



Jackstraws

Charles Simic

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In this new collection of sixty-two poems Charles Simic paints exquisite and shattering word pictures that lend meaning to a chaotic world populated by insects, bridal veils, pallbearers, TV sets, parrots, and a finely detailed dragonfly. Suffused with hope yet unafraid to mock his own credulity, Simic's searing metaphors unite the solemn with the absurd. His raindrops listen to each other fall and collect memories; his wildflowers are drunk with kissing the red-hot breezes; and his God is a Mr. Know-it-all, a wheeler-dealer, a wire-puller. In this latest lyrical gathering, Simic continues to startle his fans with the powerful and surprising images that are his trademark-slangy images of the ethereal, fantastic visions of the everyday, foreign scenes of the all-American-and moments full of humor and full of heartache.

Jackstraws Details

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Author : Charles Simic

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From Reader Review Jackstraws for online ebook

Dewey says

3.5 stars.

While I hold some American poets in the highest regard - namely TS Eliot, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and Robert Frost - most of the postwar 20th century tradition interests me little, if at all. And no wonder: most American poetry is what I like to call "living room poetry;" too domestic, too reflective of boring stuff (some exceptions exist with nature and environmental poetry, which for some is arguably a boring subject) and too symptomatic of people who do not live the lives poets once had the reputation of living. If it isn't directly talking about these subjects, then it still feels distanced, as if written in a living room for a living room and not for the subject itself.

And while some might argue that it's not necessary for a poet to be some kind of a gallivanting Rimbaud, the fact still stands that Rimbaud's poetry, written before he turned twenty, still impresses, intrigues and brings meaning into people's lives in ways that a poet's lifelong output in the mid-to-late 20th century does not. American poetry, for the most part, has become stagnant in living rooms all across the country.

I say all this because Charles Simic, whom I pushed myself to check out, is different, at least in this first collection that I borrowed from the library. This collection is, as the back describes, "populated by insects, bridal veils, pallbearers, TV sets, and parrots." A rather charming assortment of inspirations that give this collection the feel that it is its very own universe. However, as the few socio-political poems indicate, Simic did not intend for this collection to be an alternate universe. Simic, as I predicted, is one of those poets famous not specifically for his craft - although his clarity and vividness are startlingly good, his voice unique and never distant - but famous because he writes about America. Though born in Yugoslavia, these poems show that Simic is an American through and through, and I don't think that's a bad thing. Especially here, where Simic isn't being pretentious about it, which I think is what pisses off people the most about all-American writing. I just never liked how all-American postwar literature tends to make the American literary tradition feel like a walled garden, and I suspect that that in turn reinforces the popularity of less walled-in writers like Ernest Hemingway up until today. Simic, while not exactly reinforcing the walled garden, isn't exactly poking holes in the hedges either.

All that aside, I thought a number of the poems in here were good. I found the poem My Little Utopia to be particularly lovely. The problem I find with Simic regarding pure style - and maybe it's just this collection - is that sometimes it feels like he's just listing stuff. And while it would seldom be appropriate to compare a poet like Simic to a slam poet, one of the reasons I despise slam poetry is because slam poets tend to list something like statistics or a dictionary definition and try to run that off as poetry when it's obviously not. It's hard enough to integrate dialogue as it is into a poem, let alone unaltered official statistic language. In the case of Simic it's more like "here's a cat, there's an insect, right over there is a fence" (minus the here's and there's I just used of course). That and the socio-political poems are no more special than any other attempt to get some heart-wrenching issue off one's chest in 20th-21st century verse. The Czech writer Josef Skvorecky said in his Art of Fiction interview that bringing politics into your work turns it into propaganda, and while I don't think Simic is writing propaganda (Skvorecky's remark applying more towards prose than verse, though not completely) there is just something about injecting an issue into a poem that makes it stagnate no matter the issue one is choosing to stand for. This not only brings down the writers craft, but doesn't do much for the issue as well.

In conclusion (wow I didn't expect it to be this long), Simic has secured my interest minimally - meaning that

I will certainly go out of my way at some point or another to read more of his ruminations, even though I won't be in a hurry to do so. I am impressed by Simics' ability to make his own personal universe distinct and vivid, that he is not just a living room poet and that he chooses, at least in this volume, to eschew any of the other pseudo-intellectual garbage that is passed off as poetry these days. And I am happy that Simic has been successful at his craft. But unless he changes his style or I come across another poet worse than him at this, I am most tempted to refer to Simic as "the list poet." Whether it's post-Pulitzer laziness or else a bad attempt at the iceberg effect, this style, mixed with an otherwise great poetic clarity, restrict these poems from being greater than they can be and ultimately (at least for me) render most of these poems good but not great. Which I find rather regrettable. I don't think a TS Eliot would have been content with these poems as they are.

Russ says

I didn't have a lot of exposure to Simic before. His poetry has a jocular, ironic tone, and he likes to make absurd-like comparisons. He is interested in big questions, but not in a systematic way. At least in this collection he is more comfortable in the aphoristic mode than in the didactic. All in all, I'd say he is an interesting, solid poet. I'll probably seek out some of his other works.

Matt says

Charming poems, Simic's use of language is very clever and expressive.

One example that struck me, from *Mystic Life* the last poem in the collection, was:

'Chewing on the bitter verb
"To be."

