The Big Book of Canadian Poetry
by Ron Romanowski

Reviewed by John Baillie

Sometimes a new book is just a good read, and sometimes it is an event. Ron Romanowski’s fourth book of poetry from Augustine Hand Press definitely falls into the latter category – in fact, it invents a whole new classification for such events.

On first inspection, The Big Book of Canadian Poetry is the publication of a group of six poets, including Ron, announcing the creation of what the group styles New Festival Theory, an attempt to instigate a more public focus on Canadian Poetry. But really, it’s not. It’s all Ron Romanowski, writing variously as June Summer-Jones, a Dorothy Livesay-ish matriarch of the art who has been publishing acclaimed collections of poetry for six decades; Siegfried Jerusalem, opera fanatic and inveterate blogger; John G. Carmody, an Irishman living in Brandon writing in the Japanese forms of haiku and tanka; Bulgarian Marina Stepanova living in asylum in Canada from her dubious past; Ruth Rachel Cyprian, a history major from the North End of Winnipeg; and, paradoxically, Ron himself.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan speculated famously that the unconscious is structured as a language, and that a sense of self arrives externally, from the imaginary – or, in Ron’s case, a sense of six selves. However, Lacan would agree that we are all imprisoned in a hall-of-mirrors world of signifiers that practically imposes multiple identities. Ron obviously embraces that idea on the one hand while rejecting it on the other – hence Siegfried Jerusalem’s “I Murdered Jacques Lacan & Slept with His Mother” (27). Welcome to the Postmodern Poetical Playground.

Reading the book raises two important questions: can one poet write convincingly in six different voices, and, even if he can, are the poems any good? The answer to both questions in The Big Book of Canadian Poetry is a defiant “yes!” Summer-Jones’s working-class humanism comes through clearly and poignantly in “A Red River’s Boy” (9); Jerusalem’s strident edginess is evident in “Die Meistersinger von Mississippi” (26); Carmody’s environmental and social lyricism sings throughout his Goldfinch tanka and bee haiku; Stepanova’s darker Eastern European sensibilities make their grimly insightful statements in “from Elegies for Stargazers” (59); Cyprian manages to express her concern with the importance of the past in pieces such as “A Natural History of Radical Moths” (85) and also creates some intriguing cross-referencing amongst the group in “Head, Too – For Siegfried. Farewell.” (82); while Ron still manages to sound surprisingly like Ron and not the other five in his signature cascading imagery and heartfelt messages such as in “Crown Us the Snowy Valentines” (104).

At times, the poetic stance taken by one of the poets inspires disparate reactions from the others, employing and redefining the same image. In “December Island” (19), the elderly June Summer-Jones makes her distaste for winter in Winnipeg quite evident, commenting on the snowmass making “an ocean of snow stretching back to the Rockies” (19). Ruth Rachel Cyprian steps in with a different point of view in “Winter: I Promote You to Look Rustic” (88), in which she exults “Let December be the ocean of winter” (88), and is made a child again by the season, “winter’s dearest confidant” (88). Then Ron, the ultimate unifier of any experience in the book, has the last word in “Returning to December Island” (98), where “December contains oceans of snowflakes/ attached by threads to gravity/ like melting pearls” (98).
Thus the concept of the book automatically gives the reading experience a deeper context than the average poetry collection can supply. The reader either asks “Can he do it?”, and if so, then “Who are these other people?”; or misses the trick completely and comes away with a fascinating impression of six different sensibilities, topped by a “What the – !” moment when the reality sinks in.

Ultimately, the book is successful because the first five poets in the supposed anthology come across as so convincingly real – and that makes the message of what they write satisfactory and real as well, as good poetry should be.

At the end of the event, the only one I’ve got serious doubts about is this Ron Romanowski guy. Let’s see some ID there, please. ❗

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