

Sweet Assorted: 121 Takes From a Tin Box

by Jim Christy

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Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

Jim Christy's childhood was largely spent in a rough part of Philadelphia, inspiring his keen awareness of life's picaresque aspects. His disillusionment with America's involvement in the Vietnam War radicalized his hardy spirit and impelled him to move to this country in 1968. Since then, he has become an adventurous, accomplished author of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Past works include *Junkman* and *Scalawags*.

Christy is now in his sixties, old enough to have amassed possessions and organize his estate. His literary career gives him the option of collecting his private papers and donating them to the government for posterity – and a tax write-off. But what about his ephemera, such as the contents of the titular tin box? He chooses to share them with his readers, offering amusement and perhaps even some insight in the process.

The book's premise is that the author takes around 121 objects that he stored in a "Peek Frean's" (7) "Sweet Assorted box" (7) and reveal the stories behind them. This arrangement implies some laxness on his part. True, it is easier to draw inspiration from an object than it is to create a series of stories that may have been inspired by more abstract means, as was the case with *Junkman*. On the other hand, the process of organization and narration implies a certain discipline. In other books, illustration merely serves the text, providing colourful confirmation. Here, both are teamed; photographs of souvenirs determine the content. The selection of random items creates a free-form atmosphere that promises the ease that the short entries deliver.

As Christy lets each object unleash its flood of memories, the perceptive reader discerns certain truths about the man. One of the most important is that his radicalism is not expressed through mere ideological commitment, but a non-partisan suspicion of powerful wrongdoers. In 1978, he published a *Weekend Magazine* report that supported the struggles of black South Africans against apartheid and was dismissed as a "a Commie dupe" (168). When the defunct Saturday newspaper supplement finally published his report of guerilla leader Robert Mugabe's massacre of white Rhodesian teachers, he was denounced as a "right-wing fanatic" (168). Since the world now knows Mugabe as Zimbabwe's tyrannical president, the ideologues' whipping boy can trumpet his clairvoyance.

This skepticism is also applied to historical heroes, who are widely admired today. He offers a Kennedy half-dollar to readers because he views that president as "a charlatan and the man who got America involved in the Vietnam War" (93). Contemporary liberalism is more subtly dismissed as "jeune protest and left-wing media clowns" (34) – presumably the "Occupy" movement and Michael Moore. His alternative is American anarchist Emma Goldman, an outsider who was deported in 1919 by Attorney-General Palmer – a victim of his notorious raids.

One of Christy's more depressing revelations is the persistence of racism in the US, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A North Carolina sheriff confined the young adventurer and his friends, in order to prevent them from attending Dr. Martin Luther King's funeral. Local white supremacists prevented a St. Augustine woman from renting her property to anyone because her last tenants had been an interracial couple.

He can appreciate North America's uniqueness and humour. Florida's St. Augustine has its rough edges, but it is a historically unique city. On a trip to the Alaska Highway, he met an old native man who told him that the first white man he ever met was a black soldier.

Christy's traditional attitudes towards women are tempered with by a sympathetic understanding of the realities of their existence. In Swaziland's royal palace, a friend points out that female lions were more dangerous than the males who guarded it. "Ain't that always the way it is" (144) is a reply that could have been echoed by any number of macho male movie heroes. However, he realizes that central Chinese women invented *nushu*, a woman's language, in order to communicate with each other in a male-dominated society.

His empathy for the underdog never degenerates into a reflexive populism. His experiences as a film extra led him to conclude that television stars such as Ed Asner and Scatman Crothers were better company than their lower-ranked peers. The bigger they are, the nicer they are? To him, perhaps.

The publisher classifies this work as a memoir, even if it is the literary equivalent of IKEA furniture. The back-page bio provides the basic structure and the memorabilia cue the stories that, compiled, reveal the author's world in an interesting, understandable manner. ☺

Ronald Charles Epstein has reviewed Jim Christy's books for the *Canadian Book Review Annual* and this website.

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