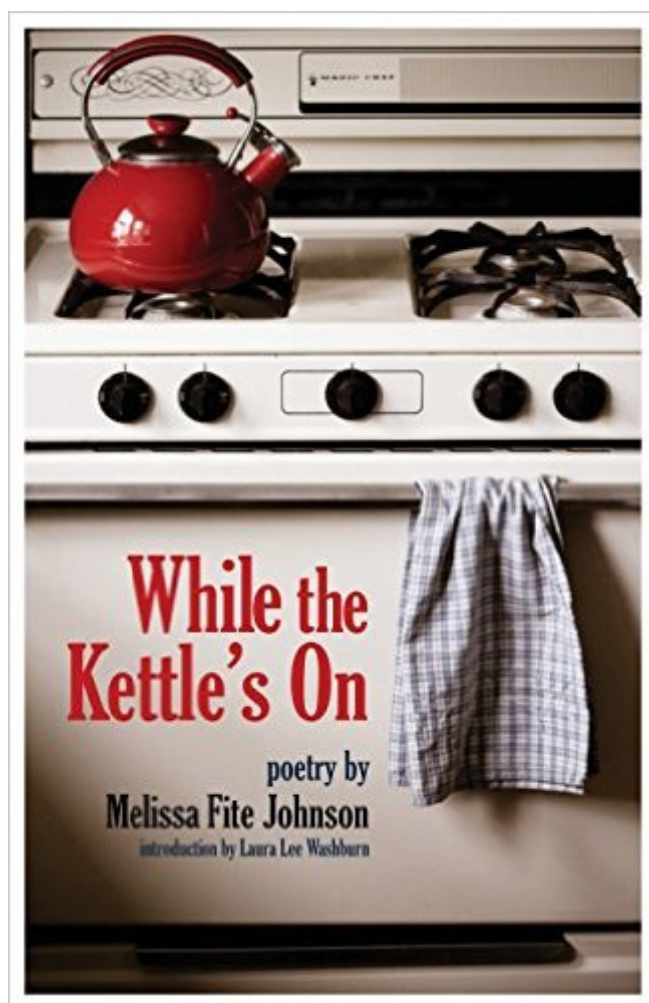


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While The Kettle's On



Synopsis

While the Kettle's On, published by Little Balkans Press, is Melissa Fite Johnson's first book of poetry. "While the Kettle's On openly, whimsically and originally explores homecoming, whirling its journey through past generations, the present body, making home, unmaking the self, and everyday love. This strong first collection lands on what is, and what is behind what is, from the tree in the present that will one day be gone, to the grandmother once young, choosing "this future, this little life." Melissa Fite Johnson helps us see the large world encapsulated in the gestures and glances of even the smallest moments of this little or big life, including what losses damage even fresh air and what graces give us back all we are. In essence, the whole collection is about love, and how to recognize it when it shines through the moments that matter." ~ Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg, 2009-13 Kansas Poet Laureate

"Reading While the Kettle's On, one feels invited into Melissa Fite Johnson's family. Like a good novel, Johnson's poems bring us into her world, and readers come to know her the way we know a close relative or good friend: sharing times of joy and loss, sharing life-changing events (deaths, romance, and marriage) and the small day-to-day details (a garden of hydrangeas or eating hot dogs at a baseball game) that make our lives most truly our own. Each poem is well-crafted and enjoyable on its own, but the true pleasure is in the way the book as a whole draws us vividly into a community of family and friends and, most of all, into the mind of a poet who reveals a full range of human emotion, from happiness to sorrow and from nagging self-doubt to quiet confidence." ~ Dr. Christopher Todd Anderson, 2013-2014 Guest Poetry Editor for The Midwest Quarterly

"I have been reading Melissa's poetry--one poem every other Sunday--for more than a decade now, with pleasure, and with admiration for her dedication, artistry, and skill. I suspect she is her own toughest critic, and that is how it should be. She's good: her word choices are good, her lines lean, no lardy modifiers. She's a poet. I'm glad to have her as a friend." ~ Roland Sadowsky, author of AWP Award Winner Things We Lose

"Settle back with these poems and get as comfortable as you would on the living room sofa remembering your way through a family photo album. In Melissa Fite Johnson's While the Kettle's On, we're lucky to watch these four generations fall in love, take their chances, sip tap water from Mason jars, and lovingly polish their teaspoon collections. These poems are comfortable as an evening walk with the dog, often as soothing as a nightly ritual of washing dishes in lavender suds while the chickadee chirps on the pear branch outside the window. Take a minute while the tea steeps, scooch back into your favorite reading chair, and then sip from your steaming cup as you read these charming lyrics and personal yet universal stories." ~ From the book's introduction by Laura Lee Washburn, author of This Good Warm Place and Watching the Contortionists

