Back Off, Assassin!
by Jim Smith

Reviewed by Andrew Vaisius

No doubt about it, Jim Smith is a political poet in Canada – a difficult profession at which to be accomplished. So difficult, I suspect, he became a civil litigator ten years ago to pay the bills.

Not that Canadian waters aren’t fruitful to protest. They’ve been polluted with mercury and dammed by Hydro. Our First Nations people often can’t drink from them.

Yet what makes our skins so impenetrable to protest poetry? I believe we hold poetry to a higher standard. Protest poetry cannot simply be ethically right; it must also be great poetry. And things just don’t seem that bad to most Canadians. Smith senses this and doesn’t restrict himself to Canadian soil or Canadian causes. He references South and Central America, as well as the USA. In one poem he dreams K-Mart into existence, and finds himself standing in the store that same day, which leads to his tongue-in-cheek question of dream fulfillment. It’s a short, skinny poem that bruises with sarcastic satire and what I feel is a fitting Canadian approach to politics. If we cannot take our elected Poobahs seriously because they are so ludicrous – why would the government of a country with 20% of the world’s fresh water in lakes and rivers feel compelled to spend thousands of taxpayers’ dollars to construct a fake lake for G8/G20 leaders to dip their toes into? – we might as well spoof them, or pie them, or prank them.

Did I mention that Smith is very funny? In “Playing Golf with the Colonels,” Anastacio Samoza and Juan Napoleon Duarte complete a threesome with the poet. “Duarte claims first shot / at the caddy,” (108), and that means literally the first shot.

Smith’s political strength arises from his acerbic humour. “Just below the strata of possession is found the layer of thieves” he writes, and adds, “Compression has caused these two layers to/ interpenetrate in exact equivalence to the symbiosis that actually arose” (98). This sounds like a wry take on legitimate thieves and criminally prosecuted thieves, or perhaps he’s serving up an Economics 101 seminar. You can interpret the “interpenetration” however you will.

The only thing I find too accomplished is his tendency to compose lists in the form of poems. They appear too often and are overdone. “One Hundred Most Frightening Things” covers nearly five pages, and begins waning in strength after the first one. “The Finger” takes us on another five-page ho-hum journey, and “Why I Am Such a Nice Guy” does the same. Back Off, Assassin! would be sleeker and stronger without their inclusion, but I still recommend this volume highly. It will only become more relevant as the present federal government gets more comfy with their majority. ♦

Andrew Vaisius is a writer and childcare worker living in Morden, Manitoba.

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