

Interview for the magazine TO BE
Jarmila Dokladalova
with haiku poet, **Janick Belleau**,
on her new book *Humeur...*
haïku & tanka

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Can you give a bit of background about yourself and your writing. What got you interested in writing in general and poetry in particular? You have written prose and non-fiction as well. Some of the books listed in your bibliography sound, by the titles, that they span quite a variety of topics and styles.

In my early teens, a nun teacher encouraged my writing. Given I was interested in Arts and Culture, I eventually became a freelance journalist. Actually, I started my career in Ottawa, in the mid-70, with the cultural weekly paper, *Ottawa Revue*, and the feminist magazine, *Upstream*. I was studying Social Communications and French literature at Ottawa U at the time. Then, I moved to Winnipeg in 1981, There, I did more of the same. In the mid-80, some Manitoba poets encouraged me to publish books... which I did. The first one was a questionnaire based on the work of Franco-Manitoban writer, Gabrielle Roy. The questionnaire was completed by 131 Manitoba women. I got the idea from Marcel Proust, the 19th century French writer. I also published a poetry book, *L'en-dehors du désir*.

Would you say that there is increasing interest in the West in recent years in the haiku and tanka or has it been steady?

I would venture to say that English speaking poets – Canadian and North American alike – have taken up writing haiku than the French ones more quickly, until brave French publishers took upon themselves to risk publishing such poets.

Often, haiku poets will go ahead and publish themselves. Insofar as tanka, it is still a rare feast to find such writings in French or in English.

What got you interested in haiku and tanka in three languages?

This question is twofold. First, I got acquainted with haiku and tanka when I studied holistic massage therapy, from 1996 to 1998. I just so happened to find a brief description of haiku while reading a zen book. Curious, I investigated this style of writing on the Internet. I attended a haiku evening in Montréal and bought myself an anthology of Canadian haiku poets. Excited by this discovery, I decided to apply myself to it. Tanka tagged along beside haiku.

Second, my interest in those three languages. Actually, I have no merit: I was born and raised French speaking; I lived in Ottawa and Winnipeg speaking English for 14 years. Then, I studied Spanish because I wanted to visit Spain and also because this language is spoken in the three Americas. For the communicator that I am, it goes without saying that I could not ignore this fact.

Can you comment on the differences between writing the poetry in each of the three languages in terms of the phonetics and syllable structure in each?

Actually, I wrote the book in French, my mother-tongue. I hired professional translators, amongst them, Jonathan Kaplansky, who lives in Ottawa. I did the hiring because I wouldn't dream of writing, in a professional capacity, in any other language. The job of a professional translator is to tackle the nuances of two languages. However, I certainly had quite an input in the revision process. I wanted the translated words to convey the same
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feeling and the same rhythm as that felt in the original words. That's why sometimes the reading feels like the writing is adapted instead of translated. The work doesn't smell like translation.

Modern haiku and tanka allow the poet to cheat insofar as the number of syllables per poem. One should, however, if she desires to be faithful to the Japanese tradition, try to stay close to the initial spirit of the writing – that is 5-7-5 syllables on three lines for haiku; and, 5-7-5-7-7 syllables on five lines for tanka. The poem should also convey the present moment, here and now, a feeling, a sensation, an impression.

There is a progression of chapters: Sexual, Sensual, In love, Unfaithful? and Tumultuous. Can you comment on this progression? I see it as going from the small to the larger... I am sure that took thought and planning, so can you give a bit of insight into how this came about?

On one hand, you're absolutely right: it goes from the small to the larger. Indeed, it goes from physical to emotional to spiritual.

On the other hand: when I write, I just write. The creative process is in place. I have no theme in mind, no structure, no clue of the final content. It is when I'm finished writing – that is 2-3 years, and numerous revisions, later, that the technician in me takes over and puts a manuscript together. For me, this is where the real work starts: choosing the theme, the variations of the theme, the poems which convey these variations; ditching some of them, writing, rewriting or finding forgotten poems in drawers. Creating a structure, giving the poems room to breathe, to move freely and yet in an orderly manner, being wholesome, looking good inside out. In wanting many people who speak different languages to read this work and to recognise themselves a little in the

final product. Although it is nice to nurture one's soul, it is even nicer when one can also feast her eyes. This is why I chose Diane Desmarais to illustrate the mood, hence the title of the book, of each of the five parts of the book.

Can you give a bit of info about Diane Desmarais?

We met in Ottawa while we both lived in the capital city for many years. To this day, we are still friends and share the same kind of sensitivity. Desmarais is a gifted artist. She is internationally known. I feel privileged that she would consent to illustrate my books. This is the second one, in fact. She also illustrated *L'en-dehors du désir* in 1988.

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