

Here is a striking juxtaposition between movement and stillness. After “light,” one expects movement in the next image (a bird or a winded branch, perhaps) and instead, surprisingly, finds stillness in the camellia blossom: its whiteness “solidifies” light in petals that tend to be opaque rather than diaphanous, with a surround of heavy, waxy leaves.

And finally, this poem’s deft encapsulation of the Buddhist notion of self:

chasing cloud shadows I fail

The book’s title, *The Empty Field*, and the references to Buddha in several poems in the collection, suggest that the author, if not a Buddhist himself, is very familiar with its Four Noble Truths. In the poem above, the psychological mind-based self (the “I”) fails in resisting what is. It can’t make itself endure since it is the same as what it chases, a shadow or cloud. It makes the foundational error of looking for itself outside, rather than looking inwardly to discover its own empty essence.

The poems in Cariello’s book, *The Empty Field*, were written and culled over a long time period, and it shows. It is an excellent collection and I highly recommend it.

Dear Elsa, by Marco Fraticelli (Canada, Red Deer Press, 2023). 240 pages; 5¼" × 7¼". Four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-889956-86-5. Price: \$14.95 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by Randy Brooks

Marco Fraticelli’s first foray into haiku fiction was his book, *A Thousand Years: The Haiku and Love Letters of Chiyo-ni*, 2018. In that book, he imagined and wrote love letters prompted from Chiyo-ni’s haiku. The book reads like a novella, progressing through the imagined love relationship. In 2023, Marco wrote a second haiku fiction book, *Dear Elsa*, a book for children ages 8-11. As an experienced fifth-grade teacher,

Fratlicelli masterfully creates characters with believable perspectives and angsty voices. This book is an excellent read for adults as well as children.

Dear Elsa features the growth of an email friendship between two fifth grade students. Here is the synopsis of the novel from the back cover: “Leo has just moved from Montreal to Toronto and hates his new school, his teacher, and the other students. Elsa lives in Boston, navigating her parents’ divorce and her dad’s relationship with a new girlfriend. The two become ‘pen pals’ via email for a school assignment, and their lives are documented here in a funny and poignant exchange that takes place across their Grade 5 year.”

The blurb doesn’t mention the reason why I am reviewing this book in *Modern Haiku*. One of the ways that the two pen pals become close friends is through haiku. This novel also chronicles Leo’s growth as a haiku writer, at first merely fulfilling an assignment to write a 5-7-5 syllable poem, to learning how to write haiku that share significant insights and feelings from his life experiences. Leo begins attaching his most recent haiku at the end of emails to Elsa. They are simple postscripts (ps):

looking out the window
in his new school
the sad student

Every writer needs an interested reader who provides understanding and caring in their responses. Elsa becomes Leo’s reader who responds honestly and keeps asking for more. In response to the “looking out the window” haiku, she writes: “Dear Leo, Actually I think your haikus look even better when you use lower-case letters. I really like that one. I guess it’s about you? I can just picture you waiting until your teacher’s back was turned and then jumping out the window to escape. Your pen pal, Elsa.”

Within the context of their email exchanges, we can see that Leo is motivated to write more haiku because he is learning about its social nature. Haiku is not merely a wrestling with words and images; it is a means of sharing his feelings and life struggles. For example, in a couple of emails the children discuss Halloween. Joe was not invited to any Halloween parties and decided he was too old to dress up and go trick-or-treating. Elsa sends him a picture of herself dressed up as Katniss Evergreen from

The Hunger Games. He likes it but signs off “Your uncheery pen pal.” However, he also attaches a haiku postscript:

the fat squirrel
greedily eating
last night’s jack-o-lantern

Elsa writes back: “I really love your haiku. It’s strange, I’ve seen squirrels eating rotting pumpkins too, but I never thought about writing a poem about it. I guess that’s why you’re a poet and I’m not.” In her postscript she tells Leo that he’s wrong because “You’re never too old for Halloween. Even grownups have Halloween parties.” Fraticelli’s novel shows the origins of haiku from Leo’s life circumstances as well as the benefits and therapeutic value of sharing haiku with a reader who cares.

As a fellow educator, one of the most important take-a-ways for me is how this story chronicles Leo’s growth as a haiku writer. He begins by merely completing an assignment. As he engages with the art of writing haiku over an extended time—in this case, one year—he learns that the goal is to understand one’s own life experiences through social interactions with readers. Everyone wants to be known for special talents or gifts. At one point in the novella, Leo is trying to gain recognition in the new school as a drummer. However, for his pen pal, Elsa, and his teacher, he becomes known as the haiku writer. In addition to expressing his own struggles, Leo also learns more about Elsa and writes haiku that support her difficulties. I don’t want to be a total spoiler of the novel’s plot, but here is one of his haiku that provides empathy and care for her circumstances:

at the bottom of the pyramid
a young girl
in a wheelchair

Elsa emails back: “Thanks for the haiku. It’s really strange to have someone write a poem with you in it. The only thing that wasn’t fun about my trip was that a lot of places weren’t wheelchair accessible.”

Marco Fraticelli's novel provides a wonderful model for teaching haiku to children that engages them in the art of paying attention to their own life experiences and sharing them through haiku images and feelings. This is an outstanding alternative to the typical "let's write a haiku today" assignment in which students count syllables and write "a poem about nature." It takes time, sharing, and genuine responses for a student to learn what the art of writing haiku is for—to share our emotions, observations, and insights from our lives. *Dear Elsa* would be a wonderful start for young readers and writers. I recommend you buy a copy for an elementary teacher you know (or donate a copy to your local school's library). And give a copy of this book to any youngsters who are curious about the art of writing haiku.

BRIEFLY NOTED

Enough Light, by Mary Stevens (Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2023). 96 pages; 4¼" × 6½". Glossy black and white card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-958408-21-6. Price: \$20.00 from www.redmoonpress.com

The latest from award-winning poet Mary Stevens whose peaceful approach to life is evident in these insightful poems. *morning calm / the barred owl's swivel / shakes off the snow*. Her observation of nature here captures the casual and serene mood after a snowfall. Stevens also conveys quiet domestic scenes that show their strength through how immediately they transport the reader from our world to that of the poet's. *one by one / the houselights follow me / to bed*. While this collection is comprised of mostly nature-based poems there are several relationship poems that are handled with the same steady hand. *when better than nothing / becomes not enough / waxing crescent*. Ultimately, the discipline of mindfulness is on full display in Stevens' poetry, as evidenced in her title poem: *forest fireflies / only enough light / for the next step*. The poet reminds the reader to slow down and look around. Always good advice. —Peter Newton