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Book Review

David McMurray (2022) *Teaching and Learning Haiku in English*. The International University of Kagoshima Press. ISBN: 978-4-901352-66-6.

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Teaching and Learning Haiku in English, by David McMurray, is an essential reference book for teachers planning to introduce their students to English-language haiku. McMurray, editor of the *Asahi Haikuist Network* for over twenty years, provides an overview of research into haiku, how English-language haiku can be taught at various levels, and how the genre has evolved alongside social and environmental changes.

The book is divided into seven main chapters: an introduction to haiku education; understanding international haiku; how to teach haiku; learning haiku through information and communication technology (ICT); haiku contests; haiku at academic societies; and trends in international haiku. The third chapter, how to teach haiku, forms the core of the book, and is subdivided into haiku education for teachers at elementary school, junior high school, high school, university, and for company staff.

Rather than attempt to define English-language haiku up front—the norm for most books about the history and features of English-language haiku (e.g., Digregorio, 2014; Kacian, Rowland, & Burns, 2013)—McMurray instead fills each chapter with examples of English-language haiku by Japanese and non-Japanese people as well as the author himself, allowing the reader to get a feel for English-language haiku. Most of these haiku were written directly in English, without having been translated from Japanese or other languages, and the reader can sense the different linguistic and cultural influences that come into play when authors from countries as diverse as Canada, Serbia, Japan, and Borneo write haiku in English. In the last chapter, McMurray gives a partial definition of English-language haiku as a literary form that no longer follows a 5-7-5 syllable pattern nor necessarily includes seasonal words (*kiigo*).

English instructors may do well to follow this approach and provide a minimalistic definition of English-language haiku to students as well as examples, which can be found in abundance in online haiku journals or sites such as *Heron's Nest* and the *Asahi Haikuist Network*. Alternatively, the instructor could ask students to read samples of English-language haiku and then come up with their own definition or description of this genre. Such an approach could give students a sense of the freedom involved in English-language haiku writing and make haiku writing tasks less onerous.

Having said this, McMurray does offer a simple recipe for how to write English-language haiku. He describes a three-step process for writing photo haiku. Use of a photo is itself an inspired teaching method. In the past, I would ask students to come up with their own English-language haiku based on a memory or experience, but this can be challenging as students often do not know what to write about. By providing students with a photo, say of a boat on a lake, they have something concrete to work with. McMurray recommends having students say what they see in the photo in the first line, describe the natural scenery or season in the second line, and say how the photo makes them feel, or what they want to do, in the third. As an example, he shows a photo of a dog wading in a river, with the accompanying haiku:

Riverside
Endless summer
Without shoes

I tried out this task in one of my writing classes and found the results to be positive. I gave students a photograph of a person gazing at the Seto Ohashi Bridge [a famous, very long bridge that connects the main island

of Honshu with the southern island of Shikoku] and asked them to compose, as homework, a haiku following the three-step method advanced by McMurray. My impression is that students struggled less with the task than when they had to come up with a haiku on their own. Some of their haiku were rather patternistic, and often quite similar. However, the purpose of the task is to allow students to experience writing haiku in English, not to produce a masterpiece. I told students that the three steps were there to help them assemble their ideas, but that they could deviate from this pattern in the future. Additionally, students could be asked to write haiku about their own photographs, which reduces the burden on the teacher in finding photographs and permits students to be creative.

One idea in the book that could trigger debate is McMurray's postulation, based on extensive research, that Japanese people and Westerners focus on different parts of a photograph when writing a photo haiku: Westerners tend to focus on objects or people in the foreground, McMurray asserts, while Japanese writers focus more on the background. I tend to bristle whenever the "West" and "East" are dichotomized and did not find that the examples in the book showed major differences between what the Japanese and Western writers focused on when composing haiku. However, the idea is intriguing and worthy of discussion in classes with advanced-level students.

The book has an environmental theme as well. McMurray argues that climate change is affecting how people write haiku as the differences between seasons come to blur. As of this writing, in late September 2023, the daytime temperatures in much of Japan remain at mid-summer levels, and cicadas—a staple of summer haiku—can still be heard screaming in the hills. McMurray describes how the seasonal words that haiku contain have become "out of whack," and asserts that this 'seasonal creep' has made it more difficult for contemporary readers to comprehend traditional haiku" (p.122-123). However, this may be more of a problem for traditional Japanese haiku than English-language haiku, where seasonal elements—or natural elements of any kind—are often absent.

Although I would have appreciated more practical advice on how to incorporate English-language haiku into English classes, I recommend this book to any teacher hoping to deepen their knowledge of English-language haiku. The hundreds of haiku featured in the book, written by people from around the globe, present English-language haiku as a vibrant genre encapsulating

both tradition and change. Teachers and students can explore this tiny but fascinating genre together.

Author Biography

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