

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

**New And Selected Works, By Charles Coe**  
Leapfrog Press, New York and London,  
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140 Pages, \$14.95

*Review by Dennis Daly*

Few confessional poets can tug hearts with their first-person observational words without sliding into sentimentality and mediocrity. Charles Coe proves the exception with this delightful new collection of narrative, bluesy poems entitled *New And Selected Works*. This compelling volume contains twenty new poems as well as an assortment of extraordinary poems from four earlier books.

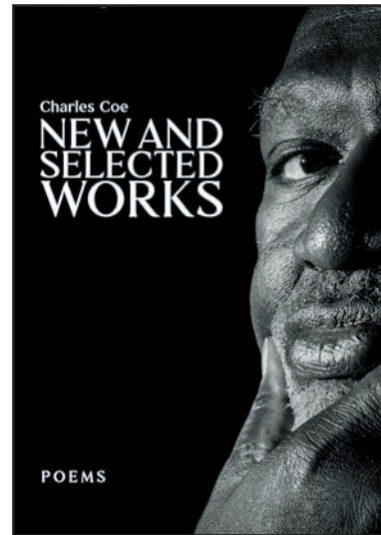
Opening the collection, Coe's poem *Prelude* sets the standard, and a very high standard indeed. Fusing the illusory nature of man with a horrifying image of victimized children from a war zone, Coe makes an obvious point. But, unfortunately, not so obvious to our hardened and sterilized comprehension of war. The juxtaposition of scientific emptiness with affecting image adds the needed intensity,

*Would it bother you to look through  
my suddenly spectral form and see  
the backrest of this chair?  
It wouldn't be intentional, a parlor trick.  
It's just that when I think about broken children  
lying in the rubble of bombed-out buildings  
I sometimes find it difficult to remain tied to this world.*

*For Ruby Bridges* is a prose poem based on Norman Rockwell's famous painting *The Problem We All Live With*, which depicted the brave six-year-old black girl, who, accompanied by federal marshals, single-handedly desegregated the William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. Like the painting, Coe focuses the little girl in the center of a racist and poisonous whirlwind. The poem itself gathers force by addressing Bridges in the second person. The closing *Astronaut* metaphor both illuminates the subject and strikes home with poetic precision,

*Ruby, what can we possibly say about you? What words can describe  
this six-year-old child, armed with only a notebook and ruler, walking  
resolutely past that pack of jabbering hyenas, past the woman who every  
day threatened to poison you, past the woman who every day waved  
before your face a black doll in a coffin?  
The lead marshal said you never cried once during that nightmare year.  
What can we possibly say about you, brave as an astronaut climbing  
into a tin can to be launched into the airless world?*

Coe's piece *In the House of Echoes* details the homey pathos and blood-ties of a large family dealing with demise of one of their siblings.



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The poet's mother provides perspective, and food and conversation dominate. The death-watch takes a new turn as Christmas carols, spontaneously begun by the participants, fill the house with echoes of sentiment. That is, until mathematical reality (read: dark humor) takes center stage. The poem concludes thusly,

*In the silence that followed the last carol,  
a silence neither pained nor awkward,  
merely thoughtful,  
as each sat with his or her own memories,  
my mother whispered softly,  
to no one in particular,  
"Three down, six to go."*

Halfway through the collection Coe's poem *Sleep Cycles* thunders off the page. This well-wrought formalist villanelle, devoid of any sentiment or emotional controls, is the classic and mythological anomaly that highlights the singular artistry of the other included works. A scene from his mother's recurring nightmare, this narrative resounds over universal chords. Despite our efforts, the piece seems to caution, humans do not control life, life controls humans. Here is the heart of the poem,

*as once again they set upon  
this changeless and eternal race  
beneath an unforgiving sun  
spurred by a dread of what's to come  
that Morpheus cannot erase  
foam-flecked and wild, the horses run.  
the spectral carriage thunders on  
although in passing leaves no trace  
beneath an unforgiving sun.*

My favorite poem in this collection is Coe's *The Dance Hall at Porter Square*. In this affecting piece the poet idealizes a specific tableau of a street couple about to dance to a popular tune on a boombox. The troubadour-poet assesses the makeshift scene as a courtly love ritual and imagines a shy damsel, accompanied by a sensitive gentleman/ knight. The poet fears his passive intervention or even a close observation might break the spell and so he continues his walkabout. The piece opens with the narrator setting up an appropriate stage for the young lovers,

*Near the entrance to the Porter Square subway stop  
is a small tree-shaded concrete plaza, off to the side  
where street people congregate  
and where yesterday I heard an old boombox  
call out that it was "Time to get together, and love  
one another right now," and saw a shirtless young man  
in a grimy Red Sox cap hold out his hand*

Blasphemy as a strategy into religiosity often succeeds. Thomas Merton seemed to know that. Dorothy Day certainly did. Coe's poem *Butt Dialing Jesus* offers a mildly impious premise to its readers and beyond

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and then proceeds to an old-fashioned demonstration of the golden rule (that is "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" Matt. 7:12). The piece works because of its irreverence and humor erases sentimentality and cliché. Consider this very funny set up,

*"You have reached the Son of God.  
I am currently speaking with another supplicant.  
But please hold; your salvation is important to me."  
This was followed by music.  
I expected celestial choirs, or maybe an elevator-friendly  
version of "My Sweet Lord," but was instead treated  
to acoustic Delta blues guitar, interrupted after  
a few minutes by the voice of Himself, greeting me  
by name and asking how he could serve.*

Armed with these sturdy, compassionate, and accessible poems, Charles Coe delivers his forthright lessons in empathy and warmth with ethical fidelity. His mnemonic inner-city parables are not to be missed. See him in person (he's a powerful reader) if you can. In any case, buy this book, you won't regret it.