

## Profile

Janick Belleau: Award-winning poetic beauty

*D'âmes et d'ailes/of souls and wings*

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With its haunting beauty and aesthetic reverence, its variety, magic and mood, the stylistic elegance of Japanese haiku poetry is sweeping the literary world. Reading award-winning poet Janick Belleau's "*D'âmes et d'ailes/of souls and wings*" is such a pleasure that it must have been difficult to write.

"Actually, it's not haiku, it's tanka," Ms. Belleau educates me. "Tanka poetry was the court's language over 1200 years ago. Men and women displayed their wit, charm and creativity using tanka. Even today the Emperor addresses the people via tanka.

"I'm not an Empress," she smiles, "although I've reviewed her book – but I can write!"

How did a French Canadian Catholic, with a bachelor's degree in the works of the literary giants Baudelaire and Rimbaud, become immersed in Japanese culture?

During a shiatsu course in 1997, her instructor talked about other forms of Japanese culture: the tea ceremony, calligraphy, landscape painting and poetry. When Ms. Belleau heard about haiku, "the whole course of my poetic life pivoted. It was a moment of *satori*, enlightenment, a flash of sudden awareness."

Finally, she could drop the fatigue of Baudelaire who took so long to get to the point. She'd discovered her medium, one that insisted on an economy of words and allowed for romanticism. "I'd read and copied the style of writing in books by Marguerite Duras, Albert Camus and Jacques Prévert. They said a lot in very few words, just like haiku and tanka." she says. "Here was the form I'd been looking for. And tanka is, after all, very much about love." She speaks with the kind of reverence that true artists have for their medium.

She began writing haiku, then evolved into tanka. "One has to be ready inside to come to tanka." I'm educated more before she explains.

Tanka came first, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Haiku in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Creating them is more than child's play. They consist solely of essential words, or sounds, to illustrate a season and a mood in the present moment. Buddhism introduced impermanence which the Japanese intertwined with their appreciation of beauty. Together they evoke images such as seasonal cherry

blossoms and melancholy moonlight. Haiku is 17 syllables on three lines (5-7-5), tanka 14 more on five lines (5-7-5-7-7).

These extra syllables make room for a profound aesthetic sense rooted in a melange of emotion, aura and mystery.

Ms. Belleau returns to her explanation, “Tanka is a matter of heart and soul, an awareness of self, feelings, and making links with memories. It involves connecting, or remembering, what the instant of nature is reminding me of.” Clearly this form of poetry is more intricate than I expected.

Ms. Belleau thumbs through her book for an example:

*from afar  
ornamental grasses  
sway in the breeze –  
it reminds me of your embrace  
light and vigorous*

“You have to see, hear what an image tells you and be able to compare it with a feeling or an impression.”

Ms. Belleau garners respect here, in the U.S., in France and in Japan, where she’s travelled twice to give lectures and readings. The most recent honour is the Japan-Canada 2010 Literary Award, recognizing excellent writing about Japan. The award is administered by the Canada Council for the Arts and sponsored by the Japan-Canada Foundation. She must be thrilled; the Japanese ambassador to Canada presents her with a cheque for \$10,000 at a special ceremony.

“Yes, it’s an honour,” she smiles. “I’m touched and moved. It’s a dream come true, for me as well as for all poets.” She’s magnanimous and humble.

I expect her to say that this prize will bring her greater fame and global honour. She doesn’t. “The award will take me, I don’t know where, but I will have to write another book of surpassing quality. The next one will be better.” We are silent and in that moment, I sense that Ms. Belleau has internalized the spirituality, love and mystery that is tanka. She has become it and the world will read her.

To read more about her poetry: <http://www.janickbelleau.ca/>

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