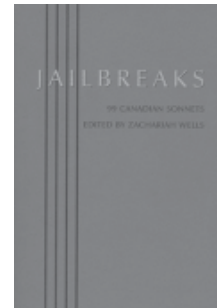


Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets
Edited By Zach Wells
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Canadian poetry is healthy, and the clear sign is the attention given to the sonnet given by Zach Wells. This anthology, *Jailbreaks*, takes its title from the Margaret Avison poem “Snow” and indicates an editorial leaning towards variations on the form. As I flipped the book open, the names on the title pages delighted me: Don Coles, Eric Ormsby, George Johnston, Irving Layton, P. K. Page and more of the best. These authors stand as a delightful cross-section of the finest craftspeople in Canadian poetry, and the concentration, of this anthology, on one form is a long lacking study. Wells’ redress is diverse and palatable.

Wells chooses poets spanning a century going back as far as Charles G. D. Roberts, and continues to current ARC editor Anita Lahey. The selection is particularly in tune with who is current, accessible, and apt. With dexterity, the collection bridges textbook example sonnet forms to multiple variations on sonnet structure. A task Wells likens to “the proverbial herding of cats” and indeed, it is no small feat that he has pulled together such a stunning collection. For those of us who believe that form is a requirement of the skill-set of a poet, much like scales are required for musicianship, this book easily stands as an example of variety and talent. The collection showcases the sonnet form in all its

incarnations and the poets of Canada who most deserve to be showcased.

George Johnston's "Cathleen Sweeping" is an example of a near Spenserian sonnet with its internal couplets and palindromic octet. This elegant craft is set with a voyeuristic parent watching a child and her imagined world. This poem is the foil to the Robert Frost quote, "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom". Johnston begins this poem in wisdom and ends in delight, all the while maintaining the sonnet's true theme: Love. In this example, it is love for a child.

The wind blows, and with a little broom
She sweeps against the cold clumsy sky.
She's three years old. What an enormous room
The world is that she sweeps, making fly
A little busy dust! And here am I
Watching her through the window in the gloom
Of this disconsolate spring morning, my
Thoughts as small and busy as her broom. (24)

These emotive, structurally sound choices make this pretty red anthology worth its price. Don Coles provides an example of a sonnet variation using ABBA structures, masculine rhyme, and a uniquely spaced and formed rhymed couplet to cap the poem "Sampling From a Dialogue". This time, narrative creeps into the bedroom of a couple in the midst of breaking down. With Coles' usual and apparent finesse, the subject takes over the form and it is easy to lose the structure in the apt wording and imagery. This is the best kind of formal poetry. The kind of form allows the reader to forget about structure and become involved in subject.

Stopping by the bedroom wall he says God

damn it Marge (if that's her name), we have been through
this forty thousand times now let's have a new
line, I need to hear something different, and this odd
and, well, obviously inflated, analogy comes into his mind ... (17)

It is easy to be carried away by the narrative and linguistic adeptness governed by the authors. However, this is no easy authorial feat and these poems provide examples of high achievement. Wells has decided wisely on his inclusions.

Jailbreaks: 99 Canadian Sonnets is a book that, simply, is *a must* for readers and writers of poetry. It is a book that can be read the first time for enjoyment, the second time for education, the third time for astonishment, and then the book can be re-read again. It could easily become a textbook in a poetry course and should be. (Yes, that's a hint). It provides example after example of enjoyable and deft craft.

After several readings, much reflection, and much running about saying to whoever would listen, "You must hear this," and "just one more," without hesitation, I can recommend this little red book of poems.

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