

Colourless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously

by Mark Frutkin

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Reviewed by Heidi Greco

I've long been an admirer of Mark Frutkin's work. For one thing, he seems to write in just about every genre, and manages to do so quite well in each. His memoir, *Erratic North*, provides a good place to start, as it fills in gaps about who he is, which in turn leads to a richer understanding of everything else he writes.

But even without the context of his other writing, this little book stands firmly on its own.

Difficult to classify, it purports to be essays, though they certainly are shorter than what most of us would consider as such, many of them occupying less than half a page. They're snippets of ideas, thought-provoking meditations, engaging explorations – many of which lead the reader into wanting to respond with their own ideas in return.

The title, *Colourless Green Ideas Sleep Furiously*, comes from Noam Chomsky, who created it as an example of a sentence that stands up to syntactical requirements without making much apparent sense. Frutkin's interpretation is that the words serve as "a concise and poetic definition for dreaming" (22). It's appropriate that Frutkin should have chosen his title from the words of a linguist, as so many of the pieces in the book explore aspects of language.

One of the book's unifying elements is its tracking of the development of one of the most basic language tools, our alphabet. As someone who spent years working in libraries, I was surprised to learn that alphabetization, which now seems such an obvious method of organization, was initiated only in the Middle Ages. The previous system had been based in a religious hierarchy: ". . . the Bible came first, the writings of the Church Fathers second, other religious texts followed. The liberal arts came at the end" (50). If this arts-at-the-end list sounds too much like the priorities of some of our current governments, let's just be glad that the rest of us have let go of such disorderly notions and elected to use our ABCs. As those cool heads of the Middle Ages saw it, the alphabet provided an organizational method that was equitable rather than value-laden, based in a system with a long-established set of standardized order.

In treating the individual letters of the alphabet, Frutkin provides a kind of etymology of each, tracing it back to its original shape and significance. 'A' was first the depiction of an ox-head. Who would have known? But by turning it upside-down, its origin becomes suddenly clear – horns and all. In describing the letter 'K' he uses the image of the hand and makes specific reference to the palm. His riff on the palm leads him to this revelation about the size of "a sheet of standard 8 ½ x 11 paper whose size approximates the size of the human head" (59). Or, as I couldn't help but think, the size of this little book, when open.

And this is what I mean about wanting to respond. The ideas in here make me itch for some kind of interactive interface button. When Frutkin comments (in a piece about 'myth') about that word's origins in the word 'mud' as being "strange . . . with its suggestion of our mythical beginnings in fecund clay" (40), I want to jump in with Kurt Vonnegut's Bokononist creation myth of humanity as being "lucky" enough to be "mud that got to sit up and look around." When he tosses off one of his

aphorisms about modern art as something the “common man knows just about enough about . . . to have been inoculated against it” (29), I think of Robyn Sarah and her claim in *Little Eureka*s that when it comes to poetry, high school English teachers too often have a similar effect on their students.

But perhaps the most intriguing of the ongoing one-sided conversations in the book is his series of ‘proofs’ for the (non)existence of God. Written as brief but rather elegant if often-circular arguments (but wait, I want to interject: Isn’t the infinity sign a kind of circular argument with itself?), these are each delightful in their own succinct entirety.

Despite its small size and the brevity of its many short pieces, this is a book to savour. And while I don’t suspect Frutkin of planting this in the book for me to use as a note of closure, I can’t resist. He cites Charles Seife’s assertion that “a well-designed, beautiful [scientific] theory will be ‘simple, compact and spare; it will give a sense of completeness and often an eerie sense of symmetry’” (74). He goes on to say that “The same can be said of a well-designed, beautiful novel or a well-designed, beautiful poem” (74). And, I contend, the same applies to this book. Completeness, a sense of symmetry, a profundity based in clarity and simplicity; it’s all here. ♣

Heidi Greco lives in South Surrey, BC, taking comfort in the green of the almost-forest that surrounds her suburban home.

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