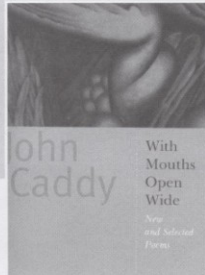




## The Plain Sense of Things

### *With Mouths Open Wide: New and Selected Poems*

by John Caddy  
Milkweed Editions, 2008  
Price (Paperback): \$18.00



Reviewed by Heidi Newbauer

John Caddy's new book, *With Mouths Open Wide: New and Selected Poems*, is a milestone collection of his writing career. It includes six spectacular sections of poetry taken from his past five books, along with poems written while he was recovering from his stroke. In the latest section, *With Mouths Open Wide*, Caddy personifies nature with intense voracity, reflection, and connection. A prime example is the poem *Embers and Char*, where "coals sing their heat, glow floats / scale to scale on changed wood." From *Eating the Sting*, we find images of humbling intensity to that of Terry Tempest Williams in "The Herony" series, where a young girl follows the activities of a family of blue herons. The Alzheimer's and Stroke sequences are phenomenal, and must be experienced by anyone touched by these horrible traumas. Being from the Iron Range area, I find particular solace in the works found in *The Color of Mesabi Bones* segment. I can see myself as a child playing and swimming at old Mesaba location when reading *Mine Towns*. I can taste the

orange dust on my face and shiver at how cold the water always felt on my skin, no matter how hot the sun. I can feel the presence of my grandpa's hands on my shoulders, comforting me with his pinches. Such poems as *The Faces of Ancestors*, *Snow Forts*, *Learning Ketchup*, and *Fluency* give me a surreal sense of my ancestors, more than I have ever experienced in reading poetry. Caddy brings these images to life with appealing appreciation for those who suffered through trying times as mining families. Throughout this collection, John Caddy captures the unique beauty of all types of landscapes—whether it's the deep woods, outskirts of town, noise of the city, or foreign plateaus—into vivid and honest portrayals of human life. For instance, in the poem *Dead End*, Caddy swells the pain of a woman no longer able to bear children in a simple, shocking, and humbling manner. In essence, he transcends the beauties and pains of everyday life into rich experiences of unspoken joy. A must read for poetry lovers everywhere.

### *The Plain Sense of Things*

by Pamela Carter Joern  
University of Nebraska Press, 2008  
Price (Paperback): \$18.95



Reviewed by David Maynard

Like the desolate Nebraska prairie in which they struggle for survival, Pamela Carter Joern's characters appear to be devoid of warmth and feeling. However, just as the frozen winter soil contains the seeds of a new spring, the characters of *The Plain Sense of Things* conceal an abundance of feeling that they dare not display before an unforgiving environment and a merciless world. This novel consists of a collection of stories that trace the unfolding saga of the Preston family. Joern explores the aloneness of the individual and the importance of those rare moments when human beings escape from the clutches of fear and painful memory in order to respond to the immediate need for human connection. Joern introduces her novel with a selection from Wallace Stevens' poem, "After the leaves have fallen, we return / To the plain sense of things." This portent of the tumultuous pages to come will echo in the reader's mind as he or she is introduced to Gramp, the patriarch of this Nebraska family and a man who is making the trip to the town of Heartstrong to acquire Billy, the son of his recently deceased daughter, Carlene. In this first chapter, "Ghost Town," Gramp spends the night in his daughter's broken down home and is forced to confront his own haunted house of memory. Like a mid-western Jacob, Gramp wrestles with his feelings of guilt regarding his treatment of Carlene and the dark depths of poverty into which he cast her by rejecting "his wayward daughter, her trampish ways."

In one of the novel's most poignant scenes, Gramp discovers a papier-mâché doll beneath Carlene's bed, his own gift to her, symbolizing his wish that she had remained in a perpetual state of innocence, unmarred by sexual desire:

All tucks and pleats and buttons and lace, the way he thinks a girl should look, perfect and innocent... He lays the doll on the bed. She looks cold and lonesome, and he folds the edge of his wife's quilt over her. He tucks it around her face, holds her curved fingers in his large bungling hand.

Like the characters in the chapters to follow, Gramp fears the chaotic nature of emotion and memory, elements of human experience that must be foregrounded in the struggle to survive the Nebraska prairie. However, Joern's characters cannot wholly succeed in repressing emotion and memory, but are forced to confront these dark twins of the psyche through their daily interactions with one another. While *The Plain Sense of Things* is a history of the Preston family's pain, it also chronicles its joy, albeit joy that is hard-won.

Joern, Pamela Carter  
*The Corresponder*  
By David Maynard  
Book Review  
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THE PLAIN SENSE  
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