

ABOUT AVATAR

Communication-Age Poetry for an Emotionally Repressed Culture

In 1995, when Sharon Harris first appeared on the Toronto literary scene, she was 22 years old and had been writing poetry for three years. She was inspired most by the sciences, and intended to incorporate her curiosities about the natural world and digital culture into her writing. In a 2007 *Lucid Forge* interview, she said,

After a really great math class ... I realized that the material was exactly the same lesson presented in an art class a week before. I realized that every subject is the same—they're just taught from different angles, with their own specializations. Every branch of learning represents one method of approaching the big questions: "Why are we here?" and "What is the meaning of life?"

To her dismay, and in spite of her fascination with science, every new poem she attempted turned out to be a love poem. "Not another one!" she would protest.

Then, fate smiled upon the young writer. At the first poetry reading she ever attended, she met and talked with poets who mix science with poetry: Christopher Dewdney, Christian Bök, Darren-Wershler Henry and Steve Venright.

After much soul-searching and many poems later, Sharon reconciled her two muses, and wrote *Avatar* (The Mercury Press, 2006). The full-length collection examines love and poetry through science and technology: love poems appear in Morse code, Braille, computer languages, and involve astronomy, geodesy and chaos theory. One chapter, "Fun With 'Pataphysics," contains poetic experiments; another is named after the I Love You Virus. The epilogue, "Poetic Method," echoes The Scientific Method, complete with hypothesis, results, and conclusions.

Her work is most often compared to Bök's and Wershler-Henry's: all three authors are also visual artists who are very involved in the design of their books. Their work pushes the limits of poetry, but their clear and concise styles make it easily accessible to large audiences (Wershler-Henry and Harris also write non-fiction). In one of *Avatar*'s first reviews, rob mclennan also likened Harris's work to the writings of bpNichol and Erin Mouré.

Christian Bök once said that all poems are love poems, meaning that a poet needs an object of desire in order to write any sort of poetry. What makes *Avatar* special is that it contains love poems ... but the object of their desire is simply love. Maybe that's what compelled poet Mark Truscott (*Said Like Reeds or Things*, Coach House Books) to write:

"I hereby nominate Sharon Harris the emotional centre of the Toronto poetry community."