*Red Rover Red Rover*, by Bob Hicok rev by Parker Kemper

Copper Canyon

Bob Hicok, author of *Red Rover Red Rover,* worked for many years as an automotive die maker and as a computer system administrator. He has previously published nine works before this work and has won several awards such as the Bobbitt Prize from the Library of Congress, a Guggenheim Fellowship, two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, and eight Pushcart Prizes. Some of the poems he has written have been selected to be included in nine volumes of The Best American Poetry. This is a man very dedicated to his craft. *Red Rover Red Rover* is a collection of poems about having hope in scary times. As of late, I think we could all use a little more hope.

The author uses many poetic devices in his book. One of them is humor, as seen in the poem “A NatureDocumentary”. The poem opens with, “Worrying I worry too much/ I try to explain Jell-O to my cats...”. The contrast here got a giggle out of me. Another humorous poem in this collection is “Family Matters”. This one opens with, “ I asked the sun if it had a favorite planet but it saw through me (mostly with neutrinos) and gave me the cold shoulder”. The joke about the sun, the hottest thing in our solar system, giving some kid the cold shoulder is not the most original joke, but it’s there.

Moving forward into the poem, the kid asks their parents if they who their favorite child is and this was their answer,

To my surprise my father said his lawn mower and my mother said the child she miscarried in 1962/ whom she loved as much as the child she miscarried in 1963/ neither of whom I knew about...

The obvious joke about the father loving his lawn mower more than his own child is funny enough to make the reader smirk. This is contrasted with the mother’s remark about the miscarriage, which is still somewhat humorous. In both poems, humor is used to great effect, but in different ways. In “A Nature Documentary”, the humor helps to frame the poem as more of a story you would tell when you are hanging out with friends or a situation where someone is trying to make their own fun. In “Family Matters”*,* the humor is used to alleviate the darker portions of the story. Not unexpected when you consider how the author’s intent was to create stories about remaining hopeful in dark times. The humor serves to brighten the mood in the story and to keep the reader hopeful.

Another good craft element on display is the imagination. Many poems have a certain amount of creativity thrown in for better poetry. This imagination can be seen as metaphors and just the story of the poem itself. The first poem that comes to mind for imagination is “Love love me do”. In this poem, the speaker states that his wife would be a great dolphin because she eats kale, wears a certain brand of shoes, and other strange reasons. This itself is an imaginative comparison. The has many other metaphors that are worth a read over, but not today. Another imaginative poem is “No you go”. The poem also has an interesting form, but we are interested in the story here.

 This one is short, so show that whole work,

It surprises me how rarely

Looking at a plane

I see anyone waving,

Sitting on a grave

I hear a knock,

Drowning at sea

I get thirsty,

Dying for love

I pick up the phone,

My arms, the Garden

Of Eden,

And love first

This poem is creative in its diction, form, and story. The story seems to be about someone thinking about the things you don’t usually see, but seem very likely to happen. In short, the imagination in some of these poems is quite nice.

Moreover, a third craft element of note here is the form. The form of these poems are quite basic. The works usually structured as one long stanza with the occasional poem made up a multiple stanzas a few lines long. Sometimes there are poems that mix these two styles. The poems are usually structured to serve the tone of the individual poems. For example, the poem called, “Zoom” has some good form.

This poem is also short, so I’ll quote the whole thing,

No man is an island

But some women

Are isthmuses

And many children

Archipelagoes as they walk

In a wrist-roped chain

To the playground

So no one’s lost

Stolen and everyone

Finds their way

To being older

And wondering

What happened

To their mittens

The poem’s form is very basic, just line after line. The form is good for the theme and story of the poem though. It reads almost like a list, which a responsible parent might make, a parent that would also be concerned about their children’s safety. Someone who worries about their child too much and ends up forgetting their mittens. The list structure helps to develop the story and helps to bring out the theme of not being worrying all the time. All in all, the form can be basic, but it has its uses.

A final element worth looking at is the depth of these poems. That is to say, what does it all mean? According to the back of the book,

…[the poems are] apocalyptic in tone, but tender in their depiction of dying animals, disappearing water, raging fires, and the humans to blame. Threads of humor, romance, and kindness suggest a collective capacity to transcend the disastrous present…

This reveals a lot about the author’s intent for these poems. In general, the poems are meant to represent being hopeful even in the bad times. This can be clearly seen in the poem’ “Ode to now”. The poem is about trying to stay in contact with friends, while dealing with the troubles of the world. This poem seems to be about 2020 in general. Given the state of the world, as of 2020, learning to look at the bright side of things can’t hurt.

Overall, these poems are well crafted to discuss sad topics, while still remaining hopeful. The humor is refreshing to see in these poems, the imagination is delightful to read, and the form carries the meaning of the poems throughout the collection. I’d recommend this book to anyone looking for hope during a dark time.