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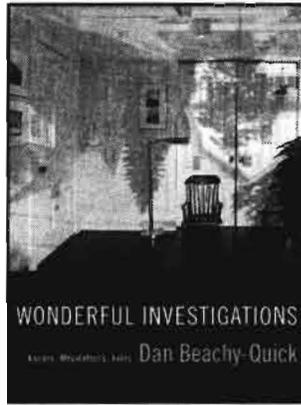
Review of "Wonderful Investigations: Essays, Meditations, Tales" by Dan Beachy-Quick

Justin Wadland



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WONDERFUL INVESTIGATIONS
ESSAYS, MEDITATIONS, TALES
Dan Beachy-Quick
Milkweed Editions (\$16)



by Justin Wadland

“**T**here is then creative reading as well as creative writing,” wrote Emerson in “The American Scholar.” Poet and essayist Dan Beachy-Quick admits that this dictum is “the touchstone of his creative life,” and it shows in his new prose collection *Wonderful Investigations*. An almost impossible task inspires this work: to stalk and capture states of wonder, while knowing that the quarry itself will evaporate if grasped too firmly with the tools of analysis. Literature provides the means to chart the hazy, yet distinct, border between the world of reality and the world of wonder, between hunger and mystery.

The book is divided into three sections that parallel the subtitle: essays, meditations, and tales. The first two sections are pure “creative reading” in the best sense; unlikely sources mingle, cross-fertilize, and generate compelling insights in the rich soil of Beachy-Quick’s reading life. He gave *Moby Dick* a similar, book-length treatment in *A Whaler’s Dictionary* (Milkweed, 2008), but here the topics range widely. Mircea Eliade’s description of initiation rites encounters Emily Dickinson’s “I Felt a Funeral in My Brain.” Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* runs into Typhon, the Greek monster that Zeus trapped under the volcano Aetna for fear he might overthrow Olympus, the same creature that Plato feared he might himself be. A retelling of Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne transmogrifies into bold statement: “Poetry is a form of desire devoted to the impossibility of its own fulfillment.”

One need not share Beachy-Quick’s erudition—or even necessarily agree with his assertions—to delight in his observations and connections. An essay on the meaning of drought churns together T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with rainmaking ritual, sympathetic magic, Blake, Keats, Emerson, and Anne Carson, who provides this wonderful passage: “The English word ‘symbol’ is the Greek word *symbolon* which means, in the ancient world, one half of a knuckle bone carried as a token of identity to someone who has the other half. Together the two halves compose one meaning.” Later in the essay, in another simple declarative sentence, Beachy-Quick uses this quotation to nudge the ken of his ruminations beyond the texts at hand to larger observations: “To bring the point closer to our concern, the poet is one-half of a knucklebone whose matching half is the world.”

In an essay titled “The Indweller’s Aversion,” Beachy-Quick performs another fascinating creative reading, this time of *Walden*. By highlighting the significance of the Greek influences on this text born of and inspiring wonder like no other in American literature, Beachy-Quick throws into relief the many levels of intention contained in Thoreau’s literary and actual work. Thoreau laments in “Economy” that most homes no longer have gods dwelling within them, and Beachy-Quick notes:

The gods are not what fill a home, but the possibility that a home may be filled. In this sense, Thoreau subtly begins to shift the nature of his criticism of homes, of home ownership, from a societal harangue to a philosophical mediation. A home is a creation, through setting up the barrier of four walls, of that negative space in which a deliberate life can occur. To build one’s own house by one’s own hand is not only to create a space to live, it also to re-create that universal process in which we live, by which we came to live.

The cabin Thoreau built on the side of Walden pond becomes such a place and thus permits the author—and by extension, his readers—to return to seeing with eyes of wonder.

The tales in the last section of the book fall into the category of creative writing. These narratives are fictional attempts to depict and perhaps engender a sense of wonder, each set during a different age: childhood, preadolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood. Unfortunately, they don’t quite measure up to the earlier sections. Dense, and at times impenetrably symbolic, the first three stories more closely resemble respectively a parable, a fable, and a dream. The things that happen—parents rediscovering a lost meadow, a boy raised by wolves, a journey through a disjointed dreamscape—seem to be serving an oblique point that overpowers the narrative momentum most readers expect from tales. The last piece, however, demonstrates that Beachy-Quick knows how to tell a story. This captivating yarn features an odd fellow named M. who has a gruesomely hairy birthmark and who starts a 1-800 number for the sole purpose of offering forgiveness to anyone who calls.

Fortunately, the creative reading of *Wonderful Investigations* more than makes up for the shortcomings of this final section. Beachy-Quick’s sensitive and intimate approach to writing about writing seems an ideal antidote to the post-whateverist malaise of most literary criticism. He acknowledges theory but doesn’t get weighed down by it, nor is it his primary interest: “Far more simply, I’m a practitioner—and these meditations on the ways in which reading and writing coexist as two activities so interrelated as to be aptly considered one are merely a result of that practice. My poetry life has been deeply devoted to the act of reading.” The author J. C. Hallman has called for a school of “Creative Criticism,” and this statement could almost be its credo. In a landscape that at times seems overpopulated with creative writers, we need more creative readers like Beachy-Quick. ♦

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