

Long for This World: New and Selected Poems by Ronald Wallace, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. \$12.95.

Winner of The Council for Wisconsin Writers' 2004 Posner Award, *Long for This World: New and Selected Poems*, by Ronald Wallace, includes material from six previous full-length collections published between 1981 and 1998, as well as twenty-six new poems. In addition to writing poetry, Wallace is the Felix Pollak Professor of Poetry at UW-Madison, the founder of its creative writing program, and the general editor for the UW Press's Poetry Series which he also founded. In spite of these weighty academic credentials, Wallace writes poems that simultaneously entertain and educate, offer wisdom without being pretentious, and elevate humor to philosophical heights. Adept in both form, especially the sonnet, and free verse, Wallace's poems raise significant questions with a voice surprisingly unified over more than twenty years, despite the formal variation and impressively free-ranging subject matter that includes McDonald's, poetry, wrestling, ice-fishing, cats, hardware, women's underwear, wheelchairs, Prozac, and indigestion, just to name a few. Over the course of his book, however, certain patterns emerge: Wallace's interest in people and stories, his penchant for everyday philosophical issues, and his ever-expanding sense of humor which depends in the early poems on an uneasy self-consciousness or consciousness of others' foibles, than grows, becoming a rich awareness of the shortcoming and foolishness of the self, both like and different from others, but essentially, humanely comic, despite the poet's acquaintance with suffering.

If I taught Philosophy 101, a course which grapples with such issues as God's existence, the problem of evil, human consciousness, identity and memory, mortality, and meaning, I would supplement the notoriously soporific freshman textbooks with poems like these which again and again address such issues cogently, swinging between a comic approach and a more traditional, lyrical one. An early poem, for example, "After Being Paralyzed from the Neck Down for Twenty Years, Mr. Wallace Gets a Chin-Operated Motorized Wheelchair" presents the poet's father, wasted by MS at a young age, a subject he circles back to throughout the collection; here the father achieves a freedom of sorts, becoming, despite his tragic situation, an instrument of comedy:

For the first time in twenty years
he is mobile, roaring through corridors,
bouncing off walls, out of control,
breaking doorways, tables, chairs,
and regulations. The hallways stretch out
behind him startled, amazed,
their plaster and wallpaper gaping,
while somewhere far off,
arms spastically flailing,
the small nurses continue to call:
Mr. Wallace... Mr. Wallace...

In "The Swing," however, a later poem which includes both parents and whose story action takes place before the father's illness, Wallace employs a lyrical approach to his

subject, undercut, however, by the irony of knowing what will happen soon after this trivial incident, “fixed in his memory more surely than/any occasion of real moment”; here he is a boy “strung between his parents/hands like some improbable bead” who cannot know “That his father would, eventually /as all things must, rust/through, and break his hold on him and his mother snap/like the strand of nylon wiring/a cheap string of pearls...”

In the sonnet cycle, *The Uses of Adversity* (1998), Wallace uses his relation to his paralyzed father as an entry into the construction of masculinity, the nature of heroism, and the poet’s adversarial relation to God in “The Friday Night Fights”:

Every Friday night we watched the fights.
Me, ten years old and stretched out on the couch;
my father, in his wheelchair, looking on
as Rocky Marciano, Sonny Liston, Floyd Patterson
fought and won the battles we could not.
Him, twenty-nine, and beat up with disease;
me counting God among my enemies
for what he’d done to us. We never touched.

The poignancy of the situation is undercut by the humor of the turn, as the pair sing along with Gillette commercials that urge them to “*Look sharp! Feel sharp! & Be sharp!*” While father and son engage in this culturally scripted male ritual, the poet’s mother waits in the kitchen and “never understood/our need for blood, how this was as close as we’d get/to love—bobbing and weaving, feinting and sparring.” Whether this line refers to the poet’s relation to his father, to God, or to both, remains a question.

