

Stars for the Living: An Interview With Poet Bruce Boston

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

Bruce Boston has a new poetry collection, *Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets* (Mind's Eye Publications (March 8, 2022)). To most of us in the HWA, the release of a new Bruce Boston collection is an event. Nebula and World Fantasy Award winner Jeffrey Ford describes this new work as



a “wonderful evocation of the Romance and Reality of the science fiction space odyssey - vast journeys, hallucinatory mindscapes. . . .” Hugo- and Nebula-winning author Geoffrey A. Landis called the collection “haunting and compelling, evoking the awe and the beauty of unbounded space in vivid hallucinogenic language.”

From a personal standpoint I am very happy to see a new collection from Bruce. For many in the HWA, including myself, Bruce has filled the role of mentor, inspiration and teacher. We learn when we read his speculative poetry. We are inspired to extend ourselves when we experience his work. His range seems limitless, utilizing elements of horror, science fiction, fantasy, surrealism, humor, and

even slipstream in his works. The very last line of the last poem (*Spacers Compass*) in the collection proclaims “and the stars are for the living.” To me this sums up so much about speculative poetry and its many sub-genres.

Q: The title of your new collection is derived from the first poem in the book, *For Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets*. While at first blush the term “spacer” appears to apply to an astronaut or space traveler, but there are many layers beyond that in this work. The themes in these poems are not just about space travel but go much deeper. For purposes of context, what is a “spacer” as presented in this collection and are there analogies to be drawn from the term?

A: In the context of the collection, “spacers” can be seen as referring to outsiders, those who don’t fit in with the crowd, who see the world differently, who often see too much and too deeply: poets, dreamers, artists, musicians, writers, explorers in physical, emotional, and ideational realms.

Q: I recall at one point over the last few years you indicated that you were done with publishing poetry collections. What brought you to that after so many award winning and nominated collections? Why did you decide to go forward with *Spacers*?

A: That was four years ago, after my collection *Artifacts* (Independent Legion, 2018) appeared. I also qualified my statement about no more poetry collections with “for the foreseeable future”. To put together a poetry collection is a task that requires considerable work. You don’t just throw a bunch of poems together and slap a title on it. You need to find poems that resonate with one another, and order them in a way that enhances that resonance. You have to decide whether or not you want illustrations to complement the poems, and if so, from where will they come. You have to consider the cover and the design. And once you do all of that work, you are going to have a great deal of emotional involvement in the project.

The reason I declared no more poetry collections for the foreseeable future was that my more recent poetry books had not been selling as well as earlier ones, not reaching as many readers. After all the work and emotional involvement entailed in creating a new collection, I found that very disheartening. The drop in sales was no doubt in part due to technology and self-publishing. Currently the world has become flooded with books, poetry books as much or more than any other kind. Sometimes it seems that there are more writers out there than readers. It’s hard even to give away books that you no longer want, unless you decide to donate them to be recycled for paper. Despite this, it’s still discouraging to put all the time and energy into a book that not that many people are going to read.

Since publishing *Artifacts*, I've published a collection of short stories, *Gallimaufry* (Plum White Press, 2021) and also come to realize that there was one collection of poems I always wanted to compile, one that brought together the best of what I loosely call my "deep spacer" poems. Even if the book doesn't sell well, I've consoled my ego with the fact that it will continue to exist as a physical and electronic reality for any who want to read it.

Q: *Spacers* focuses heavily on science fiction and the world of the people we imagine populating those voyaging ships searching the heavens. Looking at some individual works, such as "*For Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets*" (originally published in *Asimov's SF Magazine*, April 1984 and 1985 Rhysling Award winner), they seem to span a number of years of your work. Is this collection a retrospective of a body of work focusing on this theme?

A: Yes, all these poems have been collected before, but never orchestrated together as a whole. One would have to read five or six or my previous collections, mostly out of print, to find them.

Q: There is an interesting blending of the concept of the vastness of space and darkness and human interaction with this darkness. Darkness is a common theme for

horror, overlapping of course with science fiction. In *Spacers* the “dark” is friend, enemy and geography. In this collection how do you view the “dark” and the use of this concept as a tool furthering the theme of the collection?

A: I don't think the collection has a central theme on that count. Rather, it varies from poem to poem. In the title poem, the dark represents something to retreat from periodically by returning to one's human origins and human companionship. In “The FTL Addict Fixes” the dark involves an overwhelming desire to embrace it, a death wish. In “Dark Rains Here and There” the dark becomes something inevitable that must be confronted and overcome.

