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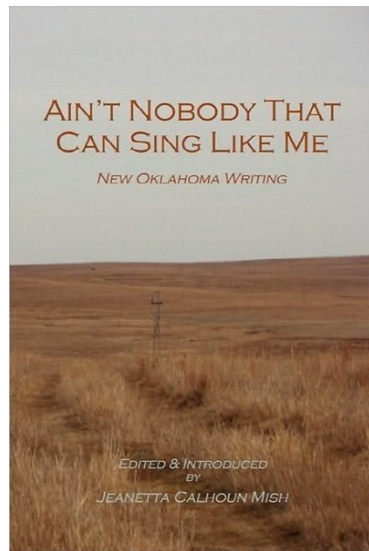
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books



Anthology gives voice to many unsung Oklahoma writers



By SCOTT ANDREWS
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Oklahoma writers, like Rodney Dangerfield, can't get no respect.

That is according to award-winning poet Jeanetta Calhoun Mish, the editor of "Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: New Oklahoma Writing."

The problem starts at home, she tells us in her introduction, because in many families writing is a "suspect occupation." It is not real work. But outside of the home, "it's extremely difficult to get writing with an Oklahoma flavor published in national magazines." And there are few outlets even within the state for creative writing with a distinctly Oklahoma flavor.

'Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: New Oklahoma Writing'
 Edited by Jeanetta Calhoun Mish
 Mongrel Empire Press, \$22

Mish set out to remedy this dearth of an Oklahoma voice in print by editing a special issue of the literary journal Sugar Mule, which she then published with her own Mongrel Empire Press in Norman. She collected nearly 200 poems, stories, and essays written by folks living in Oklahoma. (The book also features a handful of visual art works.)

And she gave the collection a title provided by Okemah's most famous son, Woody Guthrie. "Ain't nobody that can sing like me" is the refrain in his song "Way Over Yonder in a Minor Key," about a boy courting a pretty girl by bragging about how well he can sing.

A collection such as this needs to evoke the familiar. An Oklahoma native wants to be able to pick it up and recognize the people and places described. To that end, "Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me" takes up the expected topics.

The weather, for instance. Living in Oklahoma is shaped as much as by the sky as by the land - the wind, the rain, the sun's heat, the color of sunsets, the storm clouds. The state's weather shakes us and shapes us, and we become attached to even its fearsome qualities, which Nathan Brown captures in his poem "Biblical Proportions": "When God swings the fist/ of weather in Oklahoma,/ we pull up seats and lean/ into the performance."

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"Ain't Nobody ..." also refers to lakes many times. Prose and poetry describe our love affair with the cool, brown waters of Oklahoma's many lakes and how relationships - among friends and family - center upon time at the lake.

In her essay "My Life, My Lake," Terry Ford writes: "The warmth of the midday sun in a cloudless Oklahoma sky, soft sand between my toes, and the sparkling shimmer off the water - these have been essential elements in my life since early childhood."

Dogs, divorces, nostalgia for a grandparent's country home, the gradual decline of small towns, American Indian cultures, hard life-lessons, laughter. Those familiar experiences are captured. There is even a sonnet about going to church on hot day in June.

And, of course, there are stories of romantic love and sex. In "Four Poems for Tamara," Timothy Bradford declares, "Who can prove that we/ are not for each other? / Show me for certain/ the place where we part./ I've not seen the knife/ sharp enough."

But a collection such as this should have the unfamiliar, too. The unfamiliar reminds us that Oklahoma changes. New experiences are added. Old experiences are seen in new ways. For instance, Jason Poudrier has three poems about the experiences of Army veterans returning from Iraq. In "Bagdad International" he writes, "They returned to what once was home./ At least the only other man/ to go through Hell and arise/ went straight to Heaven after."

There is a well-known Bible verse that says "by their fruits you shall know them," meaning that you can tell a lot about people by their actions, perhaps more than you can by what they say. But I like to think you can get to know people by the stories they tell.

From this perspective, "Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me" does important work, as it records the stories Oklahomans tell about themselves and one another, about life in a particular place. And if, as Mish indicates, it has been hard to get these stories into print, then her book is like a much-needed kitchen table around which we can gather and listen to the stories - some true and some made up - so that we might know ourselves better and so others can know us, too.

Original Print Headline: Anthology sounds a lot like home

Scott Andrews is a native of Tulsa who now teaches literature at California State University, Northridge.

By SCOTT ANDREWS

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