

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTEBOOK/George Vukelich

## Poetry on Ice

Well, it was a slow day on the ice the other day.

"How slow was it?" you can hear them chime in up at the American Legion Bar in Three Lakes.

Slow. S-l-o-w. As Steady Eddy says, so slow that you would have had better luck opening a manhole on State Street, sitting on your little plastic pail right there in traffic and jiggling with your ice wand.

It was so slow that Steady unzipped a book out of his snowmobile suit—a slim, softcover book entitled *South Of The North Woods*. Steady said he got it because it had "north woods" in the title.

"How can you go wrong if it has 'north woods' in the title?" he asked.

He opened the book and began to read.

"In a land south of the north woods dwells a tribe of voices diverse in timbre from soaring coloratura to diffident murmur projected here—true as corn rows, profound as Fourth Lake, in grand diaphonic chorus."

"Wow," I said.

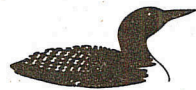
"No kidding," Steady said. "The whole book only cost \$3.50, and you get your money's worth right there in the blurb."

When Steady read the last line on the title page, he discovered that the book was an anthology compiled by the Madison Area Writers Association.

He riffled through the book the way Father Himmelsbach shuffles the deck for cribbage up at the American Legion Bar. Steady announced that it consisted of 92 pages of prose and poetry. Some of the pieces had originally been printed in the Milwaukee Journal, Jump River Review, Wisconsin Academy Review, the New Southern Literary Messenger and the late, lamented Feminist Connection.

"I don't know if I have time to read you a long piece," Steady said, as he stared at the tip-ups. At the rate we were doing business, he could get through *War And Peace* and do *The Kreutzer Sonata* for an encore.

"I'll read you some poetry," Steady said, "some north country stuff." He started with the poem on the very last page, "Old Simon's Testament" by Jerry McGinley:



*When the day awakes without me,  
And six white horses stand and wait  
Then put me in my old plaid jacket,  
Pack me in a pine board crate,  
Send along a pouch of Red Man  
And a pint of apple schnapps  
Pass along my stack of westerns,  
Give some kid my tackle box,*

*Then seal the lid to lively music,  
An accordian, some clarinets,  
Raise this toast and clink your glasses,  
"It was good; I've no regrets."*

"Kind of warms your heart, doesn't it?" Steady said. He riffled back through to midbook and perused a page in silence. "Aaah," he said finally, "now here's one that will put the chill right back there. 'Weekends with Dad' by Linda Quinlan."

Steady read in his best Linda voice:

*For years, I remember us fishing,  
Your tired Saturday eyes on me  
At the back door  
By the sawdust  
You shook off your work clothes  
And mother swept in piles.  
I couldn't drag them out of the water,  
Those rainbows  
Near the surface  
Like the mix of oil and rain  
On our driveway.  
Until you watched me struggle  
Long enough  
And pulled her in.  
Your expressions  
Were like parts of the day  
As you crushed fish heads  
In mercy  
Careful to save the meat.  
You were so proud.  
I put our fish  
On a coat hanger*

*And stood beside you grinning  
Into a boxed Kodak  
A neighbor had.  
I wanted to keep the cruel  
Bond of Saturdays,  
Until it happened on the beach.  
I needed my learned skill  
To fillet  
A flounder  
For a friend  
With a dull knife  
And it moved.*



"Not too shabby," Steady said. I told him that his reading was likewise. He read the words so well you would have thought they were his own, and of course, in a very real way, they were.

Steady scanned the tip-ups, then turned to page 70. "'Con Man' is the title, by Yvonne Yahnke," he said. When he began, it was with his Linda voice, only the voice was older and wiser in a different way:

*He mentioned guardian angels.  
Or was it I who mentioned them?  
All vague now, hazy like water  
Spots dried upon a dike of glass.*

*He was strong and smoothly practiced,  
I remember that and I hated him  
For toying with my beads. Yet I  
Let him peel my clothes away and  
Thought of D'Anjou pears.*

Steady put the book away and we sat like statues, south of the north woods, on the roof of the world. ■

George Vukelich reads selections from *North Country Notebook* Sunday night at 8 on Wisconsin Public Radio, WERN (88.7 FM).