

***Poems Across The Big Sky: An Anthology of Montana Poets***

Edited by Lowell Jaeger

*Many Voices Press (Flathead Valley Community College), Kalispell, MT, 2007: 249 pages. \$16 softcover.*

*Reviewed by O. Alan Weltzien*

Montana literature's high reputation has been boosted by several anthologies—e.g., *The New Montana Story*, edited by Rick Newby, and *The Best of Montana's Short Fiction*, edited by William Kittredge and Allen Morris Jones—in the past few years. Two thousand and six saw the publication of *Montana Women Writers: A Geography of the Heart*, which includes over forty writers within its covers. *Poems* casts a much wider net, as it includes poems from 122 poets in just over 200 pages. This strong new collection illustrates the pluralistic character signified by the Press's name. One of its chief delights comes in the continuing discovery of strong, less known poetic voices from many walks of life “across the Big Sky.” These poets take their place alongside well-known poets in its pages.

*Poems* is the brainchild of longtime Flathead Valley Community College instructor and poet, Lowell Jaeger. Jaeger wisely gathered nine additional poets as a “Board of Directors,” and invited each of them to invite and select poems from poets known to them. This

group of ten—Sandra Alcosser, Roger Dunsmore, Tami Haaland, Jaeger, Greg Keeler, Ed Lahey, Rick Newby, Sheryl Noethe, M. L. Smoker, and Paul Zarzyski—constitutes an impressive cross-section of Montana poetry, and each of them selected between nine and fifteen poets apiece. *Poems* organizes itself alphabetically according to the ten poets, and a photograph of each opens “their” section of the book. Ironically, the collection closes with a Charley Russell poem, and following it, one finds approximately thirty pages of biographical notes, publication acknowledgments, and a bibliography of published work by writers in the anthology.

The “Editor’s Notes” chronicle the genesis of the anthology, and Jaeger pays generous tribute to three former students, all deceased—Brenda Nesbitt, Irvin Moen, and Aunda Cole—who represent “the spirits driving this project from the get-go.” Apparently, Jaeger found himself, more or less, in the role of literary executor, and wanted to give them voice: “It was their idea. They wanted to join their words in a collection of voices that reached out across the Big Sky, over the wide open spaces between us.” (6) I particularly admire the poems of Nesbitt and Moen. “This collage of voices” was intended to overcome the loneliness of the Montana poet, and it admirably succeeds in doing so. I am particularly impressed with Jaeger’s democratic vision: “this anthology opens space to the words of

many lesser-known names among names already acclaimed. I am proud to present so many Native American poets in these pages, including poems in several Native languages.” (8)

The group of ten includes M. L. Smoker, a young poet from the Fort Peck Reservation who is a graduate of Missoula’s prestigious MFA program. One of my favorite Native American poets, Richard Littlebear, includes his own English translation, line by line, of his Cheyenne poem, “We Are The Spirits of These Bones.”

The scope of *Poems* unsurprisingly means that the work feels occasionally uneven, with some poets of less interest or quality than others. Yet its wide angle, the presence of new voices on so many pages, more than compensates for the infrequent disappointment. Margaret Kingsland, a well-known humanist and advocate of Montana letters, provides in her Introduction, “All This Wild Beauty,” a gracious

and broad survey of the riches that follow. In just three pages, she manages to allude to the majority of the anthology’s poets, and she ably places the anthology in the contemporary history of Big Sky literature. Painter Jennifer Fallein, also represented as a poet, painted the striking cover, which reflects her response to several of the poems.

Jaeger and his nine fellow Board members are to be commended for this excellent project that provides such a panoramic survey of Montana poetry. As Kingsland points out in her Introduction, not all Montana poets are included, but in anthologies, comprehensively conceived or not, omissions come as little surprise. *Poems Across The Big Sky* broadcasts the dense network of Montana’s community of poets and challenges that occupational loneliness cited by Jaeger in his opening essay. It is only the most recent evidence of the robust condition of literature in Big Sky country.