



Braided Creek

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After Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser had exchanged letters and poems for years, Kooser was diagnosed with cancer. "Ted's poetry became overwhelmingly vivid," Harrison recalls. "Then we decided to correspond in short poems, because that was the essence of what we wanted to say to each other."

"Braided Creek" contains over 300 poems exchanged in this longstanding correspondence. Wise, wry, and penetrating, the poems touch upon numerous subjects, from the natural world to the nature of time. Harrison and Kooser decided to remain silent over who wrote which poem, allowing their voices, ideas, and images to swirl and merge into this remarkable suite of lyrics.

Each time I go outside the world
is different. This has happened
all my life.

*

The moon put her hand
over my mouth and told me
to shut up and watch.

*

A nephew rubs the sore feet
of his aunt,
and the rope that lifts us all toward grace
creaks on the pulley.

*

Under the storyteller's hat
are many heads, all troubled.

Jim Harrison, one of America's best-loved writers, is author of two dozen books of poetry, fiction, essays, food criticism, and memoir. He is best known for a collection of novellas, "Legends of the Fall," and the epic novel "Dalva." He lives in western Montana and southern Arizona.

Ted Kooser is the author of eight collections of poetry and a prose memoir. His poetry appears regularly in "The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker, Poetry," and "The Nation." He lives in Nebraska.

Braided Creek Details

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From Reader Review Braided Creek for online ebook

John Taylor says

This is an incredible book of poem things. I've never read anything quite like it.

David Schaafsma says

My friend Jen said she was reading this book., which I had read more than once decades ago, so I thought I would read it again as she was reading it so we could talk about it. And I recall that Jim Harrison, whose work I know pretty well, died this year, RIP. Most people know his Legends of the Fall and other novels sometimes made into films, and I like those books, but I really like his poetry, too. Ted Kooser I am less familiar with; he wrote a book called Winter Morning Walks: 100 Postcards to Jim Harrison, and this book, Braided Creek is also a series of postcards, though this time an exchange of poems, a dialogue of poems, with Harrison. And then the two authors refuse to identify who wrote what, which I also loved.

When I started reading I liked the poems less than I had many years ago. I thought (this time) they sounded much like little informal things anyone might drop in talking or writing with each other: "Everyone thought I'd die/ in my thirties, forties, fifties. This can't go on forever," or "Rowing across the lake/all the dragonflies are screwing. Stop it. It's Sunday." Nice. Worth a smile, but not startling. I like the idea at this point of dialogue poems more than the actual poems themselves.

But over time, the poems feel like haiku or zen koans. Harrison said it was because Kooser was diagnosed with cancer, which somehow deepened his writing, which in turned deepened Harrison's responses:

"At 62 I've outlived 95 per cent/ of the world. I'll be home/just before dark."

"The butterfly/ jots a note on the wind/ to remind itself of something."

"Crow with a red beak/ looks over its shoulder."

"It's hard to believe there's a skeleton/ inside of us, certainly not the beautiful/ girl getting out of her red car." (Okay, there 's a cliché in there, but I still like it)

"Bucket in the rain, rejoice!"

"I'm sixty-two and can drop dead/at any moment. Thinking this in August/I kissed the river's cold moving lips." (I'm 63 as I read this, ha!)

"Buddhists say everything is led by the mind./My doubts are healed by drinking/a bottle of red wine in thirty-three minutes." (ha! And me with a drink in hand as I read and write this.)

"I was born a baby./What has been/added?"

"The pastures grow up/with red cedars/once the horses are gone."

I finally loved hanging with these two sweet friends that love each other and hearing their braided poems. Kooser got cancer first, but Harrison died first. As of this writing, Kooser recovered, so maybe he's wrong:

Maybe it does go on forever. As long as I have these poems, it does.

Nathan Albright says

Your thoughts on this collection of very short poems will likely depend on two factors: how low your expectations are about the nature of this conversation in poetry, and how much you agree with the comments made by the authors. If you are expecting or hoping for sustained observations in the nature of Ted Kooser's better work, that is not going to be found here. On the other hand, if you are expecting the concise work to be as tightly organized as Kooser's winter reflections sent on postcards to Jim Harrison, you will also be disappointed. Rather, these books are a collection of short and witty comments made about a wide variety of matters, and this is less a collection of real conversations but rather a conversation of witty epigrams [1], of the sort of conversation that is expected out of cynical but intelligent people, the sort of conversation that happens on sitcoms. To be sure, some people love that sort of conversation and some people hate it, but that is the sort of conversation we are dealing with here, and it should be recognized regardless of how it is viewed.

This short collection of poems lasts less than 100 pages, but some of the short sayings in here are deeply reflective on such subjects as death and aging, love and relationships, the nature of friendships, creation, and the search for wisdom. Unfortunately, some of the poems are also somewhat judgmental and harsh. One of the poems, for example, mocks Republicans and ascribes to them the thought that darker people are having more fun than them, which the author then affirms. This sort of cheap shot is part of the reason why many leftist writers are viewed with some reason as the enemies of what is decent and good, and why our political battles have gotten out of hand in recent years. Another aphorism on a woman's perfect butt shows the adulterous longings of the poet, not understanding that it was entirely proper and not loutish at all for the woman's husband to tell him (and others), that the enjoyment of his wife's perfect butt was reserved to him. To insult someone for telling you the truth is to be further away from wisdom, not closer to it. This poetic collection, in other words, is definitely a mixed bag.