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Customer Reviews

Johnson's poems are clear, spare gems of observation about the simple things that tell our life stories – hand-scrawled notes, Ball jars, and dish washing. She focuses mainly on her family, but readers will feel they're reading about their own families, too. Although the poems don't fall in chronological order, she begins in "The Things We Keep" about her father's early death and comes full circle, ending with her own "Summer Wedding." The first poem tells us about the notes her dad wrote to her after his stroke: "But though he left as many notes/in my house as snowflakes in a snowstorm,/I didn't think to keep even one." Perhaps that regret now shapes her poetic mission to keep what matters. While most of Johnson's poems deal with everyday moments, she also takes some entertaining leaps. She imagines Emily Dickinson in 2012 – "what Emily's life would be like if she were a poet today. In "Elegy for the Class of 1999," she envisions the three classmates who have died as the first to arrive at a party: "I picture balloons and a DJ/I picture them/growing bored with each other's company,/impatient for the big empty room to fill." Johnson's easy, conversational style will make you want to pull up a chair at her kitchen table while the kettle's on. You won't be in any hurry to leave.

Although Melissa Fite Johnson's *WHILE THE KETTLE'S ON* is autobiographical, this fresh,

candid poetry collection expands beyond the "Confessional" niche. With wit, restraint, and insights to human nature, she shares stories and characters from her family in the book's first section "Four Generations" and her new life as a married woman in the final section "The Ballad of Marc and Melissa." In between, the sections, "Revising the Body," "Good Housekeeping," and "Vulnerability" display scenes from her youth and from her adult life as a teacher. In "The Things They Keep," (a poem from the first section that perhaps alludes to Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carry"), Fite Johnson details notes her father wrote her when he struggled to recuperate from strokes. Then she names items her friends kept from their deceased parents and hints her regret that she "didn't think to keep even one" of the notes. In this section, her wry sense of humor surfaces in "Visiting My Grandparents' Graves" with an image of her grandfather's "arms outstretched for eternity" and the revelation that her mother married her father because she "knew he could kiss" in "My Parents' Wedding Day." Her words about her adopted brother reveal a restraint from sentimentality: "I think of what's thicker than blood-- love, sure, but mostly our ability to unnerve each other with a look, the girlfriends he doesn't tell me about anymore, the money I won't get back. How my first lie was to him. . .". In the section "Revising the Body," Fite Johnson shares feminine adolescence via bra sizes, eyeliner, Ouija-board experiments, and death of classmates through overdoses, liver damage, and a car crash. Again, her sense of humor and honesty create a section that's a delight to read. Next, she segues into the adult world with the "Good Housekeeping" section, where she writes about a dying Bartlett pear tree, an odd dream about motherhood, picking pecans, a mason jar, and a poetry group. The title poem of this section contains vignettes of her parents: "The mother of my childhood/is propped up by the vacuum handle./Her arms disappear at the ends/into filmy sink water" and "My father's smoking/transformed the bathroom vent/from flute smooth to caked fireplace ash." "The Ballad of Marc and Melissa" section shows a picaresque peak into the poet's married life, including a scene from the title poem. "For once, this apartment/without even a dog for company/is all I need: kitchen's open window/lapping at rain drops. . .". One of the most noteworthy poems "Emily Dickinson in 2012" lies in the "Vulnerability" section. Here, the persona composes a new collection of poems on her laptop, prints them, and shuts "each document/without saving a single one." Fortunately, Fite Johnson saved her poems to compile in this uplifting, engaging collection.

Love this book. Poems on a variety of topics that are accessible without sacrificing craft or meaning. This is the kind of poetry people who "don't like poetry" will enjoy just as much as those of us who do

Johnson's poetry has a great deal of depth and emotional impact in concrete imagery. Her collection of poems offer an in-depth artful study and reverence for the human experience. I was deeply touched and enriched by Johnson's ability to show the beauty and grace in grief just as much as I was amused and filled with joy for her ability to show the humor in family. While the poems centering on the deceased father made my heart ache, the poem regarding Emily Dickinson thrilled me. If you love poetry, give this collection a try. It's welcoming and while it has a conversational approach, the poems are loaded with advanced crafting for those of you who are poetry experts.

I absolutely LOVE this sweet book of poetry! The collection is brimming with lines that are simple, honest, and sincere and strung together with an friendly, accessible pace. Regardless of your mood, you'll feel better after you read it!

This is a touching, often heart-rending, book of poems - full of life and love. It's best enjoyed with a cup of tea. I highly recommend it.

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