

Alabanza: New and Selected Poems 1982-2002

By Martín Espada

New York: W.W Norton & Co., 2003

Hardcover: \$24.95

Reviewed by Michael Pozo

Martín Espada was born in Brooklyn New York and is the author of seven books of poetry. Espada has also published a book of essays, *Zapata's Disciples*, which received an Independent Publisher Book Award. He is the recipient of the Paterson Poetry Prize, the PEN/Revson Fellowship and an American Book Award for *Imagine the Angels of Bread*. Martín Espada is Assistant Professor in the English Department at University of Massachusetts-Amherst.

Martín Espada's *Alabanza* is the definitive collection of one of the most powerful contemporary U.S. poets. Espada masterfully crafts a book filled with social/political subject matter into a poetry that resonates with beauty yet with clear intentions on demonstrating its relevance beyond mere aesthetics. *Alabanza* succeeds in recapturing poetry at its best, as an art form that proves its social relevance exactly because of the connection it *can* make between the art we create and the lives we live in between.

Alabanza is a collection of poetry twenty years in the making yet inspired and guided by lifetimes of untold stories. Throughout this selection one sees the extent of Espada's commitment in presenting and very much celebrating the lives, stories and histories of those still defiant in the face of poverty, racism, tragic loss and obscurity. In doing so, Espada embodies the spirit of Latin American social/political poetry in the tradition of José Martí, Victor Jara and Pablo Neruda. Yet Espada reclaims this spirit *here*, in the U.S., and directs it especially (but not exclusively) towards Latinos and recent immigrants to this country.

But one is most impressed with Espada's handling of the emotional spectrum that often bogs down "political" poetry. From fierce to tender expressions of emotion both he and his characters assume a dignity that tells rather than preaches. This is not poetry that succumbs to pure ranting nor does it lose its sense of poetic identity to mere political diatribe. Espada's own voice lives and mingles with the public and private histories he reveals, yet it is not heavy handed. Unlike other vehemently *political* poetry it does not forget that poetry tells a story, in this case, it is the people who are the subject and the ideology is innately understood not given.

Espada's protagonists include janitors, migrant workers, bookish prison inmates, relatives and even himself, re-calling the days he worked as a tenant lawyer. In *City of Coughing and Dead Radiators*, Espada's own experiences resonate in a poem about the hopelessness a young lawyer feels in not having been able to defend immigrant families from eviction of their decaying tenement housing. The bitterness is made worse as the judicial process wraps up and the victims still remain. Their sense of betrayal made evident when a man shouts the last line of the poem, "Death to Legal Aid"(96).

In *Jorge the Church Janitor Finally Quits*, Espada takes a Latino Janitor as the subject of an intense scene of emotion and resolution.

No one asks
where I am from,
I must be
from the county of Janitors,
I have always mopped this floor.
Honduras, you are a squatter's camp
outside the city
of their understanding

As he cleans and mops, Jorge also recalls the years of resentment and loneliness of being a janitor. Again, in this way Espada always allows his characters to speak for themselves despite their conclusions *seeming* unfulfilled. But even in the face of this utter anonymity Jorge achieves a small victory, hardly noticeable. Espada conveys the sense of pride of someone having done this type of thankless work and finally being able to abandon it, even if it is in anonymity,

No one knows
that I quit tonight,
maybe the mop
will push on without me (82)

Though so much of what Espada presents is often harsh and tragic, it is in the depiction of the characters that one realizes where the joy lies. It is in the manner of approaching a difficult life through small victories of defiance that these protagonists are celebrated. The glossary included at the end of Espada's collection defines the word "Alabanza" as,

Praise; sometimes used in a religious sense. From 'arabar', to celebrate with words (234)

Indeed with much compassion these poems invite the reader to praise, not in some blind philanthropic way, but to genuinely celebrate these lives and stories that are at last being discovered. From the earliest poems of his career to the seventeen new poems that conclude this collection, Espada's tapestry spans the Americas and even beyond. Espada looks hard for inspiration in places most haven't and it is in this that he links the lives and experiences of people otherwise thought to have little in common. Whether in Brooklyn tenements, the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico, or the small villages of Achill Island in Ireland, one comes to the end of the book realizing the connection. Quite simply, each poem finds the bittersweet satisfaction of at last hearing a voice that was not heard before, regardless of cultural differences.

