

Italian Canadiana

Melfi, Mary. Welcome to Hard Times

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Volume 38, numéro 1, printemps 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1111804ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v38i1.43418>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (imprimé)

2564-2340 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Lewis, J. (2024). Compte rendu de [Melfi, Mary. Welcome to Hard Times]. *Italian Canadiana*, 38(1), 111–113. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v38i1.43418>

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Melfi, Mary. *Welcome to Hard Times*. Victoria, BC: Ekstasis Editions, 2023. Pp. 179. ISBN 978-1-77171-498-3 (paperback) \$24.95.

Mary Melfi walks a tightrope through *Welcome to Hard Times*, her eighth collection of poetry and first in over twenty years. To one side is the past: a lifetime of triumph and frustration, love won and lost. On the other, a present any of us might recognize: a stultifying regime of economic unease, emotional disconnection, and general malaise. To suggest Melfi steps lightly between these worlds is, perhaps, inaccurate; rather, she bounds along the tightrope, careening from side to side, only ever one small slip from the abyss. As readers, all we can do is try to keep up. The effect is dizzying, electric, a rousing return to the poetic form by one of our most versatile Italian-Canadian writers.

For Melfi, poetry is performance. She has organized her 111 new poems into the phases of a theatrical production, taking us from “Casting Call” to “Curtain Call.” Each poem is titled after a play or film from the 1970s or earlier. Readers looking for a well-defined link between a poem’s title and its subject matter are out of luck; for the most part, the connection, if any, is tenuous – a link to be forged by readers themselves. It is tempting to read this intertextual web as a commentary on artifice, on the contrived unreality of all artistic endeavour – but that’s not the whole story. Melfi sees performance as a profoundly humanistic act, going so far as to thank, in the acknowledgements, everyone in the theatre and film industries who create “stories which entertain, inspire and tell the truth about the human experience.” By putting her work in conversation with theatre and film, she invites readers to envision the poem as monologue: a moment of dramatic tension between personal and public spheres.

In these poems, Melfi grapples with the diverse themes that have animated her career. We witness class struggle, the trauma of migration, the broken promises of capitalism and multiculturalism. We catch glimpses of – almost intrude upon – the poet’s “flesh-eating anxiety” (“Lovers and Lunatics”), her attempts to reconcile multiple identities: artist, worker, wife, then widow; lover, daughter, mother, and more ... and the fallout when those identities collide. Along the way, we are introduced to a cast of characters with enough personality to fill a much longer volume: an overbearing mother, God Himself, the devil, a series of ill-fated lovers (to which we owe the sublime lines, “You are forgotten like water is forgotten / when a woman drowns” in “Love me or Leave Me”). As we approach “Opening Night,” a son appears, the star of some of the collection’s brightest pieces (“A Lesson in Love,” “The Sun

Comes Up,” “The Red Balloon”). These characters take centre stage, retreat, and emerge again when least expected. So too do Melfi’s identities, themes, symbols, and motifs. To say the collection is cyclical is not quite right; it spirals outward, turning and re-turning in on itself while driven forward by the relentless force of time. The show must go on.

Welcome to Hard Times refuses to sell you a cut-and-dry thesis that reconciles its contradictions. It prefers to dwell in the uncertainty. Melfi’s voice resounds throughout, punctuating bleak stanzas with wry honesty and an irreverent sense of humour. That voice, combined with the rich characterization and intriguing structure of the collection, gives it a feeling of playfulness, even experimentation. The poet’s range is on full display here, from the spare, broken lines of “Thin Ice” to the page-long prose poems of “The Bride Wore Boots” and “The Private Lives of Adam and Eve.” Her strongest pieces blend simple, conversational verse with raw, autobiographical detail. They resonate because they reach from a place of inner turmoil towards a universal experience.

Consider one of the collection’s standout poems, “A Chorus Line”:

I am in need of success like a bird is in need of wings.
I need to facilitate my escape from self-hate to self-love.

This idea underlies the whole collection: that art – perhaps all human expression – is subject to the material conditions of the economy. The reader finds the economic gloom of present-day Canada captured in its pages. Lines like “Watch out – Winter is a-coming / and the cost of food is going up” (“The Dangerous Age”) feel prescient, even ominous. The text opens with images of poverty, revolution and war; the very first lines, in fact, are “Being poor is synonymous with living in a desert / with machine guns for company” (“Fury”). Over the course of 150 pages, Melfi’s reaction to this truth moves from rage to a kind of begrudging patience. The imagery of violence is replaced with flowers, those “genteel creatures” (“The Never-Ending Story”), and living characters with the dead, who “make for good companions” (“The Good Companions”). Notably, the collection makes a tonal shift as she returns to the themes explored in her recent memoir, *In the Backyard: Relearning the Art of Aging, Dying and Making Love* (Guernica Editions, 2018). We end optimistically, but the embers of discontent are never totally extinguished.

As readers, we must ask ourselves if we trust Melfi’s final words. Distrust runs deep in this collection – distrust of family, society, God, even the self: “I

decided one day long ago to sell / my subconscious at a flea market. / No one was interested" ("The Devil-Doll"). But there is, as always in Melfi's work, a stubborn spirit, an irreverent, clever, lively persona that draws you in, persuades you that she has seen and understood something that we have not. In "While Paris Sleeps," another standout, she writes:

To be alive and not to rebel against Despair is pure madness.

And you aren't mad!

The color of your outlook is dark, but not that dark.

In these lines we find the boldness and innovation of Melfi's work. Her cast expands to include aliens, cats, ghosts, and Snow White. Somber reflections are met with surprising bursts of levity. A dour mood is dispelled with a joke. This balancing act – of form, tone, subject matter – is the backbone of *Welcome to Hard Times*. The final message, perhaps, is to accept what comes. But not without a fight.

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