

Book Review:

Hajku ta' Hi u Hu: l-Ambigwità Sagra u Skandaluza tal-Imhabba

Joseph W. Psaila

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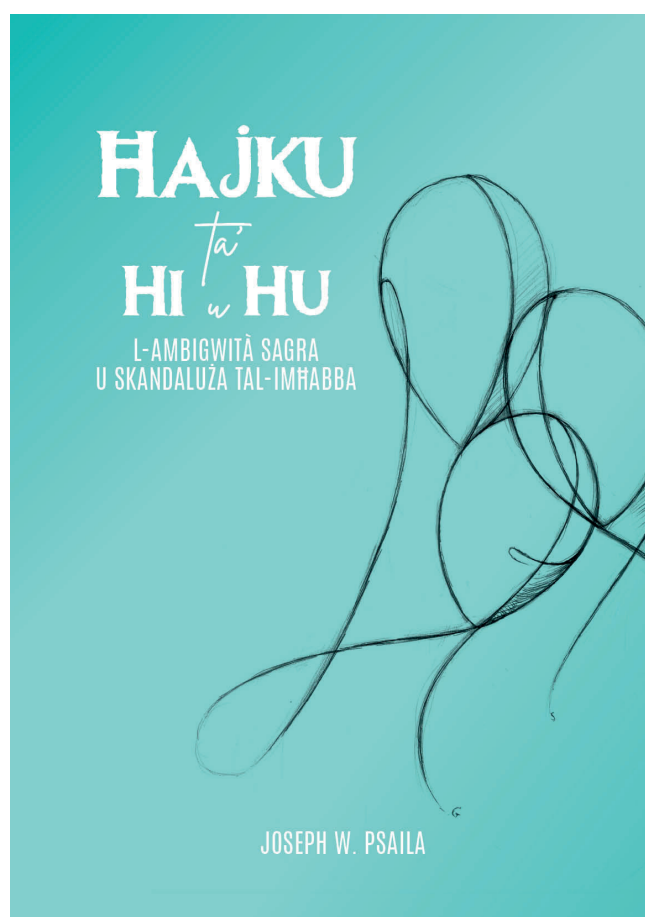
REVIEWED BY PAUL XUEREB

Love Depicted Seriously but also with Humour

Psaila is an established author, known best perhaps for his long and ironical narrative poems, *Purgatorju 360 degrees*, and *Pranzu statali*. Now he has come up with an entirely different volume of verse, a collection of some 140 very short pieces, some of them in not always strict haiku format. The one topic of the collection is sexual love on which he comments sometimes with much subtlety and humour and on the whole with a surprising variety.

The author is an elderly man but he writes with freshness. Love and its comrade lust (the word in Maltese may be unfamiliar to many readers – “ħorma”), its birth, its existence, its breakup, and life after its destruction have sections in which each is dissected. Perhaps this is the author’s own style of narrative about the emotion few of his readers will not have experienced in some form though not necessarily through all the stages he depicts.

A man of learning, he quotes in his foreword from Freud, with the great man writing it is unnecessary to have a knowledge of water before you jump in and swim. In this context it might be a warning not to read the collection as being autobiographical. Psaila decries many people’s reluctance to talk openly about sex, so the book can be seen as the author’s defiance of those who might think that this is no fit subject for discussion by somebody whose youth is long behind him. Sexual love, a subject that informs at least half the novels ever published, an emotion that keeps mankind going, cannot but interest fully any writer, whatever his age. Many readers, I imagine, will join me in being very glad that a poet of Psaila’s stature should have decided to publish a collection of poems that are frequently striking and quite a number humorous.



George Scicluna’s very elegant, sensual drawings accompanying a number of the poems will surely help to make the volume even more collectible.

Despite the book’s witty title, I should make it clear that Psails very often does not stick precisely to the established haiku format. In some cases, such as the utterly successful piece on page 106, he adheres stricly to the rules of just three verses of 5-7-5 syllables, a total of 17 syllables; in others his sole deviation is to have say one syllable less in one or perhaps two verses. More often, however, he writes poems having two, three or more stanzas, each stanza in either strict or slightly deviant haiku

form. Not being a purist, I generally accept his deviations, as in fact the tone of the haiku is rarely absent. Others may not accept this.

Since none of the poems has a title, I shall refer to particular pieces by the page on which they appear.

The first section, “Grazzja”, speaks about the ways people fall in love (“tiehu grazzja ma’ xi hadd” is to be strongly attracted to someone) and here Psaila writes sometimes delicately, sometimes with humour, as with Jack and Jill stumbling and tumbling together (22) or the “catenaccio” piece on the following page. He skilfully depicts the process of attraction between two in which both are winners whereas others, as in the one on page 27 the man who thinks he has won her does not realise that it is she who has won him. On page 28, two falling in love with each other, God is seen as in love with both.

The “Horma” section sees the author trying to trace the various forms and aims of desire. The man expecting his partner to do all he expects, is changing a rubber doll into a masterpiece of art (49), and COVID with lockdown in forbidding kissing can lead to the two hearts also locking down (51). The author has more fun in depicting quarantined lovers having to replace kisses by touching elbows (54). There is more humour in another piece that sees lovers as actors playing the roles each has in mind: he sees himself as gothic, she as baroque (41). On page 63 he borrows from a famous poem by the Roman Catullus, often referred to as Lesbia’s Sparrow, in which the poet imagines himself to be his mistress’s pet sparrow which she loves to fondle. I must confess, however, being defeated by the second haiku/stanza’s vocabulary. Perhaps my favourite in this section is the almost perfect haiku in which the woman leaves the man to protect him and save him from herself (66). This is probably the only piece in this section where true love selflessly gives up its desire.

The section of “L-Imħabba” includes a variety of moods from the utterly lyrical to others meant to elicit smiles or chortles. Of the lyrical, a good example is the one (108) where the beloved’s name becomes magical, and its uttering in the moment of love is utterly transporting. And it

is the lover’s name again the mention of which opens the gate of an Eden of love and desire in another (101). The language of music (126) gives a special dimension to the lover’s words, whilst in 117 modern communication technology supplies the only form (unsatisfactory but still there) of an equivalent for a physical kiss from the aged lover.

The last two sections are “Il-Firda” and “Il-Fejqan”. In the former, the author reminds us he is Gozitan watching, as people have often done, from the Gozitan beach of Qbajjar, the lava explode from Mount Etna in Sicily. This lover, however (140) is not impressed as he watches the phenomenon, being anguished by the vulcan exploding within him since his lover left him, and in another piece (145) his only consolation is that through the breach his lover had made in his heart he can glimpse the beloved face. The illustration accompanying this piece is one of the best in the volume.

In “Il-Fejqan” the lovers have parted because of their sense of duty towards others (154) and the poet prays the lovers will come together again, this time for ever, behind a concealing veil. It is in this section, however, that the author’s subtlety within the poems’ length limitations makes comprehension hard for the reader.

By and large, however, this is an out of the ordinary collection, and my fear is that the fact of its not having been published by a commercial editor may prevent it from having the many readers it deserves. I have little doubt that this will be high on the list of Maltese verse publications this year.