

Making sense of dark times

ON POETRY • JoANN BALINGIT • September 28, 2009

September 28, 2009 11:20 AM

"Poetry has given people solace for thousands of years, entertained and nurtured them, but these days it seems odd to many of us," says Jeanne Murray Walker, introducing her latest book of poems, *New Tracks, Night Falling* (Eerdman's Publishing, 2009).

"It doesn't affect the stock market, and it can't change the course of a war. Why read poetry?"

Indeed, why? The 56 poems in Walker's seventh collection try to answer this question by taking on Big Questions. In the preface (an unusual document in a book of contemporary poetry) the author admits she's been finding life difficult in these dark times.

The mysteries of "why we humans keep opting for war," why we die, the source of grace and "the deep loneliness of being a separate, conscious human being" are questions, she declares, that "finally drive me to God."

And to poetry.

Unpredictable in its "wistful groping toward truth," poetry is nevertheless the means by which "I have discovered most of what I know," says Walker, a professor of English at the University of Delaware.

She also is an Atlantic Monthly Fellow at Bread Loaf School of English and has been awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts and an N.E.A. Fellowship, as well as many other grants and awards. She serves on the editorial board of *Shenandoah* and *Image Magazine*.



Clearly, Walker's poems are written in the shadows of 9/11 and other global calamities, but her poetry articulates a response to these events by telling personal stories, full of subtle details: The narrator of "Neighbor" misses how the screen door used to bang behind a friend who has died. An elderly uncle dies on Sept. 12, 2001, from "all day watching the airplanes inside [his] TV."

The poems "Revenge" and "Anger" study America's acceptance of collateral damage, how some childhood grudge might be nurtured enough to drive a person to mass murder, and how strangers fear each other.

"Oh to live before we made / separations our thesis," the poet writes.

The need to refrain from acknowledging one another runs so deep in people in "Ritual" that even a small plane's violent tossing in a deadly storm cannot break down its passengers' reserve:

*and I thought how odd it was
that our names would appear
together in the papers,
like the cast of a musical,
who died, separately,
without ritual or touching.*

The force that drives Walker's poems is a fierce desire to connect -- to connect readers, also -- to friends, strangers, the rain, a bee, family histories, mysteries. The desire to connect is a constant invisible force, like gravity: "I feel the pull of the earth as I lift / breakfast plates..."

The "Separation" poems beginning Walker's book are followed by three more sections of poems grouped as "Choices," "Tracks" and "Resolutions." A favorite of mine, "Adam's Choice," shows Adam learning to accept "what he's been given" -- Eve, that is -- even though "the name / she gave the yak chafes him, / and she sings off key."

Walker's testimonies and anecdotes are delivered in a voice that's

frank and friendly. While she keenly acknowledges darkness and disillusionment, she hangs on for dear life to humor and hope. "Staying Power" (about God's improbable, amazing staying power), "Little Blessing for My Floater" and "Centering" are wonderful poems about accepting the darkness with the light, and vice versa.

It is tougher than ever to believe, and just as tough to be skeptical -- a dilemma Jeanne Murray Walker's poetry deftly and bravely explores.

State Poet Laureate JoAnn Balingit writes an occasional column looking at verse and First State poets. Her chapbook of poetry, "Your Heart and How It Works" (InSPIRED, \$8) has just been published.

If You Go

What: poet **Jeanne Murray Walker** reading from *New Tracks, Night Falling*

Part of the University of Delaware's Department of English Speakers Series

Where: Room 127, Memorial Hall, UD campus

When: 7 p.m., Tuesday

Admission: Free

Of interest: Reception and book-signing to follow

STAYING POWER

*In appreciation of Maxim Gorky at the International
Convention of Atheists. 1929*

Like Gorky, I sometimes follow my doubts
outside and question the metal sky,
longing to have the fight settled, thinking
I can't go on like this, and finally I say

all right, it is improbable, all right, there
is no God. And then as if I'm focusing
a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up.
It's the attention, maybe, to what isn't

there that makes the notion flare like
a forest fire until I have to spend the afternoon
dragging the hose to put it out. Even
on an ordinary day when a friend calls,

tells me they've found melanoma,
complains that the hospital is cold, I say God.
God, I say as my heart turns inside out.
Pick up any language by the scruff of its neck,

wipe its face, set it down on the lawn,
and I bet it will toddle right into the godfire
again, which--though they say it doesn't
exist—can send you straight to the burn unit.

Oh, we have only so many words to think with.
Say God's not fire, say anything, say God's
a phone, maybe. You know you didn't order a phone,
but there it is. It rings. You don't know who it could be.

You don't want to talk, so you pull out
the plug. It rings. You smash it with a hammer
till it bleeds springs and coils and clobbered up
metal bits. It rings again. You pick it up

and a voice you love whispers hello.

--Originally published in *Poetry*

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