



Explanatory Value

Florence Fogelin

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Effective and affecting, the poems collected in Explanatory Value observe and expand upon everyday occurrences.

Florence Fogelin's crafted poetry collection *Explanatory Value* considers age, loss, and the wider world.

These poems draw on life and writing experiences; they are effective and affecting. "A Selfie at the Old Folks Home" confronts aging and mortality in a continuing care retirement community "where every day you face your future / and everyone talks of the past." "A Mind of Winter" makes use of ominous imagery: icicles as "shark's teeth / aiming to eat the house," used to set the stage for a devastating comparison between winter's cold and the "misery of outliving the warmth of a husband."

In "Avertive Vision," an eye exam leads to flashes on the periphery of vision that are likened to meteoroids; the poem ends with an example of the sometimes bleak humor present in much of the book: "We exchange a sideways glance. / I wonder what I'm missing." The perils of aging are a recurring theme. Indeed, the book has a habit of taking common, everyday scenes and experiences and expanding upon them to address larger issues. "Help" recognizes a woman's efforts in 1960, encouraging her maid to sign up for Social Security as a small step toward racial equality, while "Likenesses" analyzes old photographs and distills the sense of history they impart. And a series of poems scattered throughout share the term "Exploratory Value" in their titles. These entries focus on subjects including language and curiosity in a clever, down-to-earth way.

Assonance appears in entries like "The Year We Didn't Go to China...", which echoes the word "philosophy" with "we," "nervously," "foresee," and "guilty." This technique emphasizes and reinforces the poem's subject matter—a canceled visit to China and government repression in the time before the Tiananmen Square protests. Elsewhere, poems adopt more traditional forms, like as with an ABBA enclosed rhyme scheme in "Material Culture"; others utilize free verse with occasional embellishments, like alliteration and similes. Each poem conjures clear, memorable images.

Though they are strong in the consistency of their plain-language styles, these are poems that evade linguistic experimentation, though. Some of their phrases resemble worn prose more than poetry, as with the line "give this world a much-needed kick in the pants—" in "Minor Planet #2181." "Recycling" and "The Effects of War" are more innovative as they trace their subjects' stages in discrete stanzas or sections; the former follows the path of some red yarn through its various uses, while the latter tracks milkweed as a one-time component of life jackets, food for monarch butterflies, and collateral damage in a battle of farmers versus weeds.

Explanatory Value is an enjoyable and accomplished collection of poems in which words "are themselves our joy, our bane, and our salvation."

PETER DABBENE (September 15, 2021)

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