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Recommended Citation

Roth, Matthew, "Review of Empty Room with Light" (2003). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 8.
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english_ed/8

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Book Reviews

ANN HOSTETLER. *Empty Room with Light*. Telford, Pa.: DreamSeeker Books, 2002. Pp. 100. \$12.95

*Reviewed by Matthew Roth**

The poems in Ann Hostetler's first collection, *Empty Room with Light*, reveal the world through the prism of everyday, domestic affairs. Hostetler, a trained visual artist and a professor of Creative Writing at Goshen College, arranges her deceptively simple poems with painterly care; as with a fine still life, the best poems here seem to be lit from within, their forms emerging not from the cunning of the artist, but from an act of attention that allows the people and objects to speak for themselves.

For many acquainted with contemporary poetry, and Mennonite poetry in particular, the subject and tone of Hostetler's verse will ring familiar, and in this there is some danger. The book's litany of domestic chores, child-rearing, and religious reflections have all been treated before by other authors (Julia Kasdorf, who blurbs Hostetler's book, may provide some of the best examples), and the brief, introspective lyric, often ending in a kind of minor epiphany, is perhaps the most ubiquitous free-verse mode of the last four decades. That is not to say that poems fitting this description cannot succeed anymore—Hostetler writes many lovely poems—however, the burden to “make it new” grows heavier with each passing year.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the less successful poems in the collection fail not because they are not artful, but because, within the careful order of rhythm and phrase, they fail

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either to surprise or to convince. In "Female Ancestor," for example, Hostetler catalogues (a common device in these poems) the daily chores of her progenitor:

A farm woman opens
the oven door of the coal stove
to stir the embers, re-latches
the door with a cast iron tool, sets
it down, wipes her hands, moves
to the sink where she bends
to peel and soak potatoes. . . (p. 16).

Clearly, this listing of mundane acts (which continues throughout the poem) is meant to impress an actual feeling of mundanity on the reader. But this is a kind of mimetic fallacy—the idea that in order to write about, say, boredom, one must bore the reader. In "Female Ancestor," the details are unfailingly accurate and authentic, but there is nothing about either the images or language that asks for our attention. In other poems, like "Marriage, with Children," Hostetler's portrait of a marriage that seems to be "falling / like a loose, baggy net about us," is nicely rendered, but the poem's resolving epiphany feels so easily achieved that it cheapens the hardship preceding it.

Epiphanies can still work in poems, but they work best for Hostetler when she lets the reader have them, rather than the persona within the poem. In "Thistles," for example, the speaker meditates on the pernicious, yet beautiful weed:

Still, I love to see them bloom on distant
hillsides I'm not responsible for weeding,
revel in the deep hues of their tasseled petals
as I pass them on the freeway in an air-
conditioned mini-van, the kids
squabbling in the back (p. 59).

The sudden, allegorical turn, and the juxtaposition of pastoral and suburban settings, of order and disorder, bloom together at the end of this poem, surprising us with a concision and attention

that informs the best of the poems in this collection. And there are many poems to admire here. In ekphrastic poems like "Looking at Pictures with My Mother" and "Holy Family," Hostetler's language is as lush and textured as the works she describes. And in other poems, such as "Teething" and "Muse," the density of music, expression, and insight can be breathtaking. For these poems alone—though there are, of course, many more just as fine—*Empty Room with Light* is well worth reading.

DAVID WEAVER-ZERCHER, ed. *Minding the Church: Scholarship in the Anabaptist Tradition*. Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 2002. Pp. 280. \$34.95

*Reviewed by John D. Roth**

For nearly a half a century, E. Morris Sider—Professor Emeritus of History and English Literature at Messiah College—has devoted his life in service to the church and the academy. Since joining the faculty of Messiah College in 1963, Sider has published more than twenty books, taught dozens of classes at Messiah College, organized the archival collection of the Brethren in Christ Church, edited the journal *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, established an Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist and Wesleyan Studies, and served the Brethren in Christ Church in numerous committees and boards. In the high standards of his scholarly work, his deep commitment to Christian faith, and the gracious, collegial manner that characterized all of his many undertakings, Sider has been an exemplary model of Christian scholarship. This collection of essays is a worthy tribute to the life and witness of a remarkable man.

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