If one of Wallace’s feet is firmly planted in the father’s world of traditional masculinity—boxing and baseball (“Fielding”) and race car driving (in the hilarious “Local Hero”), another points toward the sometimes uncomfortably effete realm of poetry—the subject of “Local Hero,” in which residents of the poet’s home town confuse his identity with that of macho race car driver Rusty Wallace; “*Les poètes célèbres,*” which pokes fun at pretentious intellectualism, essentially equating it with a lack of balls; and “*Literature in the 21st Century,*” in which Wallace, tongue in cheek, fantasizes about drinking coffee and smoking cigars to prove himself: “Sometimes I wish I had habits/a man wouldn’t kick, faults a good man could/be proud of. I’d be an expatriate from/myself” instead of what he later says he is:

...all
fizzy water, reticence, and care, all reduced
fat and purified air, behind my deprived
computer, where I can’t manage even
a decaf cap, a mild Tiparillo, a glass of
great-taste-less-filling light beer.

Although these poems make us laugh, they are anything but “light.” Consider “Local Hero” with its Easter Sunday church setting, “the aging pastor driving/his old slow message home/about how we’ll all be resurrected/at the finish line one day.” The

confusion that ensues when two people have the same name is simultaneously slapstick and serious: how do we differentiate one person from another? what makes us unique? how could God possibly know us from Adam? A number of Wallace's sonnets demonstrate his ability to marry humor and heft. "The Bad Sonnet" sends up the 19th century sonnet tradition while making a case for the continuing vibrancy of the sonnet's form. "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" critiques postmodernism and its worship of absence and meaninglessness using an old poetic trick, personification, that somehow lends itself to a comic sensibility:

...And all the friendly stories
of my childhood pack up and walk out the door,
taking with them their pungent oranges, melons, raspberries,
the sweet fruit salad of the juicy familiar,
leaving us with a mouthful of semiotics,
poststructuralism doing its after-dinner tricks.

Wallace's insistence on the body, on the physical and its importance to poetry, occurs throughout his work, and while Wallace may not always have a lot of use for God, he insists on the spiritual dimension of the physical. What sustains us? What satisfies? Neither "a mouthful of semiotics," nor the easily obtainable literary fast food he speaks of in "The McPoem," "fried up flat and fast with condiments," "A poem you can count on always to be/the same—small, domestic, fun for the whole/family. Economical. American. Free//of culinary pretension." In "Waxworms," by contrast, the ice fisherman—a character familiar only to Wisconites and other upper Midwesterners—sits out on the frozen lake in -10° cold, patiently catching his food with bait that he keeps alive in his mouth, "a passel of waxworms," looking "pretty much like a maggot," that he shares with the poet, who takes away more than warm worms from this character: "There's something about being out on the ice with a crafty/old man, and the things that come out of his mouth! A week/of Sundays couldn't be more spiritually uplifting."

Like food, which appears throughout these poems ("In the Amish Bakery," and "You Can't Write a Poem about McDonalds" are especially enjoyable), laughter is of the body, something shared, something enjoyed with abandon in childhood that we grow cautious about as adults, as Wallace writes in "How Laughter." But if we're willing to risk making fools of ourselves, as the poet does with abandon in "Smack Down!", a poem that with "Local Hero" illustrates Wallace's mature comic power, then there may be hope for us:

We're too old for such foolishness,
we think, but—*Good Lord!*—you're
the babe in the too-tight tank top, I'm
the hunk in the red satin trunks,
and we're up out of our seats now,
all cartoon breasts & sequins,
all forearms & crotch,
all latex & spandex & pomp,

Then we may at least enjoy ourselves while pondering weighty issues, such as “just how we got here,/and who’s got the script, and will we luck out,/and get smacked down for the count?” Physical and spiritual, comic and lyrical, intelligent and enjoyable, Wallace’s best poems, both hunks “in the red satin trunks” as well as babes “in the too-tight tank top,” can get into the ring with those of any contemporary American poet.