

Review of *Stubborn Child*

Reprinted from *Ideas, The Newsletter of the New Jersey Council for the Humanities*
Late Summer, 2005

New Publications by Teacher Institute Members

Since its inception eleven years ago, the Council's Teacher Institute has attracted outstanding participants committed to the humanities. Sometimes, publications emerge from the group, an accomplishment few secondary educators can claim.

Peter E. Murphy, who attended a seminar in 1996 and who has been a Master Teacher at the Institute since 1999, has published his first book of poems, *Stubborn Child* (New York City: Jane Street Press, 2005). The 49 selections in this dazzling collection appear to be largely autobiographical. The book begins with the pathos of an orphaned boy in New York ("The New Boy") wondering whether his recently acquired family will keep him. It ends years later with the affirmation associated with the conception of the poet's daughter as painters working the rooms above and outside the basement where he and his wife make love ("The Painters"). In between are other moments and persons from the poet's life as a boy, his days as a construction worker and barkeeper in New York City, and his observation of students in his English classes at Atlantic City High School. A few of the poems are humorous: consider "Basic Skills," in which test scores fall in a school for whores and faculty must "put their noses to the bedposts." Sometimes a stunning lyricism prevails, as in "Why I Am Not a Catholic." The poet is transfigured by love:

I did not believe I would ever come back to life,
but when you touched me and I rose toward heaven,
I was filled with tongues and could speak
for the first time the language of the living,
which gushed out of me in one intelligible voice,
ancient and beautiful.

Many of the poems are full of raw life—of sex, booze, dope and violence—but all reveal a man trying to make sense of his existence and never flinching from showing his own shortcomings as well as his triumphs. Murphy is a consultant for the poetry program of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. His many awards for writing and teaching have come from the Folger Shakespeare Library and The National Endowment for the Humanities, among others.

— Amy Emmers