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## REVIEWS

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*Against the Current: The Top 30 Contributors of #FemkuMag, Issues 1-30*, ed. Lori A Minor (Ohio: Moth Orchid Press, 2022). 103 pages; 6" × 9". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-716-05527-0. Price: \$13.50 from online booksellers.

*Reviewed by Mary Stevens*

We can't help not being in another's skin and experiencing the world in their unique way. But on top of that, our society has developed norms for various ways of being and having—for race, class, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, age, religious belief. Anything else is considered a variation on a norm, if it is considered at all.

To discuss *Against the Current*, we must first consider the ezine from which the poems in this anthology come. A femku is “a feminist haiku or a haiku written by someone femme-presenting,” as defined on the #FemkuMag website. #FemkuMag provides a dedicated space for “haikai poetry written by womxn and non-binary folx.” While one might question the equity of a journal that excludes a specific demographic—in this case, men—it's also important to recognize that this ezine arose from a need its founder and editor, Lithica Ann (deadname: Lori A Minor), saw to support femme-presenting poets. Because we cannot fully empathize with others and our society is specifically set up not to meet the needs of those who are marginalized, this journal offers womxn and non-binary poets the opportunity to write on a variety of topics and with a range of tones that editors of mainstream journals may not even realize they avoid. Starting this ezine was a bold and constructive step in support of femme-presenting poets experienced in the systems of oppression rooted in patriarchy.

The most important ingredient in haiku and senryu is tone—so much so that haikai poets have accumulated a great variety of kigo to express the subtle gradations of the many emotions of the human experience. However, haiku or senryu that express anger are few compared to those that express the other emotions. In this culture, many consider anger a bad emotion. It is often confused with meanness. We have only recently started to come out of the cultural beliefs that it is distasteful for men to cry and unacceptable for womxn to express anger. However, emotions are neither good nor bad; rather, they can be likened to messengers who reveal unmet needs and call for change. *#FemkuMag* challenges the social pressure that demands womxn and non-binary folx silence their emotions in an effort to maintain the status quo.

Unapologetically sex-positive, the ezine also confronts societal expectations for womxn's sexuality. One can find there poems not only about sexual oppression, the high-stakes consequences of intercourse, and womxn's sexual health concerns, but also about how womxn experience and feel about the act itself—and what they fantasize about experiencing and feeling during intimacy. In a culture in which womxn's desire is ignored, shamed, and subject to double standards, this journal fosters an encouraging environment for womxn and nonbinary folx to write about and show others what sexual pleasure is and could be—based on their own needs.

*#FemkuMag* offers a unique space where, since all of the poets are femme-presenting, there is a sense of solidarity. The poet is held in the collective. And that poet's voice becomes our voice. A journal of many exceptional contributors is more persuasive and much harder to shame or dismiss than a femku by a single poet in a mainstream journal, no matter how accomplished they may be. In preparing this review, I spoke with a few contributors about what they appreciate about the ezine. One said that *#FemkuMag* “allows womxn and non-binary poets to write freely and create works that make a difference not only for the poets themselves but for the community as a whole, filling a much-needed gap and getting poems out into the world that might not otherwise be published.” Another observes that she can “go to a hard, raw place to work that digs deep” and values the editorial relationship Lithica Ann offers. Another

poet appreciates their encouragement when she feels she's pushing an edge in her writing. A welcoming editor, Lithica Ann effectively builds community and uses their vision and editorial skills to empower others.

*Against the Current* is an anthology of the thirty poets whose works appear in the greatest number of *#FemkuMag*'s first thirty issues. It consists of four poems by each poet, an In Memoriam section, the results of the marlene mountain contests 2018–2021, and a paper by a student of Dr. Randy Brooks that analyzes several poems from the ezine's first five issues and emphasizes how it gives womxn and non-binary poets "an outlet and a platform to reclaim their voices and be heard."

The collection's title gets its name from Debbie Strange's senryu

pay equity  
she swims  
against the current

The title is particularly apt. Like the speaker in this poem who struggles to obtain the same pay as her male co-workers, the poets published in *#FemkuMag* also push back against gender oppression. And its editor makes it possible for them to do so by asserting the ezine's value, even as they deal with many personal struggles of their own.

Two of the aspects that most satisfy in this anthology of 167 haiku and senryu are how many of the poems center on the femme-presenting body, making for a visceral understanding of the speakers' experiences, and the multitude of relationships and roles womxn and non-binary folx navigate over the course of a lifetime or even just a day. Even more impressive than these two foci is the collection's wide representation of other marginalized groups. These poets not only point out gender oppression but also the injustices committed to other populations. This intersectionality among gender, race, class, disability, age, sexual orientation—and more—appears on virtually every page. And while many of these social problems are not unique to womxn's experience alone, they often impact womxn in different ways from the way they do men. This anthology is a rich collection of the human experience, culled by a most compassionate editor; as such, readers of all genders will find much that resonates.

Lithica Ann's *Against the Current* is certain to become part of the canon of haiku anthologies—alongside such comparable classics as Cor van den Heuvel's *The Haiku Anthology*, Bruce Ross's *Haiku Moment*, Scott Mason's *Gratitude in the Time of COVID-19*, and Robert Epstein's special-topic anthologies—not as a variation on a gender “norm,” but as a collection of important haiku and senryu by poets outstanding in the genre.

A few favorites:

child bride —  
she insists on wearing  
the daisy tiara  
*Hifsa Ashraf*

after sex  
he tells me  
I'm a whore  
*Martha Magenta*

lily of the Nile ...  
dad's older brother  
calls my mom “ethnic”  
*Kath Abela Wilson*

childless  
I hug a teddy bear  
into the void  
*Rachel Sutcliffe*

an atlas moth  
emerges from the cocoon  
shedding my gender  
*Robin Smith*

just me without a prefix  
*Julie Schwerin*

morning cartoons  
I shake out  
the last pill  
*Tia Haynes*

a bud  
too fresh to be named  
post-traumatic growth  
*Kelly Sawage*

Everything With an Asterisk, by Bruce H. Feingold (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2022). 82 pages; 4¼" × 6½". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-947271-99-9. Price: \$20.00 from [www.redmoonpress.com](http://www.redmoonpress.com)