

21ST CENTURY BREAD BY LELAND JAMIESON

Reviewed by Oke Mbachu

Leland Jamieson's *21st Century Bread* is a powerhouse commitment to metrical, ear-rhyming verse. Divided into six sections, this handy collection of 99 poems celebrates and muses on family, memory, family memories (some of the poems are dedicated to relatives and others), worldly observations, and philosophy. The sections appear to unfold chronologically, with childhood remembrances gracing the first section, while teenage/school-year incidents, fatherhood and grand-fatherhood pieces appear in the second, third and later sections. Although not exclusively, the latter sections take on a more cosmic/metaphysical air: the speaker's father visits from another realm, mollusks give their two cents on the state of the world ("Prophecy of a Mollusk"), while some other poems are spurred by Biblical passages and *Earth Chronicles* by Zechariah Sitchin. Archimedes and Plato also make appearances in other parts of this well-rounded book.

All the while, the anchor holding these diverse poems in place are the precise ropes of meter and shiny hooks of rhyme. The majority of the poems are employed in tetra- and pentameter, while dressed in couplets, tercets, quatrains, sestets, and other forms. Petrarchan sonnets and occasional sestinas also make appearances. Although the thematic ventures of the poems are compelling enough, the reader might find himself or herself eyeing the rhyme schemes, for they stand out. They do not stand out as roadblocks, however, but as consciously-placed guiding steps to the poems' ends.

Naturally, the best poems combine vivid imagery with unobtrusive rhyming, as evidenced in "Hearthstone in the Watershed":

*This watershed is laced with walls of stone
Hardscrabble farmers clanged with plough, dug up
by "Gee!" and "Haw!" and dragged to bound fields blown
so bare by winter no crow swooped to sup....*

Jamieson's poem's of social and natural observation are also noteworthy as they demonstrate his formal poetry skills in combination with his human wisdom. Poems like "In the Crowd at the Big H," "By Floundering," and "A Modest Hope" fit that mold, as does "That Elixir," with such lines as

*Some say that marriage is a hostage-dance:
The taker and the taken in a trance
exchange their masks. Within, they each grow ashen
in search of that elixir called compassion.*

In other poems, "Hook and Ladder" wishes on a fire truck's ladder as a device for fetching night dreams lost on waking, and "Rapture in the Sun" is a juicy reminder of William Carlos Williams' "Just to Say." While some of the lines in the collection might

appear as syntactically complex or irregular (a sacrifice formal poets have to occasionally make for the sake of strict meter and rhyme), a second, closer reading should clarify the intent of these lines.

The last section of the book (“Coda for Readers & Poets: Twelve Dances”) is (as the heading proclaims) dedicated to poets, readers, and to the writing of formal poetry. In it, the formal poet and poem take metaphorical forms (“Formal Poet as a Whittler,” “Form as Kindling”) that inform and elevate the nature of this classic poetic practice.

“Scrabbling for Scarlet Oaks,” addressing the process of writing formal poems, says

*With serendipity he stumbles on
those sensate words that rhyming lines evoke,
with images a meter spawns: clear-drawn
rough acorns prefigure scarlet oak.*

However, more than serendipity is at work in *21st Century Bread*: the combination of memory, insight, worldview, formal and overall poetic know-how leaven this collection to the considerable piece of work that it is.

“Review of 21st Century Bread by Leland Jamieson” © 2007 by Oke Mbachu

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