The Good News About Armageddon
by Steve McOrmond

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

Ask Anne Compton. She’ll tell you. The Maritimes are experiencing a renaissance. Poets from PEI. Fictionistas from Newfoundland. And even those who were born there but have left for different parts of Canada and beyond, poets such as Steve McOrmond, are part of that renaissance, even though he did not make it into Anne’s book, Meetings with Maritime Poets: Interviews.

McOrmond’s first two books, Lean Days (2004) and Primer on the Hereafter (2006), were published by Wolsak and Wynn, with the latter winning the Atlantic Poetry Prize. In an interview with Sharon Caseburg for Contemporary Verse 2, McOrmond addressed the issue of prizes: “but a poet, if he or she is to have lungs for the long race, needs to build up a resistance to both criticism and praise. Both can be damaging, especially for a young writer.” Being also a technical writer, he goes on to explain how he was able to maintain some semblance of sanity: “Poetry is the file hidden in the loaf of bread, a means of jail-breaking workaday existence.” With this Buddhist perspective in mind and the need erupting again for the saving grace of poetry, he approached the writing of this his third book.

McOrmond does not like to repeat himself. Thus, those who read Armageddon because they enjoyed either of his first two books may experience some temporary disappointment. This one is nothing like either of those. He makes this abundantly clear with his opening poem, “Advisory,” which begins “1.0 The following program contains language and brief sexuality which some may find disturbing” (9). It contains lines such as “1.2 Women’s bare breasts; man’s bare buttocks.” – although why only one man but multiple women remains unexplained. It concludes “2.1 Objectionable words and phrases: Approx. 50.” – nice of him to count but he fails to tell us what and where. We must leave this poem with that and the unresolved question, is a poem “found” when the poet “takes liberties with two base texts”? (102) as the Notes and Acknowledgements explain. But then, in renaming a urinal a fountain, didn’t Marcel Duchamp do somewhat the same? And if we look at the Wikipedia entry for found art, we find that the term “describes art created from the undisguised, but often modified, use of objects.”
The title poem is a lengthy sequence occupying half the book. The sentence rather than the line is the defining factor here even though they are set in unrhymed couplets. Borrowing from several Canadian poets who were influenced by the American L=A=N=G=E poets (or variations thereof), these sentences bring to mind several influences. For example, the following lines bring to mind Colin Smith:

Human disinterest story.
Corpse lay next to TV for 3 years.

This just in from Hubble: a pair of black holes
Locked in death dance. Make it your screensaver. (28)

There are portions that are uniquely McOrmond, such as these missives from the gender war front:

She likes to be the last to leave a party.
I want to get home before the end of time.

She lies down in fresh snow to make an angel.
I unzip my fly and write my name. (36)

There are times he doesn’t quite get it right, such as when he reverts to the line in favour of the sentence:

It was then the apparition
appeared to me, a blur

like hummingbird wings,
a doorway in the falling snow. (36)

It is not just the enjambed stanza that creates this impression. Compare that passage with the following one:

One of these days, we’re going to get
our shit together. We’re going to
rise. I’ve seen it written in a fortune cookie:
*The axe doesn’t fall far from the tree.* (37)

Here the sentence is clearly the focus.
Once McOrmond has made his way, for the most part successfully, through Armageddon, he launches an assault on humour with “The Hypochondriac Flies to Mexico.” Here is the opening line: “The plane is sick. Feverish chills” (51). The reversal is marvellous. An interesting repetition of the first line takes place throughout the poem. Most writing workshop facilitators will advise you to remove or replace identical words as, in their opinion (and for the most part correctly), it makes for a cleaner, stronger poem. However, there is an instance, one that often seems forgotten, where repetition is an extremely useful poetic device; that is, where it acts as a refrain. And even though this was developed as a device of formal (particularly French) poetry, it is equally effective in free verse, as McOrmond demonstrates on this trip aboard “Pandemic Air.”

He follows this up with several humorous excursions. One of the best is “Directions to the Ark.” Here is its opening (and only) line: “First right after the abattoir.”(53) Is this a poem? Who cares? It’s damn funny.

This book represents a radical shift from his first two books. You will at times split your sides laughing. You will at times shake your head. The one thing you will always be doing is engaging in McOrmond’s poetic excursions even if you may be disappointed at times.

John Herbert Cunningham is a Winnipeg writer. He reviews poetry in Canada for Malahat Review, Arc, Antigonish Review, Fiddlehead and The Danforth Review, in the U.S. for Quarterly Conversations, Rain Taxi, Rattle, Big Bridge and Galatea Revisits, and in Australia for Jacket.

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