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Walking with the Bear: Selected and New Poems (review)

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Prairie Schooner, Volume 77, Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 186-189 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.2003.0004>



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The motif of the missing works far better and more broadly and holds the collection together extraordinarily well. The absent characters – the dead father of the speaker in “Prodigal,” Wayne and Jill in “Passengers, Remain Calm,” Ricky in “Here’s a Little Something to Remember Me By,” and numerous others – provide the context by which we understand and care about the characters who are actually present in the stories. As human beings, we all live among the missing as well as among those who are here at any given moment. Chaon’s writing is engaging enough, subtle enough, and powerful enough that this idea is no trick or lesson. His use of deflection in each story allows him to render this basic human truth in the collection as a whole.

The greatest strength of the collection, though, is that every story stands on its own. It’s no wonder that two stories have won national awards, for it’s difficult to pick the best one in *Among the Missing*. “Big Me,” the O. Henry Award winner, is certainly ambitious; this story is extremely funny and also provocative, with a twelve year old who imagines himself a detective in a large metropolis, a detective who investigates a man he believes to be his older self. “Prodigal” may be the most distinctive piece stylistically because it depends on a contemplative, reminiscent, first-person address by a father to his son. Or, perhaps, “Prosthesis” is the most stylistically distinctive piece because it achieves so much depth in just seven pages and because it makes some of the most overt claims about any of the collection’s characters in its final paragraph. The events from which each story deflects are often shocking, by their very nature, but each story focuses not so much on those loud events as on the related incidents and moments of individual grace, mystery, and imagination.

Each story asks a different version of the question: who are you now and how have you become that person? Dan Chaon’s writing makes the question worth contemplating through each character and each story. Without relinquishing to an easy answer, *Among the Missing* satisfies our desire to ponder and to appreciate the variety of choices and also the lack of choices we each face and accumulate daily as we continue to become ourselves.

Judith Minty, **Walking with the Bear: Selected and New Poems**,
Michigan State University

Reviewed by Elinor Benedict

With toughness, honesty, and a spare kind of beauty, Judith Minty pours an intimate understanding of the earth, as well as of what lies above and beneath it, into this artfully assembled volume linked with images of “the bear.” The imagery is both visual and linguistic. Under a cover almost blazing with a red and black woodcut of a bear on the prowl by Anne Lar-

son Hollerbach, the poet confirms her role as a spirited hunter of whatever it takes to live at peace with fear. In finding words for this search she has become in this volume a unique voice from the Midwest, speaking powerfully enough for all regions to hear.

Minty adds twenty new poems to selections from three previous collections – *Lake Songs and Other Fears*, *In the Presence of Mothers and Dancing the Fault*. She also includes poems from three chapbooks – *12 Letters to My Daughters*, *Yellow Dog Journal* and *Counting the Losses*. The large collection that emerges is a book to hold onto, read and re-read. As vivid impressions of fierce animals and weather sink into consciousness, the attuned reader learns with the poet to “walk with the bear,” rather than to cower, run away, or turn for the kill. In “Sleepwalkers” she salutes a violent bear of a storm:

All night, a banging and pounding
has brought this house to its knees.
 . . . something heavy
thunders over the roof. It roars
at the windows, claws at the doors.
Yes, I am afraid, but not of this. – Afraid
of turning, of walking away.

The forces of nature often dominate her work, but Minty is no mere nature poet. Nor is she a regionalist, although the lake country of Michigan inhabits many of the poems, especially those of *Yellow Dog Journal*. In this strong chapbook, wisely printed in its entirety, the poet tells unforgettably of two seasons living alone in a cabin near Lake Superior. In selections from her later works, she writes of California with its gray whales, earthquakes, rainstorms, and giant trees. No matter where she is, Minty is a poet of the ancient elements – earth, fire, water, and air – and of their animal and human counterparts. As skillfully as she describes the attraction and repulsion of nature, she reveals the magnetism between mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters, friends and lovers. She tugs at the reader’s own buried memories, moving them to the surface. Especially in the chapbook *12 Letters to My Daughters* she puts her finger on places almost too painful to touch in the process of two girls growing up and leaving home. Yet the poems are comforting in their truthfulness, their tinge of humor in longing.

