

## Judith Kitchen

an excerpt from

### *The Omnivorous Omnibus*\*

I know what it's like to be on the "other" side of writing, the one where I can do my smug Rhett Butler imitation and mean it when I say, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." But that's when I'm writing for myself first and foremost, not when I'm writing a review.

Here's the rub: we reviewers write, always, with an audience in mind, twisting ourselves into knots to make sure a point can be understood, to determine whether a transition is necessary, whether we've included enough of the work to give a fair representation, whether, whether, whether. . . . We conjure you, reader—a horde of you, a solitary omnivore—because if you didn't exist, we would be narcissistically wallowing in an exercise in futility. We already know what we think about a book, even if we don't yet have words for it. Why would we go to the excruciating trouble to write a review for ourselves?

Is anyone out there to take us in? To take us on? To argue, accuse, anguish, admonish, affirm, or agree? Once poetry reviews have been printed, they seem to float off into the void, along with the books discussed in them. Our silent dialogue with others remains, for the most part, mute. Much of the time, I simply have to assume you are out there, somewhere, wanting to know what I think—not so much because you'll rush right out to buy the book but because you'll be sharpening your own ideas on the whetstone of my assessment. Because you, too, feel the need for some meaningful dialogue about an art that is otherwise next to invisible—even when April rolls around. (If you're reading this, you'll almost certainly know what that means.)

I've been comparatively lucky. Twice a year for eighteen years, I've found myself up to my knees in books of poetry, sorting and sifting, shuffling and shifting, finding a pattern, an order in which I can allow my thoughts to progress. That is, I've really been

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\*An essay review of

SLEEPING AND WAKING. By Michael O'Brien. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2007. 65 pp. \$12.95, paper.

HALFLIFE. By Meghan O'Rourke. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 87 pp. \$23.95.

TIME AND MATERIALS: POEMS 1997–2005. By Robert Hass. New York: Ecco/HarperCollins, 2007. 88 pp. \$22.95.

FAILURE. By Philip Schultz. New York: Harcourt, 2007. 106 pp. \$23.00.

OLD HEART. By Stanley Plumly. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 96 pp. \$23.95.

somewhat desperately trying to fit my thoughts to the preordained template (flexible as it may be) of the omnibus review. Which books lend themselves to a more general discussion? Which books speak to each other in interesting ways? Which poets allow me to reinforce a point, or discover a trend, or develop an idea? In short, which books “work” with this form of review?

There are some distinct advantages to reviewing several books in a long essay. For one thing, there is space enough, and time. For another, once I’ve discovered (or contrived) my “umbrella,” once I’ve found the thread that will carry me through a discussion of four, or five, or six books, I’ve also provided myself with a presiding metaphor or an encompassing turn of mind—a touchstone that will help to keep me centered. The reader, in turn, can follow the thrust of my argument, knowing what to chalk up to my opinion or observation, what comes more definitely from the writer in question. This is, perhaps, the major strength of the essay-review: readers have the opportunity to follow a reviewer’s mind as it delves into the work of several writers, and thus are given time to react and to respond by bringing their own knowledge to the page. They can assess my assessments, can decide more or less for themselves where their own tastes lie on some poetic continuum, can stake out their own position on that line.

A secondary strength of the omnibus review is the way it almost forces the reviewer to think about larger issues and, coincidentally, to make somewhat risky pronouncements about the art itself. I am forced out onto my shaky individual limb to see just how much lofty weight it will bear.

But the omnibus is also a hungry beast. It can eat away at the reviewer until she doles out opinions merely to serve its cause. The omnibus forces us to limit its fare if we are to keep its appetite in check. We write what the creature can stomach, and this sometimes means we leave out books or particular parts of books that don’t fit its needs. We often omit the untidy, the oddball, the unmistakably different—which have to fight so hard for room under the umbrella that we’d rather leave them standing in the rain.

Worse, the omnibus can swallow books of poetry whole. They get lost in its vast intestines. Whatever once was unique or unusual can get smoothed over, tamped down, trampled even, by the forced proximity, by the necessity to address one book’s essence in terms more suited to another’s.

I was never more aware of that ravenous animal than when I began reading for this review. Several of the books that gave me real pleasure did not have much in the way of connective tissue among them. I found books I liked and ones I actively disliked—by poets with whose work I was familiar and poets whose work I don’t remember ever seeing before. Okay: something old, something new, something borrowed . . . you can see where this was leading. Maybe I could manage “borrowed,”

but what would I do with “blue,” short of feeling depressed by the books I found troubling?

I tried again. Girl Scout camp, with our young voices rising around the campfire: “Make new friends / but keep the old. / One is silver, / the other gold.” Instantly, the inherent nagging questions arose: Does this imply that gold is better than silver, or more lasting? What if there’s been a falling-out, into irreconcilable differences? Well, you can see that this notion was also leading me into a misery of my own making.

I could look for thematic connections. Or similar (or differing) techniques. I could try to worry some theoretical point, argue the postmodernism or romanticism or whatever-ism of the ways the poets fit themselves untidily into the tradition. I could spend all my time trying to feed the beast . . . but maybe I would find it easier, for once, to starve him. Easier to grant myself license and leave the books to their own devices.