



From engaging the natural world to making sense of everyday confusion, Sharon Thesen is exploring how poetry constructs the world through language

Sharon Thesen's newest book *The Good Bacteria* may sound like a treatise on how to boost the human immune system but as the UBC Okanagan Associate Professor of Creative Writing is quick to point out, it actually has nothing to do with microbial organisms at all.

"In my latest book, I'm not looking through a microscope at bacteria but I am looking through my own particular microscope at the way the world is constructed through language and the creative imagination."

Thesen's exploration into seeing the world through the lens of language resulted in this multi-faceted collection of poetry that spans a variety of subject matter from the Okanagan wildfires of 2003 to a look at the bourgeois middle-class in Kelowna through mythic imagery to an elegy for a friend that died. Published in 2006, *The Good Bacteria* has since garnered three noteworthy accolades of excellence in poetry including the Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize (Shortlisted 2007), the Pat Lowther Memorial Award (Shortlisted 2007) and the prestigious Governor General's Award: Poetry (Shortlisted 2006), her third acknowledgement of its kind.

Part of Thesen's considerable success with poetry has been, as one critic described it, her ability to "catch beauty at the periphery of things." Although Thesen welcomes this description as a fair observation of her work, she sees her words as actionable rather than simply observational: "I see my poems as an attempt to restore sanity and wildness through language."

Thesen's latest attempts in this endeavour include a new manuscript of poems, a memoir built around books that she has read in the past 30 years and an as-yet unconfirmed project that will be set on the Queen Charlotte Islands during the 20s and 30s. Another new project is sharpening Thesen's editing skills as she takes on the role of co-editor of *LAKE: A Journal of Arts and Environment*.

A product of UBC Okanagan's Faculty of Creative and Critical Studies, this new arts and literary journal is intended to directly speak to art that engages the natural world. The inaugural issue, which launched in January 2008, features artwork by Okanagan artist Kristy Malakoff, poetry by Baziju and Clea Roberts, an article by Don MacKay and creative non-fiction by UBC Okanagan Creative Writing student, Hugh Anderson.

According to Thesen, the aim of the journal is to become a forum for artists exploring environmentally sensitive art through a wide range of genres from music to dance to poetry. Because the

Okanagan is already home to many outstanding artists and writers and is a region that has experienced strong ecological pressure, Thesen sees it as the perfect place to produce such a journal.

"*LAKE* is about looking at environmental art that exposes the complexity of our relationship to the natural world, which is an urgent topic these days," says Thesen. "It's not so much our project to publish visual and literary art that engages with the natural world as it is to publish work about our complex and troubled relationship with nature."

Although funding has yet to be secured for *LAKE*, Thesen is optimistic about the journal's future. She looks to a possible collaboration with the Okanagan Sustainability Institute that may provide umbrella funding. After three issues are published, *LAKE* will also be eligible for Canada Council of the Arts funding, which Thesen notes as a big step towards ensuring the journal's continued existence.

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Thesen sees her work with *LAKE* and her books of poetry as a major contribution to her larger goal of exposing the importance of poetry to a wide audience. Having been in the poetry field for more than 30 years, she has witnessed dramatic changes firsthand, such as publishers printing fewer and fewer poetry books, which has made it incredibly difficult for young poets to get published.

Despite these setbacks, Thesen continues to stress the value of poetry to a society that often overlooks it: "I'm not deluded at all about the absence of public interest in poetry but I think that at the same time, the more poetry that's around, the more interest it generates and the more it becomes a normal part of everyday life. Any linguistically based art, by definition, contributes to knowledge. Poetry gives us such a new and radically fresh way of seeing and understanding things. Without it, we often become too involved in the world of commerce and management and its impoverished language systems." ■■■