Counting the Losses, another chapbook printed in its entirety, combines sharp images of her own maturing, told in third person, as she searches for the answer to the question, “How to be a woman in this universe.” This long poem intersperses sharp vignettes from childhood and advancing womanhood with found quotations from Aristotle and Confucius, George Eliot and Eleanor Roosevelt, and even from an unknown eighty-five-year-old woman who advises, “If I had it to do again, I would travel lighter . . .” The meditation becomes an enlightening study of the cost of

being both a woman and a whole person. Although the poem may speak to women more than to men, Minty observes, “. . . our fathers were our first loves.” She uses the image of “tree,” a talisman associated with her father and a male mentor, beginning with a remembered flowering crab tree in her childhood backyard:

It must have been
her father who carried her, her hands
like blossoms on his shoulders, feeling
roots stretch down to hold on . . .

This to carry inside. Tree. This word
flowing through. This small word to survive.

In the poems from *Dancing the Fault*, Minty moves back and forth between the lake country of Michigan and the rainy coast of California, as she did literally in her career as professor of creative writing in several universities. She loses her father and endures separation from loved ones, but finds consolation in the natural world and in friendships with colleagues. The concluding poem in this section, “To Christine, on Her Way to China: An Earthquake Poem,” induces the reader to “dance the fault” with her persona as she buys an earthshakingly expensive blouse at the urging of her friend, just as California begins to quake.

Minty’s final section presents work in which her voice has matured to a mellow darkness. She walks with bear, deer, and dog in her earthwise way, continuing the journey through inner and outer wilderness begun in the first two sections from *Lake Songs and Other Fears* and *In the Presence of Mothers*. Now she possesses a calm awareness of the unknown. The poem “Walking the Beach in Fog” looks ahead:

. . . Today there’s just the dog and me,
whatever waits ahead remains unseen.
Even these deer tracks fade to nothing. If I
walk deeper into this fog, the dog may not follow me
and if she doesn’t, what will know me there?

One of the most frighteningly memorable poems near the book’s conclusion, “Destroying the Cormorant Eggs,” glimpses a “fisherman, or madman” crushing the eggs with “his staff much like a shepherd’s crook” on a remote Lake Michigan island. He ostensibly goes about this business to save the fish for humans to catch, but to Minty he is an emblem of mindless destruction:

. . . Black
as the night waters of a man’s dream where he gropes
below the surface, groaning with the old hungers,
the luminescence of his skin covered by something
so thick his arms stroke heavy with it, the water
without end, and no island, no island in sight.

Strong themes and imagery in Minty's work almost obscure the fact of her well-honed craftsmanship. She achieves her power without resorting to excess of diction, metaphor, rhetoric, or quirky play with punctuation. In the web of human relations, she avoids sentimentality; in the depths of the unconscious, she resists portentousness. *Walking with the Bear* witnesses to the maturity of this poet, whose many awards during thirty years of publishing include *Poetry's* Eunice Tietjens Award and the Mark Twain Award from the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. If previously she was best known in the Midwest and in California, she now merits the attention of readers from coast to coast.

Leo Litwak, **The Medic: Life and Death in the Last Days of WWII**,
Algonquin Books
Louise Steinman, **The Souvenir: A Daughter Discovers Her Father's
War**, Algonquin Books

Reviewed by Gaynell Gavin

Despite the plethora of writing about World War II, two books illustrate that there is still much of value to tell of this era. In his memoir, *The Medic*, written more than fifty years after the events that he relates, novelist Leo Litwak brings a fiction writer's sense of craft to a compelling, well-paced narrative of his own wartime experiences. Although writing nonfiction, Litwak discusses forthrightly in his book's prologue the inherent difficulty in distinguishing "events as they were and as they have become in memory" while disclosing his invention of names and "composites of people, places, and units." Thus, early on, he gives readers a context for the interrelated roles of narrative, memory, and imagination in constructing memoir, especially when recalling individuals, places, and events half a century after they occurred.

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants – whose survival of virulent anti-Semitism, civil disturbances, and World War I in Europe was remarkable – young Litwak was disappointed initially at his assignment to a medical detachment. "Medics carried no weapons. They operated under the rules of the Geneva Convention and had the status of noncombatants . . . I had imagined myself an armed, vengeful warrior." Yet before the war's end he found that he had "followed [his] heart and was glad [he] was a medic without a gun." The journey that led to his conclusion predictably included treating U. S. soldiers (including close friends) and enemy troops in instances ranging from minor injuries to loss of limbs and loss of lives.

While Litwak's narrative voice is direct, complex issues thread the tapestry of this wartime story, and none is more important than the issue of race that Litwak describes as "woven into the fabric of American life. Pull on it and everything would come apart." With understated irony, he illus-