

Naomi Beth Wakan, *Poetry That Heals*. Brunswick ME: Shanti Art Publishing, 2018. ISBN 978-1-947067-28-8, 104 pages. soft cover, 5½ x 8½; \$18.95\$US. naomiwakan.com/nw_books.html or shantiarts.com

Reviewed by Guy Simser

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With *Poetry That Heals*, Wakan provides an engaging personal focus on over 30 years of writing haiku and related Japanese short poetic forms (senryu, tanka, renku and haibun). In 12 short sections averaging 8 pages each, she describes her learning process and the benefits of writing haiku and related short poems in the Japanese haikai tradition. The book reminded me of a family visitor ages ago who with eighth-decade grey hair sat at the dining room table and engaged us with tales, to the point that I forget my young age and began to ask questions, to enjoy my participation. For some time after the visitor left, I ran the conversation over and over in my mind and slowly absorbed the understated wisdom.

Wakan's unassuming writing style is light but serves her well. The book is enlivened by related colour illustrations and comments on haiga (poetry/image). Notably, she resists pushing her own work. There is only one Wakan haiku. The majority are from N.A. and a few classic Japanese poets; only in the response-poetry section do we see more of her work and with good reason as her purpose is to describe the challenges and enjoyment of response poetry (tanka and renku) with examples. Key however, is her primary focus on what her long relationship with Japanese short form poetry has meant to her personal growth, her community of friends and her broader understanding of "life". Although Wakan makes it clear she has no "spiritual label" she admits to an inclination toward the Buddhist "middle way". That is apparent.

When I opened *Poetry that Heals*, my first thought given the title was that it may be one of those 1970-80's self-help books which flooded bookshelves after the 1960's breakup of pre-WW2 social conformist norms. Relieved to read in her intro that she will not use the terms life force, inner voice, spiritual, and sacred space common to many of those self-help books, I readily read on. That was a time of marketing the exotic: the psychedelic "wave", the Castenada illusions, Zen books, and T-group retreat enticements. It was also when, with the gloss of the "Beats", haiku poems began to slip over poetry journal transoms and found their way into acceptance.

Who might find the reading of Wakan's book rewarding? For starters, I suspect the mid-lifer perhaps from 40 years up who has begun to examine the "where am I stage of life"; the one who is not entirely satisfied and seeking more during their "dash to the finish". Well aren't we all?

A second likely "market" as publishers would state it, would be the younger entry-level poetry writer inclined to "creativity". The one who enjoys literature and perhaps has tinkered with poetry as creative self-expression. Some of these readers may have tried Rap or Spoken Word poetry and are seeking another genre with which to work. Others may see the "deceptively" simple haiku, a 3-liner as a good (easier) place to begin. For such experimenters, Wakan's emphasis on what the writing of haiku *taught her* is persuasive and encouraging as well as specific in the basics of writing haiku related forms. Additionally, her positive remarks about the supportive haiku community may persuade such "silent poetry tinkers" to enter the haiku circle. Her book would be a good place to start.

Finally, perhaps school Literature teachers. Particularly those who are interested in bringing some depth to introductory poetry classes. Why? Wakan's book as poetry memoir may assist these teachers in understanding that the *writing* of haiku is not the *calculation* of haiku: $3 + 15 = \text{haiku}$. Rather the emphasis is

better understood as haiku being (nature observation + “leap” to observer/writer’s “feeling”) with emphasis on *feeling*. She writes four brief sections on haiku which I believe would offer teachers a useful haiku overview with haiku examples: Being here now;

Reading haiku; How to write haiku; Ginko – The Haiku walk. That’s enough for a starter. Briefed by this information I believe teachers would be more comfortable with their difficult task...encouraging students to write their *feelings/associations* of *discovery* in nature.

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