

Review of *Stubborn Child*

Reprinted from *Home News Tribune*

May 22, 2005

When poetry is a family affair

STUBBORN CHILD

By Peter E. Murphy

(Jane Street Press, \$14)

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Atlantic City (N.J.) High School teacher and poet Peter E. Murphy makes education a family affair in his first published collection, "Stubborn Child." In "Physics," he writes:

The size of the universe expands, she tells me,
not as I had expected, spilling its matter

into another universe on the other side.
But the bodies within it drift

imperceptibly apart within the star-dazed dark .
I tell her, I get it, I think.

We stand our own organic molecules
upright on terra firma, but do not notice

or protest that every beeping thing, even love,
is moving us apart.

Whether writing about his daughter, who complains their house is "an anachronism" or high school B.C. ("Before Columbine"), Murphy has an ear for the stubborn child in everyone.

Time waits for no man, I remind my daughter.
O, I am sure he waits for his wife, she retorts,
snapping her clever tongue like a jump rope.

Stubborn children beget stubborn children, so a different girl in "School" enters the real world that's too harsh ever to be make-believe and offer happily-ever-afters:

She makes it through history before her water break s
in science, is refused a pass, so she runs
to the girls' room with the teacher chasing,
calling for security.
Giving birth in a corridor, she can't be moved,

so they hold the bell to keep hallway traffic
from grid-locking around her.

As an educator, Murphy, who was born in Wales and grew up in New York City, relates numerous tales in this 71-page book about what goes on behind the padlocked doors of today's school buildings. There's a sense of urgency and reality communicated through his poetry of perfectly pitched lines. From "Free Lunch":

Stop hatin' mister
white man this kid says
trying to cut in line, but I don't respond
as I corral him and others
from cheating.

A consultant to the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's poetry program, Murphy also has been an adviser to the PBS television series "Poetry Heaven" and "Fooling With Words with Bill Moyers." Additionally, he founded and directs the Winter Poetry & Prose Getaway held at the Jersey Shore each year.

The title of Murphy's book is from a similarly named fairy tale by The Brothers Grimm. But where the original stubborn child finally found "peace beneath the earth" after his mother used a switch to smack his arm that repeatedly kept poking from the grave, Murphy's obstinate child finds no respite above ground. Perhaps this is because in his poem "The Stubborn Child" the poet himself has an offspring whom he reverently tries to protect from life's relentless reality:

He does not mention any of this to his daughter
who sleeps her stubborn sleep each night
as he stands in her room and prays through her
restless years, waving his arms above her,
sweeping and stirring the immaculate air.

This is not so much a signal seeking to be pulled from the adult grave of parenthood as a poet's affirmative gesture trying to grab whatever goodness is swirling around him and cover his own stubborn child with a little bit of life's too-often-missing tenderness, love and concern.

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