

And I especially enjoy her homage to fellow New Hampshire poet Robert Frost: *hemlock snow / the wingshake / of a crow*. Whatever the season, this lovely book is worth a careful read. ◻■

REVIEWED BY TERRI L. FRENCH

Blessed: Modern Haibun on Almost Every Despair by Andrew Riutta (Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2022). 164 pages, 6" x 9". Four color covers, perfect soft bound. ISBN: 978-1-958408-07-0. \$20 from www.redmoonpress.com

The title and cover of a book are what first draw a reader in, and both do so in the case of Andrew Riutta's latest collection, *Blessed: Modern Haibun on Almost Every Despair*. Straight away, we are drawn to the words "blessed" and "despair." One would not expect an individual experiencing despair, especially "almost every despair," to feel particularly blessed, and yet, in reading the haibun, a sense of gratefulness and hope prevails. How does this come about? The cover image hints at the answer. The abstract image, created by writer/artist, Mark Meyer, appears to be, at first glance, a photo looking into an empty glass but could just as easily be seen as an expanding galaxy. This to me suggests both introspection and extrospection on the writer's part—a flawed man's humble search for self through contemplation, life experience, relationships, nature, religion and spirituality. Through Riutta's writing, we feel his struggle to find balance between despair and hope, loss and love, and shame, forgiveness and grace.

Religion and spirituality are peppered throughout the prose and haiku in unusual ways. From the grandfather whose expression "ain't that something," which Riutta calls "the purest form of gospel," to Dollar Store Jesus candles, medicine men, sweat lodges, and toothless Buddha's—Riutta has a way of bringing divinity and doctrine down to earth.

Riutta has an unobstructed writing style and a knack for combining commonplace objects and mundane, everyday occurrences with the beauty of nature:

instant coffee	black leafless trees—
I swallow the crack	smoking a cigarette
of dawn	I inhale snowflakes

Most of the pieces in the book are dedicated to the individuals who inspired Riutta and who have, even through small acts or with a few words, played a significant role in the writer's life. Old friends, acquaintances, ex-lovers, family members, all have—whether they realized it or not—brought questions, answers, and snip-its of wisdom that Riutta has pondered during his life and through his writing.

The question of self-forgiveness is addressed in the haibun “William Muckinen”: “What if we had to take on all the pain and grief we gave others over the years—whether you meant it or not—in a single day? Could you survive?” Riutta doesn't shy away from the big questions and the darkness of life. Cancer, PTSD, addiction, and death are all dealt with starkly and honestly.

Riutta draws from actual life experience and real people for his work. He mentions his mentor, fellow-Michigander and writer Jim Harrison, in a couple of his pieces. It's easy to see Harrison's influence in Riutta's work. A hard-working, hard-living, rural mid-westerner with a reverence for the natural world. Like Harrison, Riutta often uses crows and dogs in his pieces.

“If I had a bottle, the crow in the maple tree outside my window would likely have all the answers,” Riutta says in the haibun *Sober*. “But I don't. So it doesn't.” “Just about every day, crows at the trash cans sing songs about me and laugh,” he says in “Chinese Zen Poem II.” But in “Weighing the Day's Gospels,” the crows seem to have a message—one not easily discerned: ““Only in death will all this sadness part' is what they're saying. Or something like that,” he says.

Dogs, too, are seen in varying lights—as mere barking annoyances to expired vessels of creation. “Inside a dead, hollow dog, the universe explodes. Expands,” Riutta writes in “End of September.”

Again, the writer compares and contrasts the lowly to the lofty from crows and dogs to the wind and the stars.

winter wind —	in the sycamore grove,
the old dying furnace	beer bottle caps
our only hope	staring at the stars

This book of seventy-eight haibun merits many readings. The stories will touch you, shake you, and make you think, wonder, and look at the world and your own life differently. But, as the humble poet asserts in the haibun “Mud and Beer,” “sometimes I think the stains on my pillow tell the stories more sharply than any of my poems.” ■

REVIEWED BY JEROME BERGLUND

Teaching and Learning Haiku in English by David McMurray (University of Kagoshima, Fujiki Printing: 2022). 148 pages, 7" x 10". Red cloth with gold titles, hardcover. ISBN: 978-4-9901352-66-6. *Teaching and Learning Haiku in English* is available in Japan from the Kinokuniya Book Center's e-mail: keoo@kinokuniya.co.jp. The book can also be shipped to U.S. and Canadian postal addresses using PayPal to David McMurray (e-mail: mcmurray@int.iuk.ac.jp).

Novices and experts alike should be thrilled to learn that David McMurray has recently published a highly accessible and elegantly relayed text, *Teaching and Learning Haiku in English*. The book can be instrumental towards helping clarify one's understanding of haiku's English applications, for personal usage as well as how such concepts may be communicated effectually to enhance the student's comprehension and practical application in the classroom. *Teaching and Learning* does not constrain its focus merely to work from European and American English practitioners. From his fruitful editorial connection, associations, and acquaintance with the countless luminaries submitting writing from all around the globe, McMurray frequently exhibits and recounts striking examples of English haiku from Africa, South America, India, and many other places worldwide.

McMurray is one of the foremost experts in this deceptively nuanced poetry and a proponent of its continual adaptation across languages and cultures. The Canadian-born author is presently teaching in Japan at the University of Kagoshima, and he has simultaneously been