The Global Anthology of New Fusion Poetry*. Rattapallax Press, \$24/€24/£12

There's little point in beating up on the weak, and *Short Fuse: The Global Anthology of New Fusion Poetry* is not a strong collection. In fact, it is a flabby, bloated, self-indulgent collection. It is not just that the book contains bad poetry, though it certainly does: *Short Fuse* presents some remarkably bad poems. But even a few bad poems could be forgiven in an anthology of 400 pages, not counting the downloadable 112-page e-book and an included audio CD. Much less forgivable is the fact that *Short Fuse* doesn't appear to know what it is, or even what it was trying to be.

If the term "global fusion poetry" sounds unfamiliar to you, you're not alone: it also seems to have perplexed the editors. In his preface, Philip Norton writes: "In order to be effective in this new era where everything moves so fast that society finds itself ever on the verge, successful poems must be out there with them [*sic*]. They must confront the verge. The verge of what? To tell the truth, I don't know". The verge here seems to have something to do with performance poetry, though that is not the only criterion: in another preface, the other editor Todd Swift notes that not all of the poets included are "first and foremost, practitioners of the slam, or even spoken word", though he then adds that in fact many of them "are winners of... slams". If anything, the term accommodates a catholic group of poets. The included work runs from:

MAYBE IT WAS SUFFERING AND PAIN
 THAT TAUGHT ME THAT WHEN I WAS OVERLOOKING
 THE OCEAN VIEW
 I WAS BLUE

(Fats White, "Confessional")

to:

Were I a fine ox, I'd buck off my yoke:
My owner would beat me until his stick broke;
He'd cut more and beat more and after I died,
He'd butcher my body and auction my hide.

(Ian Duhig, "Died for Love")

stopping by way of:

She touched my face and asked me why I was so sad. I said
You're mistaken, I'm not sad at all, and she said Yes you
are, I know because I'm a robot and I can read your mind.
And sure enough I was sad and hadn't told anyone.

(Jason Pettus, "Strangeplastikrobot")

That is to say, fusion poetry makes room at the table for adolescent angst, doggerel and prose. After reading such a collection, one could be forgiven for suspecting that "fusion poetry" is a made-up term invented only to justify the publication of yet another anthology. In his introduction, the fusion poet Hal Niedzviecki (a contributor, though not an editor) writes "I suspect it doesn't matter what 'global fusion poetry' exactly means". And he's right: in the end, it really doesn't.

A few observations:

The editors of *Short Fuse* saw fit to include their own work, and their biographical notes are the longest in the book.

A number of fusion poets have names like "DJ Renegade", "Alicia Sometimes", "EZB", "L[ar]YNX" and "Emily XYZ". Still others have names like Michael Hulse, Sean O'Brien and Kathleen Jamie. In terms of technique, tone, style, form and subject matter, there seems to be very little to connect the first group to the latter, or anyone to anyone else. When you do come across a good poem (and yes, there are a couple), what is most apparent is how different that poem is from the rest of *Short Fuse*. After the earlier "A" poets (works here are arranged alphabetically by author, although Duhig strangely follows Dumbly and Dun), Simon Armitage's "The Laughing Stock" is startling. Not startlingly good. Startlingly different, because it is good.

Many fusion poems contain references to pop cultural figures and celebrities: Albert Einstein, Chewbacca, David Beckham,

“Schwarznegger” (*sic*), Deepak Chopra, Farrah Fawcett, Frank Sinatra, the Branch Davidians, Spartacus (twice!), Elle Macpherson and many others make appearances.

Nazis are bad.

Fusion poems occasionally refer to genitalia. As in “The Natural History of Errol Flynn’s Cock” by Robert Allen. Or “Time & Cock” by Brett Dionysius (“I think time has wilted my cock/ & my testicles”).

Fusion poets often write about poetry and the difficulties of being a poet. As in “Poet of the Day”, by Harry Cording and “Cut Me a Line of Poetry” by Benito di Fonzo, both of which are not-so-surprisingly bad. As is “The Company of Poets” by Lucy English (“I want to be in the company of poets/ because poets only work when they want to/ and they never work when they’re tired,/ and they never work when they’re hungry”. So that’s the attraction.) And many of those in the audience at the next fusion poetry reading might want to remember these lines from “What to Say When Criticizing Poetry (Like this Poem)” by Ifor Thomas:

The title’s good

(I can’t think of anything to say about this poem)

Can you read it again?

(give me time please to think of something to say)

It’s too long

(never it’s too short)

What is remarkable here is that someone could write a poem on the subject of poetry without a thought for rhythm, sound, or metaphor. Without poetry, in other words.

There’s more to say, but one thinks of the trees: spending more time on this collection would be a waste of paper on top of a perfectly colossal waste of paper. In his introduction, Hal Niedzviecki asks, “Would it be so horrible if there was no connection between the poems in this sprawling book?” Would it be so horrible if no one bought this book, or ever spoke of it again?

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