Nathan Albright says

I must admit that I had to look up the meaning of the title of this book. I suppose my age may be a part of it, but I was not familiar with the game jackstraws when I read this book. There are many games like it that I remember playing as a kid, games where one built some kind of structure out of blocks or related materials and then tried to remove parts of it while keeping the whole tower standing, until someone moved a critical piece that caused everything to fall down. If one is as pessimist about the state of the world and the fragility of civilization, and it is clear that the author is pessimistic about such matters, it is not hard to see contemporary existence as being like a giant and very dangerous game of jackstraws where one pulls away one support after another in the hope that what is left can hold the full burden of our hopes and aspirations, until everything falls apart [1]. Admittedly, this is not a cheerful matter, but if one is familiar with the author's work as a whole, it is easy to realize that there is little cheer to be found in the author's melancholy reflections.

This particular volume of poetry is divided into three parts and is less than 100 pages in total, a fairly familiar structure and size among the author's body of work. As one might expect, the author dwells on some familiar themes here, as there are poems about a "non-stop war with bugs," as well as poetry relating to

the night and insomnia and bad dreams and the horrors of existence. None of these themes is likely to be unfamiliar with readers of the author's work in general. A bit more unusually, the poet seems to be focusing on medieval matters with references to medieval miniature, a barber's college, the myth of St. George and the dragon, as well as occult and esoteric philosophy. There are also a couple of poems here that relate to marriage, of the soul as well as of ambiguity, and the author focuses on ancient deities and things that are vacant or invisible. While none of these represent a dramatic shift, they are certainly a characteristic focus of this particular book, and make for a thoughtful if somewhat gloomy reading experience.

One wonders about the placement of the poetry and the theme of the work as a whole. Is the author trying to imply that occult philosophy and various mystical means like fortune telling and astrology help in propping up civilization, or is it rather that they are among the desperate measures taken by people who are aware that they live in fragile times and are trying to seek assistance and insight wherever they can. As is often the case with poetry--and particularly the author's poetry--the matter is left ambiguous. We are left with short poems and sketch-like observations without getting any sort of commentary that would allow the reader to see the author's viewpoint. But perhaps the author does not wish to provide this viewpoint, but would rather leave his work ambiguous and capable of being enjoyed by many instead of making his own worldview and perspective plain and thus alienate (potentially) a large number of his readers, as is often the case in such matters. The particular relationship between these dark and reflective poems and the fragility of our own contemporary world is something that must be left to the reader to ponder over and reflect upon in light of our own experiences and perspective.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011...>

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

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2016...>

Catherine Corman says

I lie with my eyes tightly shut
Dreaming of a world
Beyond these sad appearances.

-Charles Simic, Jackstraws

Steven says

Simic uses point-of-view, humor and personification in this collection to again and again point out how small each of our existences is in the scheme of the universe. He also satirizes religions' attempts at reconciling this gap in human logic by repeatedly addressing the "ceiling" as if it were a god. By combining all of this, Simic is able to craft a book of seemingly lighter pieces that delve deep into a core human issue. The only

time this fails is with the ambitious eight-page piece "Talking to the Ceiling" (74-81), and only because the length of the poem dissipates the power of the humor and images as the reader struggles to connect too many conflicting statements. Finally, I appreciated how Simic often juxtaposes serious topics (such as war) with lighter images (such as costumes or toys), providing interesting leaps for the reader.

Lauren says

Read while at the shore with my family - my brother's book which he let me borrow. The last poem makes this entire book worthwhile.

Don says

totally bizarre as is usual with Charles Simic. very entertaining through out.

Robert Beveridge says

Charles Simic, Jackstraws (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1999)

I've written so many glowing words about Charles Simic in the past year that anything more would really be superfluous (cf. reviews of *The World Doesn't End*, *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk*, *Classic Ballroom Dances*, *Charon's Cosmology*, etc. etc.). All I can really say about Jackstraws is "another worthy entry in the corpus of Mr. Simic, which is already stacked full of quality material." Every new book from Charles Simic is an unalloyed pleasure to read, full of little unexpected pleasures and twists of phrase that cannot help but delight the reader. If you're not familiar with the work of Mr. Simic, I cannot but urge you to become so at your earliest opportunity; the man should be a living legend. As it is, he's just another poet trying to eke out a living, and that's a crime. ****

Leonard says

Another excellent collection of poems. I read this book before in March, 2010 and re-read it this December. Simic's poetry has a timeless quality that leaves one feeling uplifted and thinking about what he just read, and like all good poetry, is infused with mystery.

Zach says

I've had much less exposure to Simic than one would think, but I wasn't blown away by this one. Lesser Simic perhaps?

Jessica says

Surrealist poetry is not always easy for me to read. The comments on the back of the books helped me a lot in knowing how to read these poems. So I copy part of said comments here for people who may have a different edition.

"The poems are like self-developing polaroids, in which a scene, gradually assembling itself out of unexplained images, suddenly clicks into a recognizable whole . . . Two motives -- the search for explanation, knowing there is none; and the finding of plots or images to match the burden of feeling . . ." from the incomparable Helen Vendler

"Surrealist, and therefore comic, but with a specific gravity in his imagining that manages to avoid the surrealist penalty of weightlessness . . ." from Seamus Heaney

Weightlessness avoided, I'll say!

R.K. Cowles says

4 1/2 stars

Jody Sperling says

For the first poem alone I would rate this book more highly than the majority of poetry I have read. "The Voice at 3 A.M." should be taught in every literature class across the country. It is perfect.

Several other standout poems will stay with me for a long time: "Filthy Landscape" is both funny and sad in equal parts, and "Talking to the Ceiling" would, for most writers/poets crown their literary career.

Olivier Lepetit says

Utter gibberish - I try, I promise you, I try to 'get' into this kind of poetry - but this looks to me like automatic, improvised writing, the kind of stuff that ANYONE can come up with with a few drinks and a propensity to be able to write whatever comes to your head at that precise moment.
