

not open to language, and nor are Leggo's poems. The better poems read like versified acknowledgments.

That originary and authentic self surrendered by Miki as a pronominal fancy is sought, studied, and palliated in Moore's and Leggo's poems. The two poets are aging, retrospective, good-humoured but finally sombre and self-absorbed. For all the pleasures this kind of lyric can provide, it is easy to see why Miki would wish to eschew the form, even as he cannot help but hear "the sparrows mock the maker / of poems going nowhere fast."

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## The Poet's Quandaries

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**A.F. Moritz**

*The Sentinel*. Anansi \$18.95

**Raymond Souster**

*Sparrow Talk*. Battered Silicon Dispatch Box  
\$24.00

Reviewed by Amanda Lim

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A.F. Moritz's *The Sentinel*, a 2008 Governor General's Literary Awards finalist, and Raymond Souster's *Sparrow Talk*, the second book of Souster's "Up to Date" series, are both collections of poetry dealing with questions of progress, nature, war, art, time, mortality, justice, and other seemingly timeless subjects. Although each collection is a worthy addition to the existing oeuvre of these accomplished poets, they confront similar subjects rather differently and with varying degrees of success.

*The Sentinel* opens with the evocative "The Butterfly," before presenting the rest of the poems in three sections named "Better Days," "In a Prosperous Country," and, again, "Better Days." "The Butterfly" presents a futuristic vision of the world, but very much grounded in the realities of the present—war, violence, competing utopian and dystopian visions, and a desire for political and social transformation. The poem introduces one of the book's dominant

themes, the intersection of the personal and the political in imagining a collective future that is more just and responsible, for us and for future generations. Moritz writes on a range of topics: the construction and narration of history, the disenfranchised and war, the politics of memorialization, our vexed relationship with urban spaces, the trials of youth, the human body's mortality, the process of poetic creation, and the relationship between personal time, nature, and collective history. His butterfly poignantly reminds us of the "butterfly effect" and is like his canary in the coal mine—the harbinger, the prophet, and the poet. *The Sentinel*'s title poem, appropriately situated in the middle of the book, addresses similar connections between past legacies, present conundrums, and future visions. The sentinel, like the butterfly, represents the prophet-poet, caught between protecting the "old guard" of tradition and civilization and trying to anticipate and shape the future. His dilemma crystallizes our own tremulous position between hope and fear. Moritz is at his best when he combines his poetic sensibility—his ear for rhythm, precise phrasing, nuanced shifts in tone and register, and lyrical imagery—with his knowledge of mythic and literary conventions and his cogent political and philosophical observations.

Souster's collection, *Sparrow Talk*, explores many of the same issues as *The Sentinel*, such as mortality, technological progress, war and violence, and nature, but in a radically different style. Most of the poems are short, no longer than one or two stanzas, and many are only one to five lines long. Souster eschews the metaphors, allusions, and lengthier reflections that characterize *The Sentinel*, and opts instead for the speech of ordinary conversation, direct and declarative. Whereas *The Sentinel* is organized into sections, *Sparrow Talk* reads more like a stream-of-consciousness whose poems are organized chronologically and

continuously follow one after another on the same page, like the entries in a journal. Souster's strength resides in his seemingly inexhaustible capacity for witty aphorisms and humorous revisions to conventional ways of thinking. Like *The Sentinel*, *Sparrow Talk* hinges on the interplay of hope and fear, but contains more humour than the former, which is more melancholy though it contains flashes of modern comedy in poems like "Busman's Honeymoon" and "The Titanic." Yet, resignation, cynicism, and nostalgia seem more prominent in *Sparrow Talk* even though Souster writes that he sings of hope; his final poem "Old Fools Like Us" illustrates this. Moritz at times sounds post-apocalyptic, yet he usually avoids the nostalgia that in *Sparrow Talk* risks spilling over into conservatism and tends to create a sense of debilitation and paralysis. *Sparrow Talk* has the quality of avian conversation, consisting of brief, sharp insights into human behaviour, but its best moments of unique wit, irony, and understatement are punctuated by slightly tired and banal lines, making the collection somewhat uneven and disjointed in tone and affect. Souster does very well in capturing our gut reactions to and feelings about current political and social crises, but in comparison to Moritz's nuanced observations and balance between complex ethical quandaries and emotion, they can come across as simply righteous, indignant, and regrettably simplistic.

Thus, while each book has its own merits, *The Sentinel* accomplishes with greater dexterity what *Sparrow Talk* aims for but does not quite reach, which is the combination of formal attention and studied reflection in appealing to both reason and emotion.




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## Time Changes

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**W.H. New**

*Along a Snake Fence Riding*. Oolichan \$16.95

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**Rob Budde**

*Finding Ft. George*. Caitlin \$15.95

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**Colin Browne**

*The Shovel*. Talonbooks \$19.95

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Reviewed by Douglas Barbour

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Although the terms of their engagement differ, all three of these books take up the burdens of history, local or world, and attempt to come to some sort of human comprehension of what they mean and how they continue to affect us in our individual and social lives.

William New's eighth book of poetry, *Along a Snake Fence Riding*, is, intriguingly, a poem for eight voices. A Narrator introduces and concludes the whole, while also introducing each section; within the sections six separate voices engage a wide range of topics, mostly associated with our awareness, sense, and knowledge of time; while throughout the eighth voice, "the Newtonian Clock," provides a running commentary, variations on a theme of time.

As his acknowledgements note, New has filled his poem with a vast array of allusions, to myth, legend, literature and science, while opening up a kind of multi-dialogue among his many voices and their particular concerns. The Narrator holds all together through his attention to the concept of travel through time and space, starting with a restless wanderer's approach to a small settlement and ending with our wandering state as we approach a venture to the stars. All the other voices provide a chorus of human visions of how we place ourselves in time, or in times of peace and war.

*Along a Snake Fence Riding* is an interesting read; it would, I suspect, make for a truly exciting performance, where the different actors' voices, overlapping one another, would add to the sense of