

L.A. Times Reviews English Professor's Book of Poems

Yet, perhaps because of its apparent simplicity, haiku is one of the more underrated art forms, says Judy Halebsky, assistant professor of English in the [School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#) at Dominican, who notes that haiku is both a complex form and a tradition that is more than 300 years old.

Haiku is not really understood in the United States. It is segregated in some way from other forms of poetry, as some scholars do argue against the literary merit of haiku.

“Most students are introduced to haiku in elementary school but don’t work on haiku beyond fourth grade. That’s part of the oversimplification of haiku.” However, while seemingly simple in structure, haiku often are rich in meaning and expression and open to interpretation by the reader. “These incredibly dense poems celebrate intensity of image and focus on the present moment,” says Halebsky, who recently had her newest book of poems *Tree Lines* reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*. “The density of haiku is created through shared knowledge and juxtaposition.”

[CLICK HERE TO READ L.A. TIMES REVIEW OF "TREE LINE"](#)

One way that haiku can be successful as poems while being incredibly brief through a season marker is called a *kigo*.

“This is one word or phrase that grounds the haiku in a particular time of year,” Halebsky says. “Through this one word, the haiku is able to evoke a series of associations about the natural world in this specific part of the season. This allows for both a density within the poem and an attention to time passing or impermanence.”

Haiku originated as the opening verse (the *hokku*) of the communally composed linked verse poetry form called *renga*. In the 17th century, haiku master Matsuo Basho elevated the form of simple, humorous *hokku* poems into a poetic form that contrasted common everyday life with the culture of the elite court class.

“Basho brought depth and intensity to the short poetry form that we now call haiku,” Halebsky says.

While haiku is alive and thriving, Halebsky is among a handful of scholars of Japanese literature to teach haiku at the college level in the United States. She incorporates the study of haiku in many of her courses, including Literature of Nature, Oral and Visual Poetry, and Japanese Literature.

Halebsky encourages her students to view haiku as a broader creative practice and creative path.

“I tell my students that people are writing haiku all over the world. It is not a specialist genre, anyone can write a haiku – just like anyone can write a letter. Haiku is more like community based art.”

Haiku, Halebsky explains, is structured through image rather than a narrative development. Even in the short form, a haiku often offers two images that clash together to evoke a third image. The third image is revealed in the contrast between the two images rather than expressed directly.

“This contrast or juxtaposition is central to the art of haiku. It allows for a space between what is written in the poem and what is evoked by the poem,” Halebsky says. “With the season marker and nature-based images of the poem, the haiku address the human condition of fragility in a transient world. We are subject to the natural world, the forces of nature, and the ever-fleeting condition of life. A haiku calls us to attend to this fleeting moment.”

Born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada, Halebsky studied art and literature in Japan on fellowships from the Japanese Ministry of Culture before returning to the United States to earn a PhD in performance studies at UC Davis.

While in Japan, Halebsky immersed herself in Japanese theatre, poetry, and culture. She participated in haiku events, a passion she continues today, and started collaborating with Japanese poets to translate poems from Japanese into English. She also studied both Noh theatre, a form of classic Japanese dance-drama, and Butoh dance.

Today, she continues to immerse herself in haiku culture, attending haiku conferences throughout the world, including the recent International Haiku Festival in Tokyo.

Halebsky, whose newest book *Tree Line* has been recently reviewed by the *Los Angeles Times*, also is accomplished outside the close knit haiku community.

Her book of poems, *Sky=Empty* (New Issues, 2010) was chosen by Marvin Bell as the winner of the New Issues Prize, a first book award, and was also a finalist for the California Book Award. Her chapbook, *Space/Gap/Interval/Distance* (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2012) won the Poets-Under-Forty Chapbook Contest from Sixteen Rivers Press. With a collective of Tokyo poets, she edits and translates the bilingual poetry journal *Eki Mae*.

Recently she co-wrote a play, *Emmett Till, a river*, which combines Japanese Noh and oratorio to tell the story of the young African-American boy killed in Money, Mississippi in 1955, and his mother’s advocacy for justice for her murdered son. The play recently ran for two weeks at San Francisco’s Theatre of Yugen at NOHspace.

Haiku’s focus on nature and the place of humans in nature fits well with Halebsky’s newly published book, *Tree Line*, a collection of ecopoetry – poems that address the environmental crisis of our time and how we relate to this crisis. The new book is influenced by nature poets – with Basho’s teachings on haiku informing some of the aesthetics and concepts in the collection. Meanwhile, Halebsky is working with her Dominican students to involve youth in the juvenile justice system in creative writing projects through the service-learning course Finding Voice & Empowerment.

The theme of the course is using writing as a tool for empowerment. And just as she encourages her Dominican students to view haiku as a broader creative practice and creative path, she hopes to encourage incarcerated youth to use creative writing to speak to a broader community about the issues that shape their lives.

“We hope to show youth how writing – like music- can be a vehicle for social change,” Halebsky says. “We want them to see writing as a tool to share experiences with the broader community in a way that nourishes compassion and understanding.”

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