

Belmont

Stephen Burt

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Reviewed by Michael Gillan Maxwell

Stephen Burt is a prominent figure in 21st century American poetry as a poet, scholar, essayist, critic, TED Talk speaker and Harvard professor and much has been written about *Belmont*, his third full-length collection of poetry.

Stephen Burt's poetry in *Belmont* is cinemagraphic, atmospheric and infused with enough sensory stimuli to evoke memories, reflections and impressions of my own. *Belmont* engaged me in a way that I see myself and much of my own life reflected back at me: *my* own coming of age, *my* journey and the political, philosophical and lifestyle choices I've made as a husband, father, and working professional.

This is not Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and *Belmont* is not necessarily literally about Belmont, Massachusetts per se. *Belmont* is named after the suburb in which Stephen Burt lives. It's also the name of the imaginary place in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which he alludes to in the epigraph of the book. *Belmont* may serve as a metaphor for the idealized place where we all hope to live happily ever after.

Although there is nothing in the language and syntax that would set this aside as specifically American English, many of the settings and cultural references are distinctly American. (*Draft Camp, Self Portrait as Muppet, Over Connecticut.*) There is also an exuberance and sense of celebration that walks in the steps of the great American poet Walt Whitman.

While some of the poems in *Belmont* are rooted in remembrances of childhood, they are not nostalgic or wistful longings to return back to earlier times. They serve more as reference points charting the passage of time and the progress of life. For me, some of these poems bring to mind the sublime philosophical ruminations of Thomas Wolfe in his definitive work *You Can't Go Home Again*.

On the surface, many of the poems in *Belmont* are about childhood dreams and aspirations juxtaposed to the realities of adult life. They are about having babies, raising children, going to work and living a safe and secure life in the suburbs in 21st century America. The sources of conflict and tension in *Belmont* are much more subtle and nuanced. The poems observe milestones, milestones that might include decisions about putting away one's own childish whims to honor your own children, seeking the correct path and correct work, providing food, shelter, safety and education for your family while still managing to live an authentic, artful and creative life.

There is nothing "in your face" or heavy handed about the poems in *Belmont* and Stephen Burt doesn't bang you over the head with bluntly worded questions. As a poet and teacher, he raises questions in a quiet, gentle and understated manner, with a

deft Socratic touch. Among other things, *Belmont* invites us to reflect on our lives relative to choices. Choices driven by safety and security for families, careers and longevity. There are poems about children and flowers, an ode to his car, and sketches of characters whose lives may not have turned out how they might have imagined; “wanna be” rock stars and athletes with hopes of going pro, but who never made the “Big Time” (*Bad Newz, Draft Camp*). On the other hand, I’m reminded that if you follow your instincts and go with the flow, things may turn out the way they should for your own higher good.

(from) *Butterfly With Parachute*

*When we ask that imagination discover the limits
of the real
world only slowly
maybe this is what we meant.*

Many of the poems tacitly raise questions that leave it to the reader to arrive at his or her own answers. Does a domesticated lifestyle make my life any less authentic because I’m not living the dog eat dog life of my hunter/gatherer forbears? What trade-offs have I made along the way? Have I “sold out”? Do we live a life of quiet desperation in the suburban world of Subarus, baby strollers, soccer Moms, manicured lawns and the commute to and from our jobs? The stage is set to ask these kinds of questions in

Belmont Overture (Poem of 8 A.M.)

*We mean
it when we say we like it; we feel sure*

*it’s safe around here, and once we feel safe, it’s our nature
to say we’re unsatisfied and pretend to seek more.*

The poems were written over a period spanning a number of years; like time-lapse photography, this offers an opportunity to catch glimpses of changes occurring over the passage of time. I think this may account for a refreshing variety in this body of work. Stephen Burt experiments with different poetic forms and devices that include forays into more traditional structures and internal rhyme schemes, (*Kendall Square in the Rain*) playful explorations with formatting so that the words almost read like musical tablature on the white page (*Color Theory, Owl Music, The Paraphilia Odes*) and the concept of text messages and tweets as small poems. (*Text Messages*)

Belmont is a book I can go back to time and again. If poetry can help us understand things that are inside of us even though we may not be able to identify or understand what those things are, then I think Stephen Burt has helped me with this collection. I found *Belmont* evocative, thought provoking, calming and life affirming. It’s a collection infused with warmth, good humor and wisdom, and it will surely endure.

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Bio:

Michael Gillan Maxwell is a writer and visual artist in the Finger Lakes Region of New York state. Maxwell writes short fiction, poetry, songs, essays, recipes and irate letters to his legislators and his work has been featured in a number of journals and anthologies. He serves as associate flash fiction editor for *JMWW* quarterly. A teller of tales and singer of songs, he's prone to random outbursts, may spontaneously combust or break into song at any moment and might be occasionally found ranting and raving on his website: [Your Own Backyard](#).