And perhaps it could not help being so. As much as Ted Kooser is a poet whose thoughts and insights are worth taking seriously and who has a lot to offer as a writer, it is hard for me to be as charitable to Jim Harrison, who seems at times to be more of a cheap partisan hack. Perhaps it was thought by the two friends involved that a collaborative effort would bring out the best in them, but that does not appear to have been the case, as this book is far from the best by Ted Kooser, the poet I am familiar with the most. Whether or not it brings Harrison's efforts above their level or sinks it as a result of the complacency these two seem to feel with each other is not for me to say. At any rate, these two poets seem to be like two friends riffing in a bar while drinking various intoxicants and assuming that they are far wiser and more clever than they really are. The end result is that what may be perfectly entertaining to an audience of people who are either paid to be kind or who are similarly inebriated is exposed before a sober audience that is likely to be at least somewhat less charitable, unless they too are intoxicated with the same leftist complacency themselves.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2014...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

Richard says

An easy 5 stars. This is a book I could carry around for a few months. It's certainly not going on my actual shelves any time soon. Two old poets hold forth in short spurts. If you like like haiku, or asian verse, and if you'd like to know how the American idiom can comfortably extend the forms this is the book for you. If you'd like a master class in writing but hate the how-to books, this is for you.

Here's what: this book can teach you how to see, and it can teach you how to think about what you've seen, and it can teach you how to write about both. That's big stuff, but not only that, there's at least one gem on every page. Here are a few, at random:

The old hen scratches
then looks, scratches then looks.
My life.

In my garden
the late sun glows
through a rabbit's ears.

How can it be
that everyone my age
is older than I?

A nephew rubs the sore feet
of his aunt,
and the rope that lifts us all toward grace
creaks in the pulley.

Like I said, big stuff.

Peycho Kanev says

"Under the storyteller's hat
are many heads, all troubled.

Rowing across the lake
all the dragonflies are screwing.
Stop it. It's Sunday.

Only today
I heard
the river
within the river.

I want to describe my life in hushed tones
like a TV nature program. Dawn in the north.
His nose stalks the air for newborn coffee.

Nothing to do.
Nowhere to go.
The moth just drowned
in the whiskey glass.
This is heaven.

Let go of the mind, the thousand blue
story fragments we tell ourselves
each day to keep the world underfoot.

If you can awaken
inside the familiar
and discover it strange
you need never leave home.

You told me you couldn't see
a better day coming,
so I gave you my eyes.

The one-eyed man must be fearful
of being taken for a birdhouse.

Sleeping on my right side I think
of God. On my left side, sex.
On my back I snore with my dog.

The face you look out of
is never the face
your lover looks into.

Suddenly my clocks agree.
One has been stopped for several
months, but twice a day
they have this tender moment.

Fresh snow standing deep
on the phone wire. If you call me,
speak softly.

It's nice to think that when
we're fossils we'll all be in the same
thin layer of rock.

Oh, to write just one poem
that would last as long as that rose
tattooed on her butt!

Last year the snake
left her skin on the floor,
diaphanous like the name
of a lovely girl you've forgotten—
but not her flesh.

Come to think of it,
there's no reason to decide
who you are.

I prefer the skyline
of a shelf of books.

The moon put her hand
over my mouth and told me
to shut up and watch.

Like an old dog
I slowly lower and arrange myself
in a heap of sighs.

Old friend,
perhaps we work too hard
at being remembered."

Kathryn Fay says

This is an easy book to cozy up to for just a few minutes a day or for an entire cup of tea-true poetry, raw and simple. I laughed, questioned and was moved deeply by simple short phrases. Some of my favorites:
"How can it be that everyone my age is older than me?"

"Dewdrops are the dreams of the grass.
They linger, shining,
into the morning."

"The imagination's kisses are a cloud of butterflies."

"I hope there's time
for this and that,
and not just this."

C. Hollis Crossman says

Ted Kooser and Jim Harrison coauthored this slim volume of epigrammatic poems to emphasize the poetry itself rather than the poets who wrote it. Toward that end, the poems appear on the pages with no attribution—it's never clear whether you're reading Kooser or Harrison (though if you've read much of either of them, you can often guess).

The quality of these short poems (none more than three or four lines) is very high. I don't give this volume a perfect rating, however, because reading so many very short, very high quality poems all at once quickly becomes exhausting. Even when you spread them out to a few pages a day, which I did, you still experience

the same effect.

It's a fascinating experiment. The attempt to subsume the author's identity within the poem itself, or, in the poets' own words, to make "an assertion in favor of poetry and against credentials." The poems that resulted are uniformly excellent (no surprise given the poets), but I wonder if the experiment was fair—they didn't publish the book anonymously, and those two names have accrued talismanic power among poetry writers and readers all over the world.

