

# It Won't Work

*Prepared by Brick Books' co-founder Don McKay on the occasion of the 25th anniversary celebration at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto in 2001*

Recently another publisher asked me how Brick Books functions, and with my usual boyish enthusiasm, I attempted to give him a rundown of our little multi-editor, coast-to-coast, consensual, decentred, anarcho-syndicalist non-corporation. When I had finished there was a slight pause. Then he looked across at me and said succinctly, That Won't Work. And thinking about this later, I realized that I agreed with him. It won't work.

It won't work because nobody reads poetry.

It won't work because, no matter how hard you wish, Aphrodite is not going to move in with Red Green.

It won't work because they once filled out a Canada Council form giving themselves titles like Grand Vizier, Poohbah of Publicity and Most Excellent Gofer, and received a sharp reply suggesting they grow up.

It won't work despite the fact that their presiding genius is a notorious Canadian bricoleur, a word which, once pronounced in St. John's, was brilliantly misheard as brick-layer.

It won't work because they once perpetrated a cover featuring shocking pink letters on a background of wonderful cerise.

It won't work because they once rejected a poet so gently he thought he'd been accepted and wrote back grateful thanks.

It won't work because idealism.

It won't work because foolishness.

It won't work because nobody reads poetry.

It won't work because long afternoons deep in a manuscript while Depot Creek utters undertones which are the distillate of Homer and Purdy.

It won't work because when they received a manuscript from a retired Colonel in the Ugandan army whose poems were lifted directly from the works of Layton, Dudek, Newlove, Purdy and Atwood they feared the reprisals of a poetic psychopath and so rejected him using Grey Owl's real name, not realizing that the Ugandan Colonel was in fact the hoaxster Crad Colodney.

It won't work despite the fact that Southwestern Ontario is a funnel for migrating passerines and raptors whose flightpaths intersect and compromise the systems of its universities and malls.

It won't work because although Simone Weil is right to say that attention is really prayer, Jack Spicer is also right to say that nonsense is true friendship.

It won't work because the kitchen table made most of the decisions, because others were consummated in canoes, cars, rivers and while rhapsodically drunk, and because they've lost the kitchen table.

It won't work because who could imagine it blooming amid the thin bemused contempt of an English Department the way geraniums thrive on the ammonia imparted into the air by the baby's urine.

It won't work because they once flew all the way to Winnipeg in order to photograph the actual ledger that inspired Robert Kroetsch's poem, and were honoured with an invitation to attend a prestigious literary cabaret at which the entertainment turned out to be a troupe of middleaged but very serious disco dancers, and really there was nothing even remotely humourous about this, disco is an art form, I know that, still it won't work because the editors from Southwestern Ontario began to laugh and found to their dismay they couldn't stop, despite biting their beer glasses and laying their heads on the table feigning migraine and petit mal, despite the glares of the prairie poets, all of them born during blizzards on the backs of sleighs, all of them with shotguns in their pasts and distance in their eyes, the sort of distance in which the bodies of two assholes from the east could easily be lost forever, despite all that they laughed right through the literary cabaret, including the discussion of distinctive regional voices, and out into the street and

Sweet Jesus let me stop and I will give up anything, and were granted a reprieve for a whole half hour while a new low pressure system gathered, dark, roiling, cumulo-nimbus, small funnels appearing from its underside, until, and by this time they were back at Bob and Smaro's house, it gestated like Rosemary's Baby until "doot doot doot doot, Stayin' alive, stayin' alive," the chains, the hips, the fixed sensual grimaces of the dancers, who were, you understand, mere pharmacists by day, engaging in this entirely legitimate form of self-expression, and even after they had finally retired for the night, exhausted – really this is the truly tragic and most disgraceful part – the virus was carried on one especially strong gust into the very bedchamber of their hosts, where, alas poor Smaro, whose struggle up to that point had been heroic, became infected, and now erupted in a series of fresh whoops, so that Bob, who had to teach the next day, was driven from his bed to wander lonely as a crowd in the icy streets of Winnipeg while this infantile pentecost swept unfettered through his household, it won't work,

it won't work because who could imagine, after all that he could forgive them sufficiently to allow them to reprint *The Ledger* for about the thirty-second time,

it won't work because nobody reads poetry, did I mention that, because

distribution, backlist, promotion, grants, blurbs, meetings, catalogues, printers, proofing, deadlines, it

won't work because no one would be willing to take on all that hassle without going seriously strange there are

no such people, it won't work

because there's a waterfall in Iceland, because my grand-daughters are combing out their long hair, because Depot Creek don't fly like no crow, because anyone who's had her brassiere stolen by a dog, because Hired Hands, because Reasons for Winter, because acey deucey trey divide, Antonin Artaud was digging in my garden, because

it is difficult to sing a simple song though god likes simple things, it won't work because although it cannot fly the heart is an excellent clamberer, because nobody has time to listen and relisten until the music clears its throat, it won't

work for twenty-five years fuelled on dumb luck and love, just

take my word for it,

it won't.

*Don McKay*

**Don McKay** has published 8 books of poetry, including *Birding, or desire* (1983), *Night Field* (1991) which won the Governor General's Award for Poetry; and *Another Gravity* (2000), *Camber* (2004) and *Strike/Slip* (2006), all published by McClelland & Stewart. *Another Gravity* and *Camber* were nominated for the Griffin Poetry Prize; *Strike/Slip* won it in 2007. His work has also received the National Magazine Award and the Canadian Authors Association Award. Since 1975 he has served as editor and publisher with Brick Books. He taught creative writing and English literature at the University of Western Ontario and the University of New Brunswick for 27 years before resigning to write and edit poetry full time. From 1991 to 1996 he edited *The Fiddlehead* magazine, and he has also served as a faculty resource person at the Sage Hill Writing Experience and The Banff Centre for the Arts, where he has held the position of Associate Director, Poetry, Writing & Publishing. He now lives in Newfoundland.