



Waves of Compassion Break on the Literary Shore
Janet Thelen

Surfing the Soul: Mountain, Ocean and Spirit Poems
Lompico Creek Press: CA, 2003
\$14.00

Have you ever wondered what happens to the competitive surfer who enters and consecutively places first in national surfing contests? In 1991, local Santa Cruz surfer Mark Roan was noticed by *Surfer Magazine* and endorsed by Bob Pearson, well-respected owner of Arrow Surf Shop. Twelve years later, Roan, Arrow's Professional Team Rider turned writer, is about to catch the biggest wave of his life with the publication of his first book, *Surfing the Soul: Mountain, Ocean and Spirit Poems*. He is not only making a name for himself, but he also interprets surfing legends such as: Jeff Clark—Maverick's pioneer, Jack

O'Neill, creator of the wetsuit—innovative businessman, and Kristina Marquez—Santa Cruz local with Hawaiian lineage, through his “surfing saga” poems. His choice of words embraces the power of the ocean, while his in-sync rhythm feels as inspiring as watching Laird Hamilton—dynamic big-wave rider—surf.

Surfing the Soul peaked my interest because of my love for the ocean, and because Rován’s poetry mirrors the wild beauty of riding waves. His writing takes the reader to a place where he or she can surf the poetic waters and engage with the people and subjects in his poems. *Surfing the Soul*, shares the author’s deep awareness and caring for our planet and its inhabitants and illustrates his connection with nature.

“Surfing Sagas” begins off the California Coast and stops at all seven continents. This section of the book is devoted to creative interpretations of “famous surfers and people like you and me,” stated Rován. In spite of having met only half of the world-class surfers he interviewed for the book, he has crafted thirty-two poems employing the universal language of a salt-water wave. A poem about Peter Johnson, artist and New Zealand surfer, demonstrates Rován’s descriptive abilities, “I scored delicious waves/between wrinkles on the neck of Lost Coast/with smooth Cadbury chocolate cutbacks” (95).

His precise, passionate writing holds the reader’s attention, combining reality with the surreal, true experiences with personal interpretations, and recounting events with the ease of the master storyteller. “Writing poetry,” said Rován, “is to educate myself in an original way. Sometimes the scene comes first, then the words. I’ll be inspired by key words or music that propel me. To develop the craft of poetry, the writer has to work it like a painting, go away and come back to it, aqua art/ on my blank canvas” (106).

California-born Rován lives with his pet parrot, Polly, in Santa Cruz. Having attended San Francisco State and the University of Hawaii he earned a degree in Psychology and English Literature. He became environmentally aware at an early age by exploring the untracked beaches of the California Coast. Today he describes himself as a poet who is a surfer. “At the end of the day, sunset, I leave the beach as I found it, with only my footprints in the sand.” Mark Rován is always within reach of the ocean’s roar.

Surfing the Soul leads the reader on a journey from the ocean to the mountains. From Montana, (thankfully less-populated “Big Sky Country”) where “resplendent purple rays glint off granite ledges” to the Rocky Mountains, where he lived for six years before returning to the coast (109). These poems address his time in the mountains. In his poem “Avalanche,” which describes a true event inspired by Doug Sabanosh, he recounts “standing on an edge of a cliff, tumbling 300 feet,” then surviving (116). In the poem “Riverside,” the reader is still

within reach of the water's edge. Rován describes sitting "beside the river's sweep/ its course concealed beyond our reach" where "blue dragonflies abide" and the clear water of consciousness flow (127).

I have read many genres of poetry but this is my first encounter with "visionary" poems, in reference to the section of spirit poems. "Visionary," explains Rován, "has a large scope. It is a sharing of vision without limitations—an insight, seeing the potential of anything, seeing what lies beneath the sand." Classic writers such as Jeffers, Rumi, and Hafiz have influenced Rován as well as renowned author, Herman Hesse. "One of the things I've learned," said Rován, "is that we all have a spiritual connection—finding 'inner peace' through life, is touching our spiritual side."

When the mind is able to see beyond the subtle layers of our surroundings we can view nature in its simplicity *and* depth. A late addition to the book was the poem "Big Sur," which allows the reader to connect with one of my favorite places. With telling details, Rován describes its natural "western beauty," miles of coastline of "bluefin waters" and rugged landscape, "vertical shale/ skyward/ toward the Ventana wilderness" (8). Reading this poem you can experience the scenery and its varied wildlife while "Big Sur's moods circle within" (9). Ric Masten, author and Poet Laureate of Big Sur, acknowledges Rován as "intimate with the ground he walks on. His words have me soaring on the brisk hazy air."

In *Surfing the Soul*, Rován takes on themes of global importance, such as protecting the ocean and its inhabitants. In "Breath of a Dolphin," marine mammals survive in the same oceans that we use, but it is up to humanity to preserve this fragile environment where "silver currents tingle" (4).

Whether you enjoy the outdoors as an athlete, enthusiast or gentle observer, *Surfing the Soul* will leave you with thought-provoking images. Rován's work has great diversity, wild and ever changing as the sea. One moment the reader can view nature from the depths of the ocean, and in the next scale to the peak of a mountain. Rován's poetry is the spark that ignites compassion, a respect for nature, and humanity's role in preservation of our natural environment—may these poems be a soothing balm or a "jasmine sea scent" for the soul (46).

Works Cited

Masten, Ric. Re: *Surfing the Soul*. E-mail commentary. 22, July. 2003.

Personal interview with the author. 11 & 13, July. 2003.