The False Laws of Narrative: The Poetry of Fred Wah
Selected and with an introduction by Louis Cabri
Laurier Poetry Series

Reviewed by John Herbert Cunningham

One of the original TISH poets, Fred Wah has achieved iconic status in the world of Canadian poetry. It’s about time, then, that someone came along to write a book such as this. And it’s a pleasure to see it as part of the Laurier Poetry Series, which has achieved a standard of excellence that other institutions should be admiring and emulating.

The book begins with an excellent biography of Wah, followed by Cabri’s introduction. Cabri begins his explication of Wah’s poetics by referencing a 2007 speech by Wah: “Wah approaches his topic by outlining paradigms for modern lyric and epic, ‘paradigm’ meaning model, pattern, or example of poetic form. His exemplary paradigm for modern lyric is William Carlos Williams’s 1954 poem ‘The Desert Music,’ and for modern epic, a technique, collage – the juxtaposing of texts, images, materials from different times and places and media.” (ix) Although Wah learned this technique from Robert Duncan, Duncan “wanted ‘a poetry of all poetries, grand collage . . . epic in dimensions, that can let – hauntingly so – ‘all of the old stories / whisper once more,’ as he puts it in one poem . . . By ‘old stories,’ Duncan mostly means ancient Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian, and Christian myths.” (x) Wah diverged from Duncan on this: “Wah’s poetry disentangles itself from modernist ambitions or representing ‘grand collage’ of ‘old stories’ based on a cultures-of-the-world unity.” Instead, Wah draws on Aboriginal culture, including petroglyphs, for his motifs. Cabri concludes this section of his introduction with

The riprap of Wah’s poetry learns from the grand collage epic, but takes off with the proprioceptive lyric. His riprap offers the juxtapositional openness and loose-endedness of collage, without collage’s grand-historical, presumptive scale. Wah’s riprap offers lyricism – without lyricism’s I-centre, i-dentical iterations of poetic voice. (xiii)
About the improvisational aspect of Wah’s poetry, Cabri says that “Wah’s poetics involves enacting embodied perceptual processes in language. One way he does that is through sound. ‘[W]hat one ‘means’ is not primary, or central to what the po-em is’.” (xiii) Cabri then explains this hyphenation

By hyphenating the word ‘poem’ as ‘po-em’, Wah reminds readers that, uttered, a word is made of syllables – ‘po’, ‘em’ – in temporal succession . . . ‘[I]t is the ‘working’ within, whatever form, that interests me . . . ‘Working’ entails an act, such as placing a hyphen inside the form of a word, so that readers notice how words are made so that sounds ‘never stop changing places’ over the alphabet’s twenty-six graphic letters. (xiv)

The first poem presented gives an idea of Wah’s collage technique:

Mountain that has come over me in my youth
    green grey orange of colored dreams
    darkest hours of no distance
    Mountain full of creeks ravines of rock
and pasture meadow snow white ridges humps of granite
    ice springs trails twigs stumps sticks leaves moss
    shit of bear deer balls rabbit shit
    shifts and cracks of glaciation mineral (1)

Colors, landforms, sticks, stones and other shit get piled on top of each other in a cacophony of unpunctuated images that hit you with a punch. Who needs verbs when a traffic collision of nouns can do so much more? Later in the poem, Wah’s playfulness comes through in phrases like “lying slopes” or in lines such as “O creek song flow always an utter pure of coolness / spring from the rocks.”

Creeley’s influence is evident in akokli (goat) creek. “Akokli” is a Ktunaxa word meaning horn or antler. As Cabri says: “Wah’s title parallels, but does not unite and conflate, two linguistic worlds and their cultural histories.” (x) I would suggest that there are three worlds being paralleled – the white world, the Aboriginal world and Wah’s world. But then, Wah’s world, he being the scion of a Chinese father and a Swedish mother, brings complications to this. This is Wah’s multicultural poetics coming through.
Wah was one of the original eco-poets, as is seen in “Hamill’s Last Stand”:

Our concern is tree-murder, harvest
of the forest (she’s worried
they call it “timber”) timber sale A04292
structure wood
could be a rough political situation,
could be
we speak as trees (12)

This is also an excursion into the politics of language, where “tree” to one denotes a living entity and “timber” to another denotes profit and potential livelihood.

From the mid 80s into the early 90s, Wah is preoccupied by the poetic sound of his jazz trumpet. He still eschews punctuation, enjoying the sound of words clanging together. In “Music at the Heart of Thinking 28,” he writes:

Salt for the tongue’s Heart heartening desire
paradoxical cold and hot Canadian presence/
absence mime’s right action right mind et al
simple terms a vision Avison teaches frames
leaks hollows and flows in ’63 she and Olson (33)

Margaret Avison was a featured poet at the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Conference, which brought several of the Black Mountain poets – Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov – as well as others, such as Ginsberg, to Vancouver for the first time, a vision of what was to emerge from UBC. Note the Buddhist reference – “right action right mind” – to the Noble Eightfold Path. Is the “mime” the Buddha?

Cabri completes this project with excerpts from Wah’s three most recent books, including his 2008 Sentenced to Light. From the 1991 So Far he includes the poem “Dead in my Tracks: Wildcat Creek Utaniki” with its incredible register leaps, a mixture of prose and poetry in diary form. Typically, in the Laurier series, the featured poet is asked to provide an afterword. Cabri instead develops this afterword into a discussion with the poet, permitting the reader access to
the poet’s poetics and allowing a much deeper insight into what the poet was attempting to accomplish.

*The False Laws of Narrative* is an excellent selection of Wah’s poetry from his earliest to his most recent. Cabri demonstrates not just an understanding of but a profound respect for Wah both as an individual and as a poet. Cabri has created the standard by which all others should be judged.

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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