Q: In “Dark Rains Here and There” you begin the poem with “a girl in Myanmar” strangled by poverty and the shadow of perpetual rain. The poem then moves to a girl in San Francisco who “lived with passion and belief/ and drug-fueled flights to worlds unfathomed.” The poem continues on with this girl (or perhaps others) traveling to distant worlds, both haunted and embraced by these “dark rains.” In all of your works, including this volume, there is a social consciousness woven into the narratives. Themes of oppression, the destruction of the ecosystem and other social issues. Yet, on the surface, as with “Dark Rains Here and There”

there is a story unfolding. The reader cannot ignore the secondary and tertiary layers of meaning of this poem and many others you have given us. A classic example of this is in the poem you wrote with Robert Frazier, “Return to the Mutant Rain Forest.” This poem, which has received numerous accolades as a classic of speculative poetry, tells the story of a crew visiting a planet and encountering hardship as they trespass on a native ecosystem. There are parallels with humanity’s treatment of the earth. Has it been important to you to intertwine the narrative of your works with your beliefs as to what humanity has failed to accomplish but could still if redirected?

A: The girl-woman-traveler-señora in “Dark Rains Here and There” are all intended to be the same person. The poems and stories set in the Mutant Rain Forest are not taking place on another planet, but on a future Earth where Nature is rebelling against human despoilation. Just as we are seeing today with climate change and pandemics.

For me, the best poems are ones that have substance, ones that speak to the reader beyond their surface reads. That substance can be personal, social, or universal. Many of my poems that have substance beyond the surface, even the sf ones, are describing the present in some way. Many are cautionary tales portraying a negative result that exists

unless we change our ways. However, I think I dwell more on human faults than human potential.

Q: Over the years you have published many forms of science fiction and horror poetry. Do you prefer one genre over the other?

A: I don't think there's a hard and fast line between the two. I don't think of myself as an sf writer or a horror writer, but a speculative writer.

Q: Do you approach science fiction poetry differently from horror when composing?

A: No. That's not the way writing poems works for me. Once I have an idea and begin working on a piece, the form and content and genre seem to follow naturally. At first, I'm not even sure what genre the piece will be or even whether it is going to be a poem or a fiction. And sometimes one morphs to the other. My poem "In the Garden of the State" portrays a society in which the state treats its citizens the same way a bonsai gardener treats the trees growing in his garden, limiting their growth and training its direction. By exploring this vision and its ramifications more thoroughly, the poem eventually morphed into my novel *The Gardener's Tale*.

Q: Are there any genres you have not attempted to explore but wanted to?

A: I love mystery and noir fiction and have considered writing a novel that combined the two. However, at this late date, it doesn't seem likely. Maybe a long story if I get a good enough idea and get fired up about it.

Q: I try to ask this of every poet I have interviewed. Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim only to write when inspired. When the moment or the "Muse" takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?

A: With regard to poetry, I work solely from inspiration. However, for fiction, particularly longer fiction, from my own experience I'd say you have to write nearly every day to accomplish anything worthwhile.

Q: As a follow up to the previous question, and one I often repeat, deals with the avoidance of cliché in speculative poetry. What advice can you give the fledging poet on how to use archetypes without resorting to

cliché? How do you write dark poetry without imitating the poets that inspired you to write dark poetry?

A: The simple answer here is to find your own voice. However, I'd would add that it is not a sin to borrow or extrapolate from writers whom you admire and who have influenced you. All writers are working in a literary tradition and to some extent their own work is going to reflect what they have read and enjoyed. Yet it will also reflect all the other influences throughout their lives. This is where your own twist enters and plays is own notes on familiar archetypes.

Q: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?

A: I have no plans to publish any more books for the foreseeable future. I have enough uncollected poems to compile another poetry book, but I think sixty books and chapbooks may be enough. However, I am continuing to write new work and to submit to magazines and anthologies. Also, I regularly post poems on my Facebook page along with news, humor, art, and assorted oddities.

Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces from your new collection:

The Music of Deep Spacers

From the brawling bars of Mars
to the dim cafes of Aldebaran,
the music of deep spacers

reaches to the unbounded sky.
Most often it is a raucous music
of passions intense and fleeting,

brutal and lacking in subtlety,
a release from light years passed.
Yet when the last call comes and

the lights flicker, and cafes
and dim bars are shutting down,
the music all at once changes

to a vast and haunting refrain
that echoes the depths of space,
the solitude of ceaseless travel.

Stumbling out into the night,
singly, in pairs, and in groups,
strains of music trailing behind,

the spacers wander alien streets,
in search of temporary lodgings

beneath the static of the stars.

For Spacers Snarled in the Hair of Comets

If you've heard the stellar *vox humana*
the untuned ear takes for static,

if you've kissed the burning eyelids
of god and seized upon the moon's

reflection, disjointed and backwards,
in the choppy ink of some alien sea,

then you know how sleek and fleshy,
how treacherous, the stars can become.

While the universe falls with no boundary,
you and I sit in a cafe of a port city

on a planet whose name we've forgotten:
the vacuum is behind us and before us,

the spiced ale is cool and hallucinogenic.
Already the candle sparkles in our plates.

