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# Poet/astrophysicist ponders time and our role in the universe in 'The Book of Mirrors'

White Pine Press

KRISTOFER COLLINS

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The critic Stanley Booth says, “You can't write unless you can hear the words in your head, and my head wasn't talking.”

**“THE BOOK OF MIRRORS”**

By Yun Wang

White Pine Press (\$17)

I know how he felt.

In her poem “Superstition of a Caged Bird,” poet Yun Wang writes, “There is only the infinity of darkness / strewn with eyes of the dead.” Yep, that resonates, too.

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For weeks now I have been trying to conjure the words that would unlock the poems collected in Yun Wang's “The Book of Mirrors.” Wang, who grew up in rural China, received her PhD in physics from Carnegie Mellon University in 1991. She was also a member of the avant-garde music ensemble Morphic Resonance in the early 1990s. She is now a senior research scientist at California Institute of Technology and is focusing on dark energy, a theoretical force that causes the universe to expand at an accelerating rate.



**Kristofer Collins**

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This is an interesting juncture in history for a book of poems written by an astrophysicist to land in my lap. These long pandemic months have all but obliterated my sense of time passing. I hardly know what day it is anymore. My understanding of myself as a body moving through space has become hyper-acute. Can I run the gauntlet of the grocery store and keep a 6-foot

bubble safely around my person? My sense of perspective has really been put through the wringer.

“The Book of Mirrors” feels particularly of the moment for these poems are largely about perspective. How does a human being understand oneself in the face of the continually swelling universe? Where do we fit in along the vast timeline of history as well as in the coursing bloodline of our own families? Wang's poems kaleidoscopically shift the reader's perspective throughout this collection.

The poet moves from a cosmology conference held in the 1980s to war-torn Baghdad, where children play among the bodies of the dead. She travels with the Cassini Probe as it orbits Saturn, then lands in the film “Fellini’s Casanova,” where the legendary lover has become “old and gray” and the “same waltz haunted his dreams / each night.” Chinese literature and Western European fairy tales commingle with Bach's Partita for Violin No. 2 in D Minor.

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“We are immortals to mayflies,” she writes in “Supermoon,” and yet there is never enough time. Time is the great devourer. “Cronus ate his own children,” Wang notes of the ancient Greek god of time.

Throughout the book, woven through images both grotesque and sublime, underlying all of the music of her stanzas, there is time. Vast stretches of cosmic and geological time, as well as those intimate passing moments of daily life familiar to us all, tick-tock across these pages. These are time-haunted poems.

“There must be God somewhere / maneuvering all that mess into stars,” she reflects in “Black Roses.”

It's the function of a mirror to offer up a reflection. Whether that reflection is flattering or not is of no concern to the mirror. The same can be said for Wang's poems. They offer no judgments on the course of history any more than they present an appraisal of the humming static of radioactive decay.



Wang artfully creates order out of chaos. Her stanzas feel as though they were carved into the page, like an inscription wrought by an expert sculptor. The mess of this universe, the confusion we feel simply because we are alive, Wang organizes into something both rational and beautiful.

“The Universe will shrink back into a tiny bubble,” she writes “or dissipate into / space-time foam. Only the soul can escape through a wormhole.”

*Editor's note: An earlier version of this review had the wrong year for when Yun Wang earned her PhD. It has been corrected.*

*Kristofer Collins is a writer living in Stanton Heights. His latest book is “The River Is Another Kind of Prayer: New & Selected Poems.”*

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