

Blue Cage at Midnight

by Gary Freeman

Toronto: LyricalMyrical Press (2007), 35 pp.

Reviewed by Lisa A. Smith

What is the human compulsion to place a message in a bottle? The fragile container, holding the carefully crafted note, releases a cry for help into the wide open ocean. The pounding waves toss the bottle about until it finds its way into a sheltered alcove, where a curious beachcomber picks it up. Will it be opened? Will it be understood? When we put a message in a bottle we leave to chance the possibility that the message will reach the right hands, and further that they will understand our message and know what to do.

What type of message might we send? Do we lay our soul bare for the readers and allow them to see, feel and hear our experience? Do we tell them what we need and hope for? Do we apprise them of our deepest fears and darkest moments? Do we risk sending such a message to someone we have never met and may never see?

Great poets, writers and musicians place messages into a bottle and release it into the universe - pure humanity, pure soul, no fear, no pretension, no bullshit. And that's what Douglas Gary Freeman does in his book of poetry, *Blue Cage at Midnight*. As Freeman currently hangs in limbo awaiting extradition for a crime he allegedly committed over 30 years ago, this book is a message in a bottle that Canadians interested in working to foster social justice and end human suffering need to read. But the prospective reader should not worry about feeling overwhelmed; this is not a list of history dates or complicated political and philosophical arguments. Rather, the author artfully takes us on a journey with him through his life, his passions and his fears, which are fundamentally implicated in the political and social struggles into which he was born.

Freeman grew up in a tumultuous inner city neighbourhood and came of age in an even more turbulent political climate in 1960s Chicago, the hot spot for FBI repression of the Black Panther Party, of which he was a member. Beginning with "memories of my youth" the author immediately illustrates his mastery of powerful imagery and metaphor, which remains the thread weaving together all of his compositions.

as children
we learned to stand on one leg
clasping bundles of hope between our teeth

He shifts effortlessly into a commanding tone in “Like Caught Niggas”. Freeman delivers an opening phrase which pulls the reader into the powerful political message driving the piece.

Slaves are made
Not born:
The fabric of the mind must be mutilated
Then supplanted
By the desired synthetics.

The book is comprised mostly of poetry (save for a few short prose style expositions) and is drawn from just under two decades of Freeman’s writing.

The cover art, by Paul Morin, blends excerpts from the poems with bold images which provide an excellent complement to the compositions. The opening to the book, by George Elliott Clarke, apprises the reader of Freeman’s current circumstances and situates his case within the wider history of African-American struggles in the United States, as well as highlighting the long tradition which Freeman enters into in using verse as a form of struggle and resistance. Clarke calls Freeman’s writing “spiky, tough, explosive”, which is without question true. However, I most connected with how the author lays bare the darkness in life without shame or apologies. His writing is heart wrenching, painfully honest, beautiful, and at times jarring, in many ways akin to jazz, which Freeman loves and lives for.

Visit <http://www.web.net/~freemandrum/index.html> for more information on Freeman’s story and how to become involved in his campaign. Let Freeman’s message be one that inspires action to turn his “Blue Cage” into one with a door which we all push open.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Lisa A. Smith is currently a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. She worked for many years in conjunction with the Centre for Restorative Justice at Simon Fraser University. She held a research internship at the Crime and Justice Research Centre at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, along with research positions at Simon Fraser University’s Department of Criminology

and Concordia University's Department of Sociology. Her work has appeared in *Social Compass*, the *Sociology of Religion*, and the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*.

Editor's Note: After being detained at the Don Jail in Toronto, Canada since July 2004, Gary Freeman was extradited to the U.S. in February 2008. All but one charge against him was dropped. Gary pleaded guilty to this charge and served one month in Cook County Jail. He is on probation in the U.S. for a two year period. Gary is with his family in Chicago where he is starting a foundation for children who are victims of violent crime. American authorities view the outcome of this three decade long case as an effort at reconciliation with the African-American community.