Beyond the Edge of Alien Desire

Seduced by pheromones
more potent to the senses
than my species' own,
I ride her blue cries
to crimson excitations,
and for a trembling instant
the light years between
our limbs collapse.

Charged by the tendrils
of her spiked electric fur
to telepathic sight,
I feel pain raining down,
see blue fields blown
in the searing light,
know the wiles of victims
for the pale glabrous beasts
who handle them by night.

At dawn the dreadnaughts leap,
another world to take,
her scent is still upon me,
blue miles to go before I wake.

Dark Rains Here and There

i

When she was a girl in Myanmar
the dark rains fell
suddenly in great sheets
of water and sound
in the heated afternoons.

Thunder would rattle
the tin roof and the kitchen
would often flood.

When the dark rains fell on Myanmar
she lived in poverty beneath
the tyranny of a state
beyond redemption.

When the dark rains fell on Myanmar
the sky gave up its color.
Shadows would disappear
for there would be one great shadow
covering everything.

ii

When she was a woman in San Francisco
the dark rains would fall slowly
and steadily for days at a time,

turning the pastel houses gray
beneath an even grayer sky.

When the dark rains fell on San Francisco
the tires of passing cars hissed
endlessly on the wet pavements.

When the dark rains fell on San Francisco
she lived with passion and belief
and drug-fueled flights to worlds unfathomed.

iii

When she was a wanderer in space,
the dark rains fell many ways
on many different worlds.

When the dark rains fell
in the labyrinth of canyons
that laced the southern hemisphere
of Epsilon Eridani Nine,
they danced this way and that
in constantly shifting whirlpools of wind.

When the dark rains fell in the light gravity
of Fomalhaut's only habitable moon,
it was in large limpid drops
clinging to the cilia and limbs

of overarching trees.

When the dark rains fell
on many different worlds,
here and there,
she learned to live with love
bright as a rocket's flare
and loss deep as a singularity.

iv

When she was a señora
in the high Mexico desert,
in the steady days
of her peace and resolution,
she would stand at the screen door
just before dusk.

She would listen to the insects ticking
against the dusty metal crosshatch
and watch the light
from a low red sun
encroaching on the shade of the porch.

When the sky remained cloudless
on the high desert,
when life seemed dry and spare
as the land around her,

she found herself watching
for one more dark rain
she could walk in.

Interstellar Tract

after William Carlos Williams

I will teach you my Earth people
how to perform a star flight
for you have it over a troop
of astronauts –
you have the space sense necessary.

See! imagination leads.
I begin with a design for a ship.
For Sol's sake not streamlined –
not silver either – and not polished!
Let it be weathered and familiar,
as full of natural color
as the world it leaves behind.

And let us have glass on all sides!
Yes windows, my Earth people!
To what purpose? So we might
see the stars streak in the wake
of our light-speed passage,
so we might watch our past shrink

and our future swell before us.

No plastics please –
and if there must be steel
for Clarke's sake keep it covered.
Fill the corridors with earth
which gives beneath our feet,
where grass can begin to grow.
Plaster the walls and panels
with murals of your own making
or common mementos from the past,
a favorite poem or photograph –
an old poster – a dried flower –
you know the things I mean
my Earth people.

Better still, no corridors at all,
no cramped cabins to hold us in –
rather a vast and open space,
spun for gravity, where our
thoughts may freely flow,
with a river known for its warmth,
a forest or two so we can build
homes of our own choice.

A rough and natural ship then,
a miniature Earth, still clean –
green and blue and full of clouds

if you can imagine such a thing –
and for light no glowing tubes
that turn the skin a sickly hue,
but the passing stars themselves –
magnified by sufficient art and craft
to rival the lumens of our sun.

As for the bridge and crew –
bring them down – bring them down!
A navigator, perhaps, to help
plot our course between systems,
but no communications officer
to turn our varied voices into one,
no strutting captain-king
leading us through the cosmos,
calling our ship his ship.

Let the controls remain simple.
For what reason? So any man
or woman can learn to master them,
so every one of us might take a turn
at the board and have a hand
in making our destinations.

And finally, each sidereal cycle,
let us sit openly with one another,
side by side beneath the trees –
my Earth people – as we conspire

to save the best in our origins
and leave the worst behind –
you have nothing to lose –
believe me, the stars
will fill your pockets.

Go ahead now –
I think you are ready for flight.

Bruce Boston is the author of sixty books and chapbooks, including the novels *The Gardener's Tale* and *Stained Glass Rain*. His poems and stories have appeared most visibly in *Asimov's SF*, *Analog*, *Weird Tales*, *Amazing Stories*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *New Myths*, *Pedestal*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nebula Awards Showcase* and *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His poetry has received the Bram Stoker Award, the *Asimov's* Readers Award, and the Rhysling and Grand Master Awards of the SFWA. His fiction has received a Pushcart Prize and twice been a finalist for the Bram Stoker Award (novel, short story).

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