

Poet's latest effort grew from nonfiction research

By Laura Marshall, Berkshire Eagle Staff

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LENOX — Karen Chase never has had a run-in with a bear, but you wouldn't know it from her latest poetry collection. Many of the poems in "Bear" were offshoots of another project Chase was developing: a nonfiction book about "Operation Berkshire," in which two agents infiltrated a group of hunters who were poaching bears in county forests. The Lenox author said in a recent phone interview that the poems grew up out of the research she was doing for that book.

"It was never an idea that I had, to write about bears," she said. "I was hearing stories about bears for a few years. "I got to know so much about bears by interviewing these guys: men on the wrong side of the law, and men on the right side of the law." She said she went so far as to take shooting lessons so she could understand the hunters better. "The poems in the book, I think, grew from that involvement," she said. And how could they not? Immersed as she was in bear lore, she began to create poems that feel like legends themselves.

Poems connected

The book is broken up into sections, but the themes, imagery and vocabulary flow between the poems as well as the sections, tying them together into a cohesive whole. In the section labeled "Bear," Chase uses the first person to address bears directly — "I would not speak / to our whole species all / at once, so I regret, Bear, / talking to you in general," she says in "Ursa Major" — and she often addresses them as if standing face-to-face on a trail in the woods, miles from help. "Bear, I belong back in my yard, worrying," she writes in "Traveling in Bear Country," "about words and money, acting human."

Chase's respect and love for bears is evident throughout, but it never approaches sappiness. Her sense of fear and humor balance each other, as in "Today, Bear, I am having laser surgery": She discusses her trigger thumb and then apologizes. "What the safety pamphlet had in mind when / it advised hikers to speak to the bear / and act human was not this I am sure, / but for your information / humans talk a lot about their ailments."

Despite the title of the book, not every poem is about bears. There are poems about the creative process, poems about family, poems about the departed, the past, travel and books. Each is an example of Chase's direct style: Even the longer ones feel concise, somehow; likely it's something to do with the clarity with which she composes her verses.

'Accessible' poetry

Another poet, Billy Collins — who happens to be a former U.S. poet laureate — is a champion of "accessible" poetry, or understandable poetry that appeals to the masses. Collins included a poem from Chase's first book in his "Poetry 180" anthology, which was designed to bring poetry back to the people.

Chase's work tends to be accessible, but she said she doesn't strive for it.

"I don't think about it," she said. "Some poems are more accessible than others. It's whatever is driving the poems that I pay attention to." Her own tastes in poetry are "very wide-ranging," but she said she's "not attracted to very inaccessible poetry."

"Although," she noted, "Ann Carson is one of my favorite poets. She's really amazing. She did a translation of Sappho — she's a classicist — and it's absolutely fascinating. But I wouldn't call it accessible."

Chase, who has been a Rockefeller Bellagio Fellow and a MacDowell Fellow, might not think about accessibility while she's working, but it did occur to her recently that she wants to share her work with locals. "I think it's completely important," she said. "I was thinking about the book launch, about the people in town — the woman who cuts my hair, the people I deal with at the Lenox Bank." She hopes the community will come out to her book party Friday at The Bookstore in Lenox. "It's going to be fun — and that's accessibility."

About Chase

Chase's first book of poems, "Kazimierz Square," was short-listed by Foreword Magazine as Best Indie Poetry Book of 2000. Her work has been widely anthologized, including poems in "The Norton Introduction To Poetry" and "The Norton Introduction To Literature." Her nonfiction book "Land of Stone: Breaking Silence Through Poetry" recently was named a bronze winner in the category of psychology/mental health by the judges of the 2008 Independent Publishers Book Awards.

Her other bear project, the nonfiction book about Operation Berkshire, has just been finished and is in her agent's hands, so perhaps for a while Chase can move out of the world of bears. Unless she has a close encounter sometime soon. "I saw one up a tree where I live," she said, "and I saw one by the side of the road once, coming back from Pittsfield." That's as close as she's gotten so far. But thanks to the safety pamphlet she quotes in her book, she'll know what to do: Wave her arms, act human and keep talking.