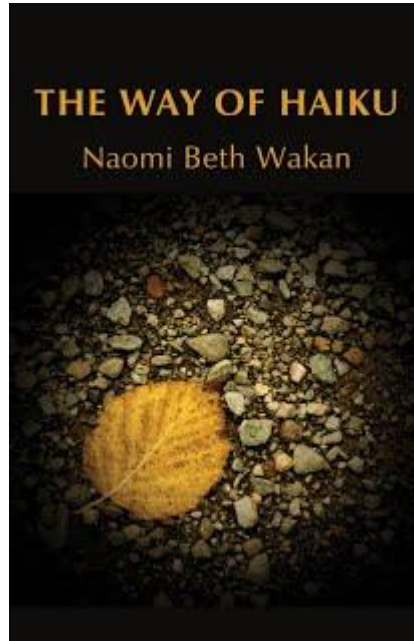


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The Way of Haiku, Naomi Beth Wakan, published in 2019 by Shanti Arts Publishing, Shanti Arts LLC 193 Hillside Road, Brunswick, Maine 04011, www.shantiarts.com, Cover image by Christine Brooks Cote, Crow Haiga by Carole MacRury, ISBN: 978-1-947067-67-7 (softcover), 109 pages, ISBN: 978-1-947067-68-4 (ebook), Library of Congress Control Number: 2018964699, USD15.95

Review by Susumu Takiguchi, (Founder of the World Haiku Club)

Naomi Beth Wakan has produced a very useful introductory book on haiku. If it is meant to be a text book, then it is one of the few least harmful of the haiku text books around, outside Japan.

The targeted audience may be a haiku novice but it would also make good reading among those general readers who are curious about haiku but have not yet got around to getting to know it. They would lose their prejudice that haiku is an insignificant frivolity and get interested in it but still would stay within reason, rather than being carried away to become another haiku fanatic.

This is because the book is a guiding hand along the path of haiku-writing, an ‘hors’ oeuvre’ in the author’s words, to whet the appetite, encouraging the reader to find his/her way to the main course.

One could even say that this new book can be useful for those so-called seasoned haijin who, inadvertently, may have taken wrong turns or gone astray in their haiku journey but do not, or would not, recognize it.

Ideally placed to bring out such a book, Wakan is well-informed about the haiku community present and past, well-balanced in her appraisal of different schools of thought and is good at presenting her own personal opinions and experiences along with the views of established commentators. One can only admire her capability of explaining such a convoluted subject as this with such lucidity and in plain English.

The book deals with all that is needed for a beginner of haiku-writing and more. It covers basics of haiku, its history, main topics for discussion, controversial points, quotations of some leading commentators and some exercises and useful tips.

The moment one starts reading this book, one gets a reassuring feeling that the author is presenting her case with a kind heart in the hope that the book will really help the reader, rather than forcing her dogma down the latter's throat. Thus, warmth is the first characteristic of the book.

It also spreads an infectious feeling that learning is an enjoyable business and that the author is also a learner who would wish to share her experience and discuss it with the reader rather like in a seminar. In this sense, she is a 'ichi-jitsu no cho', or more knowledgeable than the reader but by only one day. Thus, a feeling of joy and camaraderie wafts along the pages.

Why do I get this impression that this book is somehow different from other similar books on haiku?

Textbooks are dangerous beasts. They teach. The reader would tend to just learn (swallow) what is taught, because it is all based on the assumption that the teacher (the author of a textbook) knows, whereas the reader as a student doesn't. What if the teacher is mistaken? There may be a smart and critical student but even he/she cannot escape all that can be wrong, or at least misleading. The moment a haiku practitioner starts to teach, his/her haiku starts deteriorating, or at least starts improving no more. Teaching is a very difficult art, indeed. Among many jobs Wakan has taken, and still does, in her very long life, she has done quite a bit of teaching and acquired her own way of doing it through her on-the-job experiences.

The Way of Haiku completes Wakan's trilogy. The other two are: *The Way of Tanka* and *Poetry That Heals*. She is a prolific writer, having authored more than 50 books of essays and poetry. Writing must come to her like breathing. The book reflects it. It is written with clarity, openness, balance and sympathy. All these four qualities are necessary when writing about haiku which is one of the most obscure, controversial, confusing and touchy subjects under the sun. Picking up this book, I have immediately thought of the famous book by Professor Harold Gould Henderson. His *Haiku in English*, published more than half a century ago and a bestseller (is there such a thing in haiku publications?), is a small and thin book, of 74 pages (his another book, *Introduction to Haiku*, is 192 pages). Wakan's book is also a smallish and thin book, of 109 pages. Beware of small and thin books, for once in a long while you may come across a gem. These books show that haiku books need not be big and thick to be really good

So, why do I feel her book is different? The answer, I think, comes from many contributing factors. First and foremost, she is widely travelled, increasing her understanding of different peoples in different cultures and in different countries and regions. This includes crucially Japan

where, like Prof. Henderson, she lived, for two years in her case. I assure you that this would make a world of difference. She is not an academic but her hunger for knowledge of, and curiosity about Japan are just as insatiable. Other countries which are important to her include India and Morocco.

She was born a British in London, earned her degree in Social Work from Birmingham University but emigrated to Canada after getting married, where she had her children. The two countries seemingly have a lot in common but they are different countries after all, and she must have found many differences in Canada after actually started to live there. Living in more than one country (normally your motherland) gives different perspectives and view points, which can only be a good thing in haiku.

She has undertaken many different jobs and disciplines. These include psychotherapist (specialising in early childhood traumas), Flamenco dancer, folk dance teacher, maker and store keeper of toys and dolls, builder, maker/seller of anything that could be sold (woven rug, basket work, hats, dandelion coffee), ESL (English as a second language) teacher, photojournalist, social studies teachers, educational book publisher, poet, essayist, artist and last but not least a mother and homemaker. Jack of millions of trades and master of them all!

Thus, she has experienced everything, which has given her versatility, broader horizons, understanding of real people, acceptance of the vicissitude of life and diversity, in short better grasp of humanity and the world. She has learnt the importance of creativity, adaptability, flexibility, resourcefulness and resilience, which I can detect in her book. She has added to her innate warmth and kindness, tolerance and compassion derived from life experiences.

She knows abject poverty (she was once penniless), serious illnesses (she survived two bouts of cancer), unhappiness in human affairs (she had to leave her beloved twin-sister behind in Britain when she emigrated to Canada) and life's tragedy (her first marriage broke down). Faced with misfortunes, human beings either turn bitter or more understanding, tolerant, bigger and better. She belongs definitely to the latter.

Her career as a writer, however, started late, to put it mildly. It happened when she was in her 60s. She made a publishing house eat their humble pie for losing her manuscript into agreeing to publish the replacement she sent. That became her first book. Then, she was asked to be the Inaugural Poet Laureate of Nanaimo, British Columbia (2013-16). She is now a member of Poetry Gabriola, Haiku Canada, the League of Canadian Poets, Tanka Canada and is a life-time honorary member of The Federation of BC Writers and their first Honorary Ambassador. In other words, she is now a well and truly-established writer and poet. Before too long, she will soon achieve the grand old age of beiju, reverential designation for 88 in Japan, where a haijin is still a mere chicken and would not be taken seriously until he/she hits the age of 80.

Going through *The Way Of Haiku*, I cannot help thinking that the life of the author and the author as a human being are as interesting and important as what is written in it. I salute Wakan bringing out this wonderful book to be added to haiku poets' bookshelf, or on their smartphone, perhaps next to Henderson or Higginson?