

Reviews

Judith Kitchen

an excerpt of

*Great Expectations**

I began to ponder just how much our expectations of a writer figure in our assessment of the work, how much we anticipate based on previous performance—and whether that’s a fair way to measure something new. Is it reasonable, for example, to be disappointed when a poet does not change all that much? Early William Stafford poems hardly differ from those in his final book—so if we liked the early work, why shouldn’t we like the later? What happens when the best work comes early in the career? Is it fair to complain because Galway Kinnell has not produced a second *Book of Nightmares*? What about when the poet’s work alters radically? Do we tend to hold on to what’s familiar? If so, then Marvin Bell’s challenging “Dead Man” poems might meet our resistance, but shouldn’t a writer be able to expect readers to follow into new and exciting territory?

We keep asking our writers to “grow” when it’s not clear what we mean, yet I find myself examining books with precisely this request hovering in the back of my mind. In other words, I often compare an author to his or her earlier self, and I look for thematic or technical progressions—something to show me which directions the work is going to take, and what is of new concern to the writer.

*An essay-review of

LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN. By Colum McCann. New York: Random House, 2009. 355 pp. \$25.00.

MAKING AN ELEPHANT: WRITING FROM WITHIN. By Graham Swift. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009. 404 pp. \$26.95.

UPGRADED TO SERIOUS. By Heather McHugh. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2009. 85 pp. \$22.00.

NEVER-ENDING BIRDS. By David Baker. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009. 111 pp. \$23.95.

SHADOW BOX. By Fred Chappell. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. 81 pp. \$50.00. \$17.95, paper.

THE FINANCIAL LIVES OF THE POETS. By Jess Walter. New York: HarperCollins, 2009. 291 pp. \$25.99.