This collection of Espada's best and most recent poetry comes at a critical time. Recent reports have described the alarming rise of the death rate among immigrants along the militarized U.S.-Mexican border. Along another stretch of the border, in the sister-cities of Juarez and El Paso, young women continue to be kidnapped, raped, mutilated and murdered with little or no exposure. And in Long Island the recent terrorist tactic of fire bombing a Mexican family's residence all speak of Espada's urgent concerns. As one of the leading U.S. Latino poets working today, Espada's poetry is richly based in his own heritage but only as a springboard in order to make connections with other peoples. *Alabanza* speaks to anyone concerned with the struggle against injustice, a struggle that never ends.

Martín Espada's poems merge art with purpose and re-ignite its human potential to not just entertain but to teach and motivate. In this manner, *Alabanza* is full of both personal and private histories yet insistently crafted for public display. *Alabanza* exposes the tragic legacy of so many long out of sight of both the word and eye. But, the rediscovery of these histories is best described in a mood and light that can only be called, celebratory.

For further interest: *A Mayan Astronomer in Hell's Kitchen*. W.W. Norton, 2001.

"Alabanza: In Praise of Local 100" by Martín Espada

*for the 43 members of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees
Local 100, working at the Windows on the World restaurant,
who lost their lives in the attack on the World Trade Center
Alabanza. Praise the cook with a shaven head
and a tattoo on his shoulder that said Oye,*

a blue eyed Puerto Rican with people from Fajardo,
the harbor of pirates centuries ago.
Praise the lighthouse in Fajardo, candle
glimmering white to worship the dark saint of the sea.
Alabanza. Praise the cook's yellow Pirates cap
worn in the name of Roberto Clemente, his plane
that flamed into the ocean loaded with cans for Nicaragua,
for all the mouths chewing the ash of earthquakes.
Alabanza. Praise the kitchen radio, dial clicked
even before the dial on the oven, so that music and Spanish
rose before bread. Praise the bread. *Alabanza.*
Praise Manhattan from a hundred and seven flights up,
like Atlantis glimpsed through the windows of an ancient aquarium
Praise the great windows where immigrants from the kitchen
could squint and almost see their world, hear the chant of nations:
Ecuador, Mexico, Republica Dominicana,
Haiti, Yemen, Ghana, Bangladesh.
Alabanza. Praise the kitchen in the morning,
where the gas burned blue on every stove
and exhaust fans fired their diminutive propellers,
hands cracked eggs with quick thumbs
or sliced open cartons to build an altar of cans.
Alabanza. Praise the busboy's music, the *chime-chime*
of his dishes and silverware in the tub.
Alabanza. Praise the dish-dog, the dishwasher
who worked that morning because another dishwasher
could not stop coughing, or because he needed overtime
to pile the sacks of rice and beans for a family
floating away on some Caribbean island plagued by frogs.
Alabanza. Praise the waitress who heard the radio in the kitchen
and sang to herself about a man gone. *Alabanza.*
After the thunder wilder than thunder,
after the shudder deep in the glass of the great windows,
after the radio stopped singing like a tree full of terrified frogs,
after night burst the dam of day and flooded the kitchen,
for a time the stoves glowed in darkness like the lighthouse in Fajardo,
like a cook's soul. Soul I say, even if the dead cannot tell us
about the bristles of God's beard because God has no face,
soul I say, to name the smoke-beings flung in constellations
across the night sky of this city and cities to come.
Alabanza I say, even if God has no face.
Alabanza. When the war began, from Manhattan and Kabul
two constellations of smoke rose and drifted to each other,
mingling in icy air, and one said with an Afghan tongue:
Teach me to dance. We have no music here.
And the other said with a Spanish tongue:
I will teach you. Music is all we have.