
REVIEWS

Three Simple Lines: A Writer's Pilgrimage into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku, by Natalie Goldberg. (Novato, California: New World Library, 2021). 160 pages, 5½" × 8½". Hardback. ISBN 978-1-60868-697-1. Price: \$22.95 from online booksellers.

Reviewed by Michael Dylan Welch

The thread of haiku has been consistent, if occasional, in most of Natalie Goldberg's books over many years, starting with her million-seller, *Writing Down the Bones*. So, it is no surprise that it has come to this: *Three Simple Lines*, a breezy memoir about haiku. It should not be mistaken as a craft book dwelling on nitpicks of haiku techniques or how to publish one's haiku. Rather, this is a book about the spirit of haiku, or at least one approach to its spirit.

This particular approach is rooted in Zen, as are all the books Goldberg has published through the years. I've written elsewhere about the various stances one can take on the haiku path, and mindfulness in a spiritual practice is one of them. The Zen way of haiku is just one haiku attitude, one that has been emphasized in the West thanks to the influence of the Beat poets, who in turn were heavily persuaded by R. H. Blyth, Alan Watts, and D. T. Suzuki. Goldberg came of age when many people in the West presumed that haiku was a "Zen art," when that's no more accurate about haiku, even in Japan, than saying that sonnets are somehow Christian. And yet, many affinities tie haiku and Zen together, such as paying attention to the moment, valuing the suchness of life as it is. Haiku is not limited to that, nor is Zen, but there, and in other ways, they find a pleasing intersection.

It's from this stance, I believe, that Natalie Goldberg has found inspiration and even solace in haiku poetry over many decades—as a reader of haiku to start with, and then more and more as a writer. *Three Simple*

Lines shares much of her journey to haiku: first learning of haiku from Allen Ginsberg, encounters with this poetry over the years, trips to Japan to pay homage to two of haiku's masters, Buson and Bashō, and attending English-language haiku group meetings in Santa Fe, New Mexico. A few chapters feel insufficiently connected to the haiku theme, such as her visit to the "art island" of Naoshima, and thus feel a little more self-focused—or they're just the low-hanging persimmons of something she experienced in Japan and chose to write about, even if they weren't the strongest fit. But other chapters are marvelous introductions to the lives and poems of a few of the Japanese masters. She says of Shiki, for example, that for him, "haiku was not only a way to express the changing reality of nature but also a way to express the poet's inner life simply and sincerely."

Other than the experiential description of the Santa Fe haiku group, though, there's no mention, and thus apparently little awareness, of the larger English-language haiku scene. No exploration of the Haiku Society of America, Haiku Canada, or the Haiku Foundation, no mention of the leading haiku journals in English, not even a mention of the Haiku North America conference held in Santa Fe in 2017, where Natalie herself was one of the speakers, breezing in for her session and then leaving because of other commitments. The Santa Fe group is not presented in any larger context of the English-language haiku community, nor are any of her encounters with haiku. This, to me, is the biggest opportunity lost in this book, both for Goldberg's sake and for the sake of her readers, that a connection to existing and well-established Western haiku activities and publications is not offered, let alone a deeper awareness of its poetics. It could have been helpful to many readers who might want to take the next step in connecting with others on their haiku path. The same disconnection, by the way, seems to occur at most of the February haiku weekends that Upaya Zen Center has been capably offering in Santa Fe every year since 2015, featuring Goldberg, Joan Halifax, Kazuaki Tanahashi, and more recently, Clark Strand.

But should there be such connection? And should the book offer any instruction on the mechanics and strategies of haiku? Perhaps not. Goldberg ends her book with an appreciation for Allen Ginsberg, followed by a short guide by Beth Howard on writing haiku. But even Howard's ideas

have nothing to do, for example, with whether one should count syllables or not (Goldberg does not—“if I only cared about syllables,” she says, “I’d have a block of words with no soul”). Nor does Howard mention whether one should privilege seasonal reference (kigo) or use equivalents to the cutting word (kireji) to divide the haiku into two, creating space and incompleteness in the poem that invites reader interaction. Nor is any mention made of other strategies, such as objective sensory imagery. All we get is the idea that haiku is “three simple lines”—and, usefully, that we should “let go” and yet “revise.”

For many people, such encouragement is enough, because it’s easy to get bogged down in the minutia of specialist directives (which I myself am wont to dwell on). So, we are left, instead, with a misty spiritual sense of haiku. This will likely please Goldberg’s fans. Toward the end of her book, she says, “Capturing the spirit of haiku is what I am most interested in.” She relates in the book’s first chapter that Ginsberg defined the space in haiku as “nothing less than God.” And she says in the same chapter that the “Way of haiku” is “Bare attention, no distractions, pure awareness, noticing only what is in the moment.” Well, yes and no, especially for those of us interested in haiku as literature, as something beyond awareness practice or mindfulness. The same is true with the book’s title. Yes, three simple lines, but also no. As Roland Barthes once wrote in *Empire of Signs*, “The haiku has this rather fantasmagorical property: that we always suppose we ourselves can write such things easily.”

