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Book Review: The Waltz He Was Born For: An Introduction to the Writing of Walt McDonald

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Advertised as an introduction to the poetry of Walt McDonald, The Waltz He Was Born For is also a celebration—of both the poetry and the man. Author of some twenty volumes and Poet Laureate of Texas, McDonald details a Southwest of dry hills, dark nights, tough working-class characters fiercely determined to retain their essential humanity amid trying circumstances. McDonald’s poetry has always reflected his experience of the world as writer, warrior, family man, sage, and spiritual guide, counseling compassion and reconciliation. His characters—especially his men—strive to survive in a hostile and dangerous world: hence his many poems about war’s makers and victims, and about solitary, isolated men defying the brutal Texas Plains by sheer perseverance. In one essay, Chris Willerton, writing about perseverance in McDonald’s work, identifies the poet’s central themes as survival and faith, each grounded in memory. Memory reifies both one’s fiercest terrors and the spiritual sighs of relief (and release) that follow surviving them. From that collective memory, at once personal and universal, stems the resilience that informs the unconditional compassion characteristic of McDonald’s best work.

McDonald’s poetry really needs no introduction, but these seventeen literary-critical essays examine his life and work within the contexts of “war writing,” Southwestern (and Texan) writing, religious writing, and American poetics, revealing the richly layered texture of the poet’s works. Inevitably, while the essays impress upon us how much ore McDonald packs into his literary veins, they may distract readers from the gustatory, firsthand appreciation of the poet’s rich words and imagery. He says—indeed he sings—what his commentators can only approach obliquely through academic prose. That is not a criticism: it merely states the difference between art and “criticism,” and it suggests why the best criticism points us toward the art itself and gets out of the way.

The book’s final section, a delightful 2000 interview with the poet, demonstrates why McDonald really is something special, not just to Texas but to the American literary scene. McDonald, who has conducted countless writing workshops over his career and who confesses that he feels “lucky . . . to hang around words and see what happens,” continues a brilliant teacher and mentor, even in “retirement.” Given the unmistakable love of language and of life the interview reveals, it is little wonder that his work has touched so many readers with its remarkable combination of craft and humanity, artistry and insight.

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