

BOOK REVIEW:

***Living with Poetry: Finding Something Deep Inside Yourself That Only Poetry Can Reach* (IPBooks, 2020)**

by Howard L Schwartz, MD

Reviewed by UTE TELLINI, PhD, Retired Art Historian

The psychoanalyst Howard Schwartz is the author of several books, most of them written for children, more particularly his grandchildren whom he adores and loves. These stories are a combination of fiction and memoir, and, being in the business of looking behind the façade of things, The author shares his interesting and surprising insights. In this book of poetry, he is our guide once again.

This time Schwartz does not claim the whole stage, but he lets other writers—his favorite poets—speak, reprinting entire poems, a most welcome and convenient feature. Inspired by the whole enterprise, he also lets us sample some of his own attempts at poetry.

The interest in poetry is a relatively new thing for Schwartz. He relates how a chance encounter in a bookstore acquainted him with an anthology by Robert Pinsky (Poet Laureate of the US 1997-2000), which he purchased. Not having had a particular interest in poetry beyond a fleeting encounter in college way back (Columbia University), a new world opened up for him because the Pinsky anthology was accompanied by a DVD, narrated by the author. What a great idea! Listening to his new guru Schwartz became convinced that in order to appreciate—and understand—poetry at all, it must be read out loud! He was hooked!

He started to read with a passion—across the entire literary spectrum of poetry, from classical antiquity's Cicero and Homer to American heroes like Franklin and Lincoln, to other favorites such as Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, to modern poets such as William Carlos Williams, Joy Harjo, (U. S. poet Laureate 2019), Maureen Nelson, and many more, young and old.

In fact, the youngest poet is the author's granddaughter, Sabine Bos, who was an accomplished and published poet at age sixteen. Reading her "Inversa Norway Spruce" you realize that outwardly she may be young but her insights and expressions trace back to an old soul. In Cicero Schwartz sees a kindred spirit. As you age, you may have to give up some favorite occupations, but you may also discover something new. In fact, you might just fall in love with poetry!

Ben Franklin, who spent much time away from his wife lovingly praises her virtues in "My Plain Country Joan." Abe Lincoln surprises by revealing some of the dark demons that visited him at a relatively young age. That the poet William Carlos Williams had two careers was news to me. During the day he was a respected family physician in Rutherford New Jersey and at night and on weekends he pursued a successful literary career as a poet.

An entire chapter is dedicated to Lauren Schwartz who, in many heart-rending poems, shares how she accompanied her mother Harriet (an artist and a friend of the author), on her terminal journey with cancer. Another poet, Maureen Nelson, reveals how after mourning the death of her husband of many years she rediscovers her erotic self and finds new love. Her newly found happiness is jumping off the page. How wonderful, Maureen!

The poetry of Joy Harjo, the first native American U.S. Poet Laureate, member of the Muscogee Nation, is a timely addition to this book. Her poems reflect the fate of Native Americans. We read that the poetry of Joy Harjo is “to hear the voice of the earth, to see the landscape of time, and . . . to get a glimpse of people who struggle to understand, to know themselves, and to survive.” Traditions exist to guide, comfort and heal, as we learn from the poem “Washing My Mother’s Body.” It is deeply touching.

So is Howard Schwartz’s own poetic contribution to this book. He remembers paying a visit to his parents’ gravesite at Mt. Hebron Cemetery in Queens, a trip he has made many times with his mother before she, too, was then resting there. Like other visitors, he needs no map—because his feet know the way. In another poem, “Grandma’s Hands and Rugelach,” he commemorates in loving detail how his ailing grandma made the delicious treats especially for him. He also shares his youthful guilt because grandma was not supposed to exert herself.

The book ends with a poem by Edward Field, “Mark Twain and Sholom Aleichem.” In it he imagines the two men, now old and a bit awkward, frolicking with the usual summer crowd on Coney Island beach. “Markele” has holes in strategic places in his bathing suit and Sholom ends up going into the water completely dressed in a suit and tie. It is hilarious and it is sad, but you finish the book with a smile.