In one of her later chapters, about attending the Santa Fe haiku group, led by Charles Trumbull and others, Goldberg says, “Eventually, what I begin to enjoy most is simply not knowing how to do it. ... I like not being good, not having a clue.” In an earlier chapter she writes, “I prefer to meet something straight on, in ignorance.” This may well be beginner’s mind, which has its virtues, but it also comes with a measure of insensitiveness that inhibits growth and learning, or even much awareness of what else is going on in haiku (for example, the bibliography makes no mention of William J. Higginson’s *The Haiku Handbook* or Cor van den Heuvel’s *The Haiku Anthology*, two seminal books in the field of English-language haiku, but does at least mention Jim Kacian’s *Haiku in English: The First Hundred Years*).

Highlights, though, are certain chapters that describe Goldberg's pilgrimages to Japan, especially those on Issa, Shiki, Chiyo-ni, and visiting the graves of Buson and Bashō. These chapters include dozens of poems, mostly by other translators. Many of the poem selections are less well known, thus presenting the great masters of Japan in fresh ways. These poems, and Goldberg's stories about them, offer the experience of what it is like to connect with these poets, not just with their poems in translation but with their lives and their stomping grounds in Japan, turning textbook poets into flesh and blood. She whispers to a Bashō statue at Chuson-ji, "Thank you ... for bringing me here." We have almost no connection to haiku as a contemporary Japanese art, however, no connection to current Japanese masters, or any of the literally millions of poets who practice haiku formally, each month, in Japan. Goldberg's view is therefore surprisingly limited, both in America and in Japan. Many readers might never realize how little of the massive iceberg Goldberg is touching just briefly with a fingertip.

Goldberg is not shy about her not knowing. She prostrates herself at first before the wrong stone when visiting Bashō's grave in Otsu, for example, and repeats a story about Bashō's "old pond" haiku being written in the Kyoto area when it is well established that it was written in Edo, now known as Tokyo. Is this honesty or naivete? Another example of this not knowing is a chapter in which she describes her insistence on being served a dessert at a restaurant in Japan after the kitchen is closed. Her doggedness, believing "nothing is impossible," and demanding through a hapless interpreter that the kitchen do her bidding, feels deeply insensitive to any culture, and especially so to Japanese culture, and comes across as an instance of boorish American-tourist behavior. I winced at this story, even though she claims that the episode was a mark of "freedom" for her interpreter and says, with a presumption that borders on arrogance, "in her secret life, I know she is delighted." Surely not.

And yet this not knowing is central to Natalie Goldberg's writing, and her writing advice—to be open to possibilities. "Don't give me information ahead of experience," she says in one early chapter, but at some point the reader, and Goldberg, also need information—and the willingness to internalize it. Fans of her work will find much to enjoy here—and will

likely also catch some of her vibrant enthusiasm for haiku, which alone makes the book worthwhile. The epigraph for this book is a quote from Allen Ginsberg, who said, “Follow your inner moonlight. Don’t hide the madness.” Indeed, in *Three Simple Lines*, Natalie Goldberg shows her madness, her wild mind. It’s that spirit this book promotes, of letting yourself go with haiku, which may be the best lesson of all. Despite the book’s occasional missed opportunities (obviously more my preference than Goldberg’s), this is a book I enjoyed reading.

Well-Versed: Exploring Modern Japanese Haiku by Ozawa Minoru, translated by Janine Beichman, with photographs by Maeda Shinzō & Akira (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture / JPIC, 2021). 376 pages; 8½" × 6". Hardcover, ISBN 978-4-86658-179-8. Price: ¥3,700 from <https://japanlibrary.jp/>; \$23.49 as ebook from www.amazon.com

Reviewed by David Burleigh

A couple of years ago, when I was introducing a course that I had been asked to do for international students on the history of haiku (‘From hokku to haiku in English’), I began with some translations by Janine Beichman. These were from a poetry column by the late Ōoka Makoto that ran daily for twenty years on the front page of a national newspaper in Japan, under the title *Oriori no uta*, or *Poems for all Seasons* in Beichman’s selection, each consisting of a short poem (or a part of a longer one) with comments. I took a handful from the earliest of Japanese anthologies, like the eighth-century *Man’yōshū*, just to give the flavour of the work, remarking what a singular venture the column had been, an indication of the prominence given to short-form poetry over the centuries.

In Japan many newspapers carry columns of poetry, particularly haiku, and often they include commentary by the selector, usually a well-known poet, and many of these commentaries and selections are gathered into books, comprising a vast reserve of discussion and exegesis that is almost