

Poet-teacher completes second book of poetry

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By CONNIE RAE

It strips away the frills and cuts to the bare bone of life. Its unflinching objectivity and clinical detachment hit you right between the eyes. It's 20th century poetry in its raw reality and it's the work of Malton high school teacher, Clifton Whiten.

The Westwood Secondary School English teacher fixes on life situations and relationships, files them in his mind under appropriate titles which he jots down, and brings them alive on paper in his more leisurely summer holidays.

His first book was published by Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd. in 1969. He has attempted to have his second book, called *Various Titles*, published nine times and is convinced that he will ultimately find a publisher, in spite of the limited market for books of poetry.

Many of his poems have been published in literary magazines such as the *Canadian Forum*, *Canadian Poetry*, *Toronto Education Quarterly* and the *Dalhousie Review*.

His first book, entitled *Putting the Birthdate into Perspective*, was written when he was 29 and deals with all the experiences of growing up. Whiten calls it a "man's book" and admits it is slightly "erotic."

"Poetry is my passion — the thing I love the most in life," says Whiten, now 38. "It comes of a need to express myself to others, to create, to produce something perfect and satisfying." He writes poetry for both the ordinary public and poetry for those steeped with knowledge of Greek mythology.

He sprinkles his free verse and traditional verse with jangling descriptions such as "black snow-bound earth," "sabre-toothed yellow-jacket," "amiable demons," "cars and trucks jumping, bunched to careen into the screaming sun," "fat rouge-red dolly," "my golden daughter," "rainbows of laughter" and "sun-splashed streams."

In *Icarus Falling*, he compares himself to Icarus, who defies his father, Daedalian's, warning and flies so close to the sun that his crafted wax wings melt and he falls into the sea. Because the Icarian sea is named after Icarus, Whiten declares, "I drown achieving, I drown achieving."

In his not-yet-published book, Whiten writes again about Icarus. This time he says, "I need nothing named after me, nothing. My work is enough."

Whiten also writes about his wife, Collette, a well-known Canadian sculptor. Married with two small daughters when he wrote his first book, he now says, "We were at opposite ends of the creative scale — her medium was concrete, mine was verbal. Her artist friends were different from my literary friends." Although they have been separated for eight years, Whiten says he has learned a lot about women from his wife and daughters. "I used to be a lecherous chauvinist, now I can appreciate

women's achievements. I have learned respect and admiration for women, and that makes for more honest relationships." Whiten even reads *Ms.* magazine to keep up with women's thinking.

Whiten also writes about his engraver father ("a kind, gentle man meticulously devoted to his trade"), his "prairie" mother, his schoolhood pals and life's deformities.

He admits his poems are not wringing with emotions but says "emotion and passion lurk beneath the surface."

In a poem about Arvo Schuler, a cripple, he writes:

*"beaten to a pulp with belts
up against the Frost fence
in the corner of the schoolyard
at recess
on his birthday.*

*For a moment, running head-up, grinning,
he had thought they liked him."*

"I was perhaps moved by the crippling effects because of the anguish I suffered as a child, he says. "My parents were separated, there was no money and father was wiped out during the depression."

He writes of suicide, a theme he says is common among today's sensitive people, but adds he is no longer oppressed by life and his "central satisfaction" is in coping with it.

The person in *Boatman, Listen*, is obsessed with signs and finally takes his own life by drowning and keeps asking, "*But was I right, Boat man? Boatman, listen.*" There is no answer.

Poems are bits of emotion conjured up and put in stilted rhyme. Some of it is coarse and blunt, but the images are clear. Of a crossing guard he wrote:

*"Paint him. Paint him scared. Paint his silver
dog whistle:
beating all down his wrists and sleeve—this old
man,
every time he hustles back up to the curb.
Paint his bright orange sign glued to his circus
drawers."*

Of an old couple living upstairs, he writes:

"Damn them both. Tamperers.

Tamperers with the taps.

Mated tigers pacing,

grumbling. Caged-in, perverse."

Of killing, he brutally writes:

*"in my sights, red squirrel chattering in greenleaf
sky,*

crashing to the leaves, convulsive,

another shell, another."

Whiten attempts to instill literary knowledge at Westwood and regular guests from the League of Canadian Poets come to speak to the members of the literary club.

He is also starting an Ontario literary publication called *Westwood* in which he invites poetry and graphics from high school students and teachers of Ontario.

Whiten is reaching for the sun.



Clifton Whiten has had one book published and the Westwood Secondary School English teacher has written another. Both

books open with a poem on Icarus who, in Greek mythology, ignored his father's warning and flew too close to the sun.