Ronda Coleman says

Jim Harrison and Ted Kosner are two desert rats I would love to hand out with. Their simple correspondence is poetry in motion. I laughed, I cried, I fell in love in the desert sky, the moon. This has become one of my "bibles." I refer to it often when I need a lift, or when I am feeling nostalgic for something that feels honest and true.

Deb says

I'm reluctant to say I'm done with this book and I'll probably end up purchasing it. Most of the poems are three lines written back and forth on postcards, semi-haikus of wisdom, wit and the bittersweetness of life.

Some favorites:

*When she left me
I stood out in the thunderstorm,
hoping to be destroyed by lightning.
It missed, first left, then right.*

*I grow older.
I still like women, but mostly
I like Mexican food.*

*The face you look out of
is never the face
your lover looks into.*

*Straining on the toilet
we learn how
the lightning bug feels.*

One of the co-writers, Ted Kooser (U.S. Poet Laureate from 2004-6) has a book called Valentines that started out as a nifty little postcard project and exploded. I'm seeing a trend...and also waiting anxiously for the library to get a copy of the book when it comes out in February. The woman who recommended Braided Creek to me was one of the women Kooser wrote his valentines to.

Les says

Comment after first 45 pages.

This is wonderful. I find myself with a huge grin or pausing for introspection on nearly every page. Brilliant idea and lovely in its execution.

Definitely 4+.

Two dear friends corresponding via poems, "American Haiku," and aphorisms. I love that there is no ownership of the poems. From the back cover, "When asked about attributions for the individual poems, one of them replied, 'Everyone gets tired of this continuing cult of the personality . . . This book is an assertion in favor of poetry and against credentials.'" A beautiful little book that can be gobbled in a quick sitting. . . and returned to for further enjoyment.

Samples:

Under the storyteller's hat
are many heads, all troubled.

All I want to be
is a thousand blackbirds
bursting from a tree
seeding the sky.

A book on the arm of my chair
and the morning before me.

Lost: Ambition.
Found: A good book,
an old sweater,
loose shoes.

I want to describe my life in hushed tones
like a TV nature program. [read in David Attenborough voice] Dawn in the north.
His nose stalks the air for newborn coffee.

Some days
one needs to hide
from possibility.

If you can awaken
inside the familiar
and discover it strange
you need never leave home.

You told me you couldn't see
a better day coming,
so I gave you my eyes.

Matthew says

This is a brief book of poetry, but the conceit behind it makes it a mesmerizing collection of work by two fantastic poets.

Jim Harrison, a legend in his own right, exchanges poems with his friend Ted Kooser, who was diagnosed with cancer. Through their exchange of poetry, they communicate the experiences of their lives in a way that would truly be unable to be captured through prose. The book was published with the intent to not attribute any of the poems within the book to either author, and in doing so essentially creates a stream-of-consciousness style poem that is the entirety of the book. The poems themselves seem to be written in a haiku/haikai type of style (albeit not in a strict way) and ask deep questions that men in the twilight of their lives but with the wisdom and wit of people clearly influenced by beat poetry could only stand to write.

Reading this book of poetry is revelatory in the practice of the poets leaving aside identity and ego in the service of expressing a truth through the exchange of their being and thoughts that is higher than the names of any two men or any style of poetry.

This is definitely a book for lovers of poetry and for those who want a semi-spiritual experience as they read quality work by two great writers.

Nicole says

It took a little time to get into the style of this book. It is written by two different people, and the fact that there is no notation of who wrote what (the book is written like one long poem) felt off at first. It made it difficult to discern sometimes when the writing had moved from one person to the next, and there were a few spots when it would have been nice to know that detail.

Lisa says

Jim Harrison and Ted Kooser wrote poems back and forth in their letters. I love their collaboration and the exchanges. I feel like I've been invited into their lives--it feels personal and intimate.

I love the fact that the two poets refused to claim authorship for individual poems in the correspondence, saying, "Everyone gets tired of this continuing cult of personality...This book is an assertion in favor of

poetry and against credentials."

Kooser was a poet laureate of the United States for a few years (2004-2006) and set up a website aimed at making poetry accessible to the masses. Great idea! my link text

A few of the "epigrammatic, aphoristic poems" that caught my attention (there are so many more!):

Old friend,
perhaps we work too hard
at being remembered.

Under the storyteller's hat
are many heads, all troubled.

A book on the arm of my chair
and the morning before me.

Lost: Ambition.
Found: A good book,
an old sweater,
loose shoes.

Luis Alberto says

Along with Winter Morning Walks, these are two books I read every year around this time of year. I couldn't do without them.

Bo says

A friend gave me my copy last March. And said her writing group often pulled a short poem from this book as prompt for their writing sessions. I've followed suit, and have used some of the poems as writing prompts. Yes, the book is full of great prompts, more than that it's an intertwining of conversation -- their letter writings back and forth in three or four line poems -- between poet friends Ted Kooser and Jim Harrison.
