

The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku: A Reader Response Approach
by Randy Brooks (Brooks Books, Taylorville, IL) 224 pages, 6”
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Reviewed by Michael Ketchek

Blyth wrote that the reader of haiku has to, “play an active part in its dynamic recreation.” This book by Randy Brooks, a professor at Millikin University in Decatur Illinois, proves just how true that statement is. *The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku* is a collection of haiku with commentary by the students of his haiku course at the university. The book also has haiku by the students, reflections on different aspects of haiku, such as haiku aesthetics, and some linked verse by the students.

That some of Brooks’ deep understanding of haiku has been conveyed to his students is evident by their thoughtful responses to the haiku presented in this book. A wonderful example of how the reader plays, “an active part” in interpreting a haiku can be seen in the three student responses to this haiku:

our father
in the rear-view
mirror

PMF Johnson

Kelsey Meredith has this to say, “I can picture my own father’s face in the rear-view mirror, looking back at my brother and I in the backseat...My brother and I would laugh as dad reached his arm back and played a guitar or piano solo on our knees.

Emily Crutchfield had a totally different perspective, “This haiku says a lot to me; it seemed very sad and depressing. I envisioned the writer being in the driver’s seat, looking at his or her father in the rear-view mirror... I imagined the father being an old man needing his child to chauffeur him to appointments...”

Charlie Decker finds another perspective and another layer of meaning, “ “Our father” makes me think first of the dad of two kids, one of which is obviously old enough to drive. They are leaving their father in the driveway because he did something to drive them off. However, “Our Father” is the beginning of a very common prayer we say in the Catholic Church, so in that aspect I think of people leaving the comfort and reassurance of their religion.”

It is fascinating to find a favorite haiku in the chapters featuring the haiku of Peggy Lyles, Wally Swist, and George Swede and read the thoughtful responses to these haiku by the students. There are chapters on poetics, aesthetics, Basho and more, all with students’ commentary

There are also haiku by the students themselves. A few fine examples:

home from work
no dirty dishes
but my own
Debbie Meyers

unable to cry
I sharpen a
stack of pencils
Nicole Silverman

stuck in class
a frisbee
hits the window
Rob Spurling

This book with its outstanding commentary on so many haiku illustrates the power of these short poems to provoke varied thoughts and emotions. Brooks has caused his students to feel and think about haiku. This book will induce the same thoughtfulness in its readers.

