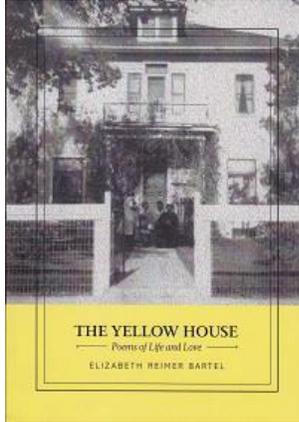


Elizabeth Reimer Bartel. *The Yellow House: Poems of Life and Love*. Self-published. 2015. 155 pp.

Book review by Robert Martens



Elizabeth Reimer Bartel has already published a novel, a memoir, a poetry anthology (co-published with a group of women), and now a book of poetry all her own, but she might be described as a “late bloomer.” Born in 1925, she only started writing when she felt it was time. “Reading has been my greatest joy all my life,” she says. “I had to read enough before I was ready to write” (Author Event). *The Yellow House*, written in advanced age, is in a sense a nostalgic memoir of a long life lived among treasured family and friends.

The yellow house in which Reimer Bartel was born was situated at the corner of Main Street and Reimer Avenue in Steinbach, Manitoba and was built by “the eccentric Reimers” (press release) who helped found the town in 1874. This book of poetry ends with a story: the death of her grandmother in the yellow house and the Mennonite funeral rituals that follow. *The Yellow House* frequently speaks of death, doubt, and loss; the poems are written from the perspective of a woman who has indeed lost much and is facing her own mortality. The book is not dark, though. It is imbued with humour, whimsy, and an abiding faith. These poems are stories in poetic form, written simply and accessibly, and with a vividness of detail that is remarkable.

The second of the following two poems speak to old age and death; the first, to the wonder of life’s renewal.

Sources

“Author Event: Elizabeth Reimer Bartel, ‘By Whatever Name.’” *Vancouver Island Regional Library*. 2012.

www.virl.bc.ca

Press release. Hardcopy sent to reviewer. 2015.

There Is No Weight

She springs into my arms
A magnet fixed between us
A bond which will never break
Instinctively my arm bends
To make a seat for her
So I can hold her close.
The sweetness of infant flesh
Encircles us.

I stroke a tear-stained cheek
smooth dampened hair
murmur comfort
my lips against her ear.
Our breathing slows

she hiccups once or twice
sighs, slumps down half-asleep
a heaviness against my shoulder.

There is no weight like it in all the world. (143)

We're the Old Ones Now

I watch my sister, determined
as a hungry leghorn, chin forward
as she prepares to cross the street
among the ghosts of generations past
our forebears that begat children here
sang and prayed
dealt in the goods of this world
and the next.

My sister steps off the curb
where the cottonwoods
once bowed
in an ordered row before the house
and my maiden aunt
hair centre-parted, smooth
cheeks flushed with mercantile blood
her shapely feet passing cheerful geraniums
bordering the walk.
Daily she crossed the wide street
fine shoes picking their way
through the mud
and ruts of spring, the dust of summer
all of her drawn
to her first real love: the store.

At the end my aunt became confused
asked every time we met
which one of her brother Johnny's girls I was
while across the street the big windows
of the store glittered.

My maiden aunt is gone.
The store and family home dismantled
oak banisters and brass door knobs
auctioned off
the stout beams and boards
hailed away in truckloads by the Hutterites
to build their chicken barns.

Now there's the polished granite of the bank
here on this street
hard-edged concrete planters trailing vines
ornamental trees
historical plaques commemorating pioneers.

But we're the old ones now,
my sister crossing the street
and I'm the one who trembles and sees
how much she looks like our long dead aunt.

The Yellow House is available at the MHSBC library or can be purchased by emailing the author at deliztel@shaw.ca.