

# Review of William D. Elliott's WINTER IN THE REX

Winter in the Rex, William D. Elliott's attractive third book of poetry, is a captivating--at times intriguing and searching--collection of poems dealing with the vision of a Minnesota poet come home after years away. An early life in northern Minnesota, interrupted by years in distant places to grow and react to a more complicated world, are relived vicariously in the plastic form of poems. Surely a compliment to the poet's achievement, it is a special compliment to life in Minnesota.

While the book is divided into four parts which parallel the poet's life in and away from home, time and space transcend the most instinctive impressions of childhood and youth into the experiences of mankind itself. Elliott's distinctive awareness of the multiple implications of a word, without losing sight of his total composition, places the collection in the mainstream of contemporary poetry.

Thematically, the poems deal with life: some nostalgic, some disturbing, some charming and humorous. Three decades of personal history intertwine the simplest experiences of hiking, fishing, and watching sky divers, with the poet's more sensitive reactions to the significant issues of war, ecology, racism, and peace.

The ultimate value of any collected work of poems rests with the few outstanding poems that it contains: poems that not only say something truly relevant to everyone, but poems that work technically as well. Winter in The Rex has its good share of these. "Dinner at Seven Seas" (Pt. III), playfully but with a tone of urgency, records on the literal level the vacation itinerary of one busy day which includes a dinner and a playhouse musical. On the levels of imagery and rhythm, the poem suggests the more intimate and, perhaps, more poetic parts of the itinerary.

. . . The chorus  
cuts our ears the  
rhythmical moving of heads in  
costume hats, back, ahead  
back, ahead, ahead, bac  
the beach at eleven  
. . . . .

and sailing  
brunch at Seven Seas  
Conamessett Inn Red Coach  
Grill: mix the orders and  
fish, please, for strippers . . .

"Winter in The Rex" (Pt. IV), the poem that inspired the title of the collection, has a structure and a theme which reflect the organization and meaning of the entire book. A compressed world from the 1940's through the 1960's is glimpsed from a perennial booth at the old Rex Restaurant in Bemidji:

I lie along the booth, her  
new legs, my weight  
XER and its neon sign  
in ice, and see the summer.  
Watch our Bemidji Belle falter on the birch  
and finally sternwheel by . . .

pleasing visual and tactile images in this last poem involve the reader emotionally. Simultaneously, the contrasts suggest the present inversions of the poet's immediate vision of his lifelong home.

Life in Minnesota is a popular topic today in everything from nature writing to a cover story in Time Magazine. This reviewer believes that the poetic interpretation of Minnesota life, the view that crystalizes those everyday immediate experiences into a clearly beautiful and integral whole, is one of the most reliable accounts of life itself. For this reason, I recommend Winter in the Rex for the nostalgic and the idealistic, for those that love Minnesota, love good poetry, and love life. Winter in The Rex may be ordered or purchased from Bookcraft, Bemidji, Minnesota, 56601, for \$3.50.

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