

Michelle Leber, *The Yellow Emperor* (Five Islands Press, 2014)

A poet-friend of mine said to me last week that he doesn't much like 'project' poetry collections, collections in which there's no room for the haphazard or wayward poem because the author begins with an idea and then sticks to that idea until the book is complete, that is, until it is cohesive and succinct. There might be a narrative thread running from poem to poem to make it a 'project' collection (Claudia Rankin's *Citizen*), or the poems might be linked through characters (Susan Hawthorne's *Cow*). These two examples point to the 'project' collection as being easily associated with novels, although it might be that a collection holds together through adhering to a strict process (Barry Hill's ekphrastic *Naked Clay: Drawing from Lucian Freud*). Whatever the connection, I told my poet-friend that I was a fan of 'project' poetry, and I'm going to stop calling it that now because the quotation marks and indeed the word itself seems to belittle what is ultimately a dedicated work of art. Michelle Leber's new collection, *The Yellow Emperor*, is a solid example of what I'll now refer to as a theme-driven collection (that's better), skilfully engaging with all three of the examples I gave above: narrative, character and adherence to a strict process.

The narrative thread and character exploration work together as Leber uncovers some of the stories of the Yellow Emperor, who ruled China around the 27th century BCE when civilization was taking shape and chopsticks and the written word were coming into being. It's difficult to discern how much China historically owes to a man who is also considered part cultural myth, but the emperor undoubtedly cuts an important figure. My acupuncturist showed me her 'bible' the other day and it's attributed to him: *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*. It's been around for two millennia. It's here where Leber integrates a strict process into her collection, as many of the poems are interpretations of acupuncture points and some lines in the poems are taken directly from Debra Kaatz's translation of *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*.

The opening poem, referred to as *proem* (or prelude), can be read from the point of view of the author as both poet and devotee of the Yellow Emperor, holding tight to the traditional Chinese aesthetics of nature: 'One cold morning I will study the stones / in dark woods beside the river.' So, too, does the collection end with the author's point of view, in the single poem of the postscript. This bookending of the author's voice shows great potency in structuring because it positions the Yellow Emperor as essential to Leber's modern-day living (Leber works in Chinese medicine so her connection to the Yellow Emperor is more than personal; it's professional and perhaps spiritual).

But it's the bulk of the book, told in five parts through a myriad of characters, where we get a sense of what made the Yellow Emperor, and what he gave in return. His story begins with Fu Bao, his mother, who enters into a conception of the cosmos:

She collected only red
and white stars that night
threaded them loosely
around her waist
felt them reach up
for her breast, down
to the tiger grotto. (19)

There is no mention of a father. The following poem carries on with Fu Bao's pregnancy in which nine ancient wives' tales warrant good luck, one for each month of the pregnancy. Already

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there is a strong feel for women in the Yellow Emperor's making. Along with the moon goddess, other characters include his first, second, third and fourth wives and his mistress. None of these women seem to be part of the book only to hold up the heroic man. Rather, they are contributors to culture in their own right.

The Yellow Emperor's ministers, though, are male (of medicine, writing and music) and so too is the fisherman, whose only reason, as far as I can tell, to be included in the book is to give space to the emperor's childhood while simultaneously delving into mythology. The Fisherman's is a big poem told simply, and the result is both unsentimental and poignant. It begins,

Always, no matter
the colour of season,
he scrambled a path
to the Ji River bank.

Carrying his feelings
away from the world
his thoughts like swift eels

darting the shallows.
Each day he visited
a fisherman
with the white-stick brow. (22)

When the old fisherman naps one afternoon and never wakes up, the poem ends with,

Rock spirits believed
the Yellow River
would burst one day,
wringing its bank

to capture the Ji River;
to feast on brine
from the emperor's tears. (23)

The notes in the back read '*Ji river: Purportedly no longer in existence.*' (83) Notes like these, kept far from the poem so as not to distract, colour the poems, vividly. My preference was reading the book once with a constant finger on the 'Notes on Text' pages so I could flip between the poem and its contextualisation and then reading it again as a flowing collection, but the poems are all standalones if you're not into endnotes – quite a feat. The notes at the back of the book as well as the list of characters at the beginning seem to me a perfect way to contain such complexity.

To bring the third point of theme-driven collections, adherence to a strict process, into discussion, consider 'Culmination Point of Deliberation':

There are things to understand:

the nerve of the eagle

tumbling its appetite to earth,

the necessity of raising
fugitive birds for feasts.

That for each death
there is circumstance.

...

I am like a long-necked bird

formless as hunger
fishing the fat void

–listen to the glittering current
as it offers answers. (39)

The poem is very much a musing on death, using the traditional Chinese emphasis on nature to point to great life lessons. Here, the bird (woman- and mankind) is persistent but temporal, and the current (life itself) is powerful in its legacy. The poem's notes reveal that the poem is written in the voice of Lei Zu, the emperor's first wife, but also that the title is

a translation of the acupuncture point Shang Qui, Spleen 5. *The meaning conveyed is of a culmination or high point that provides perspective and from where we can see in all directions...to achieve an internal state of clarity.* (85)

Clever. And that's exactly what my poet-friend said to me, that the 'project' collection is too clever for his liking. Well I like it *for* its cleverness, and not only that: the language drips with sensuality, leaving a clean image on every page. I'm buying the book for my acupuncturist.

Heather Taylor Johnson

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