

Dance, Monster! Fifty Selected Poems

by Stan Rogal

London, ON: Insomniac Press, 2011, ISBN 9781554830237, 100 pp., \$14.95 paper.

Reviewed by rob mclennan

For several decades now, Rogal has been writing poetry that has quietly become one of the most entertaining and engaging bodies of work in recent Canadian letters while at the same time developing a reputation, rightly or wrongly (I strongly suspect wrongly), for being what one waggish reviewer called “an intellectual redneck.” I believe this outsider status has contributed to a remarkable poet being largely (but not entirely) overlooked by the Canadian poetry establishment.

He began publishing at a time when the dominant fashion in Canadian poetry was far more fusty and austere than it is today. Perhaps Canadians just weren’t ready for Rogal’s boisterous good nature, idiosyncratic style and quick humour that ranges widely from wry to screwball. I have no doubt that if Rogal had been publishing in the United States all this time, he would most certainly be compared, favourably and often, to trailblazers such as Frank O’Hara and Jack Spicer as well as contemporary favourites such as Dean Young and Tony Hoagland.

Paul Vermeersch, “Foreword”

I’m pretty sure I don’t agree with that unknown reviewer’s assessment of Rogal as “an intellectual redneck,” but sure do appreciate Insomniac Press poetry editor Paul Vermeersch’s work in putting together Toronto writer Stan Rogal’s *Dance, Monster! Fifty Selected Poems*. Certainly, Rogal’s poetry can’t easily be compartmentalized, and he is one of a series of Canadian poets, including Anne Carson, Leonard Cohen, Erin Moure, Lisa Robertson, Sylvia Legris, nathalie stephens, Judith Fitzgerald, Gil McElroy and even, to some degree, Phil Hall, who are completely unattached to any stylistic grouping. Where do we put a writer who uses language so freely, sharply and with such deliberate and errant play, and why does such originality manage to fall completely under the radar? It is as though we require a new name under which to place him.

The idea, as well, that if Rogal were publishing in the United States, he would have received far more attention is something I’ve repeatedly heard, and even said, both about Rogal and about the work of Cobourg, Ontario writer Stuart Ross. What is it about the Canadian psyche that holds certain writers away from larger popular and even critical attention? I’ve seen very little in the way of anyone working on an explanation of what exactly causes Canadian literature to ignore writers who we think deserve more attention here, especially if we think they would receive it, had they lived, or even published, south of the border. Over eight trade collections, the collected wit and breadth of Rogal’s poetry explore stock images and myths of North American culture, from folk songs and the open road to Marilyn Monroe, *The Wizard of Oz*, Jack Kerouac, visual art, Jack Spicer, philosophy, linguistics and other oddball moments of intellectual debris, bound together in collage-type leaps across a series of book-length canvases.

For this, Rogal's first volume of selected poems, (uncredited) editor Vermeersch has stayed away from any larger structural or thematic unit to cohere the collection, instead picking fifty of Rogal's poems from eight of his individual poetry collections (all but his first, self-published *Penumbras*, published in 1980). The collection *Dance, Monster! Fifty Selected Poems* appears to be constructed as a sampler as opposed to a particular "best of," showcasing a range across the stylistic and thematic spectrum of Rogal's published poetry, seemingly selecting almost equally from each of his eight trade collections. The specific number of fifty pieces also suggests that the collection's format is borrowed from recent series produced by The Porcupine's Quill and Wilfrid Laurier University Press, both of which similarly collect "essential fifty poems," but with far meatier introductions, something I would argue Rogal's work more than deserves. Why do so many selected poems now appear without introductions, to give a sense of context?

Enigma

To remind you not to think of X.
Fails. Without its bones
 dragged rattling from the closet.
The mere skin enuf to strike a match.
Blazing at the window.
Great Catherine, fer instance.
Strapped to the belly of a stallion
 commands some deathless weight
 no am't of museums can hope to exhume.
Or Turing, early praised for dealing death to enigma
 suffers the charge of two assholes
 & a scrotum full of poisoned apple.
Or Betsy, propelled by a cloven hoof
 crosses the Fraser with a vengeance
 birthing a multitude of fish floating
Belly-up in her wake.

*Increasingly strange. Humanity's
sport with self-extinction. A thot
no dinosaur could muster in 140 million years.*

Forgetting what goes around comes around
Makes poetry a sugar tit
Without recognizing this wood is all middles
No one never ever getting no nearer than this
No one never ever getting no further than this
Advances
X

There is something about Rogal's poetry, much like the poetry of John Newlove, that emerged almost fully formed in his first trade collection, *Sweet Betsy from Pike* (Wolsak & Wynn, 1992), with the structures and themes of his later work already there, simply waiting to be honed, furthered and

expanded. Since then, his trade poetry collections have included *The Imaginary Museum* (ECW Press, 1993), *Personations* (Exile Editions, 1997), *Lines of Embarkation* (Coach House Books, 1999), *(sub rosa)* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2003), *In Search of the Emerald City* (Seraphim, 2004) and *Fabulous Freaks* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2005). A poet of sharp thought and halting line breaks, each of Rogal's individual poetry collections is shaped as much around theme and subject as structure, making the coherence of individual books not the easiest to select from, but this small volume manages to keep to the expansive flavours of what makes a Stan Rogal poem work. Hopefully this collection will increase attention to his writing, counteracting the strange critical silence, and attracting not only new readers to his poetry, but reminding occasional readers just what he has been doing for years. ♡

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